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**“THE POWER OF SCRIPTURE AND PERCEPTIVE QUESTIONS”**

**Acts 8:26-40**

**Our text today focuses on the evangelistic ministry of Philip, a Greek-speaking or Hellenistic Jew who was one of seven chosen to oversee the daily distribution of food to the widows, and who became a very effective evangelist.**

**Following the martyrdom of Stephen, severe persecution of the church began in Jerusalem. It caused many Christians to leave Jerusalem. This dispersion provided the impetus to begin an evangelistic outreach throughout Judea and into Samaria. Luke reports that Philip went to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, and also cured many of their illnesses. As a result Luke says a number of people came to faith in Christ and were baptized.**

**What comes next is the story of Philip’s encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch. What does our text reveal about this person? First his homeland is not technically the Ethiopia we know, but**

modern day Sudan. Ancient Ethiopia had a king, who was too holy to administer the everyday affairs of state, so the queen was the day to day ruler. Second, in terms of ethnicity this individual is definitely a Gentile and likely had black skin. Third, he holds the important position of secretary of the treasury. Because he is frequently around the queen and her retinue, he had been castrated to safe guard against any possibility of sexual misconduct. Fourth, socio-economically due to his position at court, he is a member of the upper class, undoubtedly with considerable wealth. He is able to finance this lengthy trip to Jerusalem and on the way home is reading his own copy of the Isaiah scroll, at a time when few people owned their own scrolls/books in that era. Fifth, in terms of his religious status he appears to be a God-fearer, someone who has adopted the Hebrew religion as his own. It's doubtful he had officially converted and become a proselyte however, because this was not allowed by Torah legislation (Deut. 23:1).

With that background, let's hear the rest of our text, Acts 8:26-40, found on p.127 NT in pew Bibles. First, notice how God

**directs many of these events. An angel directs Philip to down the road which leads from Jerusalem to Gaza, which is on the Mediterranean coast.**

**When Philip caught up with the slow moving Ethiopian Eunuch, probably in some sort of covered wagon with a driver, the Spirit directed him to join the man. In other words, “hitch a ride!” As Philip drew near he heard the eunuch reading aloud as was the custom from chapter 53 of Isaiah about “the suffering servant of Yahweh.” As we just heard, this passage describes an innocent, righteous figure who suffers and dies vicariously on behalf of others, bearing their sins, in fact making his life “an offering for the sins of others.” As a result God highly exalts him!**

**Philip asked a perceptive question, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The eunuch very honestly replies that he needs help to understand who precisely the prophet is describing. So Philip jumps aboard and shares the good news of Jesus’ sinless life, sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection fulfill that passage as no other single individual ever has!**

**We don't know how long Philip's conversation lasted, but like Peter's sermons earlier in Acts, he probably invited the eunuch to respond with faith in Christ, to repent, and to receive baptism in Jesus' name. Therefore when they came across a wadi or a stream, the eunuch said, "Here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" So both entered the stream and Philip baptized the eunuch.**

**Afterwards God is directly at work again as the Holy Spirit "snatched Philip away" – whether by natural or super-natural means it's hard to tell. In either case Philip was next at the village of Azotus, another coastal town, about 20 miles north of Gaza, and proclaimed the good news about Jesus to the towns he encountered on his way north to Caesarea along the coast. By the way, Philip appears again in the Acts narrative some years later, in chapter 21:8-9 when Paul became Philip's houseguest in Caesarea. By that time Philip had raised four daughters, each of whom had the gift of prophecy. Second-century Christian bishop Irenaeus reports (*Against Heresies* iii.12.8) that the eunuch became a missionary among his people.**

**Remember Jesus' words of commissioning – “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” In this 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts Luke tells us about Philip's evangelistic ministry in Samaria, followed by that of the apostles Peter and John. Interestingly, a number of ancient Greco-Roman writers called ancient Ethiopia “the end of the earth” because it was at the remote edge of the known world. So Jesus' words are finding fulfillment!**

**What guidance does this text provide us about our attempts to do evangelism and grow in our understanding of the faith?**

**First it tells us that relevant, strategic, perceptive questions are a wonderful way to begin sharing our faith with others!** As I've heard so many times, as Christians we need to “earn the right to be heard.” And one way of doing that is by patiently listening to their views and life experiences and needs and concerns of others and then asking relevant follow up questions before we do a lot of talking. In our story the Holy Spirit created a ready-made opening for Philip to share about Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's message about the Suffering Servant of God.

**Open-ended questions are particularly helpful; for example –**  
**what brings focus and direction to your life? What ethical principles guide your behavior and where did they come from? Who inspires you to live up to your full potential? What are your beliefs about an afterlife? For Christians, Jesus provides answers to each of those questions!**

**So while being able to summarize our faith and speak succinctly about who we believe Jesus to be and what he accomplished in his earthly ministry, death, and resurrection, we also need to be good listeners and ask perceptive questions!**

**Second this text reminds us of the importance of having a deeper understanding of Holy Scripture, especially concerning the identity and achievement of Jesus.** Recent surveys of people in the US indicate that while over 92% of Americans own at least one Bible (most households have three), the Bible is American's favorite unopened text, as biblical literacy is at an all time low. A Gallup poll showed that fewer than half of all Americans can name the first book of the Bible (Genesis), that only one-third know who delivered the Sermon on the Mount (many named Billy

**Graham, not Jesus), and one quarter do not know what**

**Christians celebrate on Easter!**

**Let's conduct a brief biblical literacy quiz from the Old Testament for just a moment! Shout out the answer if you know it –**

**“Who was the greatest comedian in the Bible?” Samson. He brought the house down!**

**What excuse did Adam give to his children as to why he no longer lived in Eden? “Your mother ate us out of house and home.”**

**Which biblical character had no parents? Joshua, son of Nun.**

**Finally, “why didn't they play cards on the Ark?” Because Noah was standing on the deck!**

**The scriptural passage which stumped the Ethiopian eunuch was from the second half of the Prophet Isaiah, chapters 40-66. That same section of Scripture provides the text for Jesus' sermon in his hometown synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30) when he quotes Isaiah 61 and says, “The Spirit of the**

**Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And when Jesus told his disciples they would be his witnesses "to the ends of the earth" he undoubtedly first read that phrase at Isaiah 49:7 when God spoke to the remnant of faithful Hebrews, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (see also 45:22; 52:10). It is also in that same section of Isaiah that God first says to his people, "You are my witnesses" (Isa. 43:10), a command the Risen Christ gives his disciples.**

**It is that section of Hebrew Scripture, Isaiah chapters 40-66 that I will be focusing on upon in my Fall Class entitled "The Great OT Theologian; Exploring the Prophet Isaiah chapters 40-66." This study will help bridge part of the gap between Old and New Testaments and provide a much fuller canvas on which to understand the NT portrait of Jesus! And we'll learn a great deal about the character of God in the process and what God wants of**

**each of us! If you've never been in a Bible Study, this will provide lots of helpful background to the New Testament story of Jesus. And if you're a Bible Study veteran, I'm confident you will learn a great deal of new material! I know I have in preparing for that study!**

**Friends, we are called to be Christ's witnesses today in our homes, in our places of work and study, and as we engage others in conversations about spiritual things, let us make good use of perceptive questions and be good listeners.**

**And as we seek to live out our faith, may each of us make friends with sacred Scripture that we might better understand the depth of God's love and grace for us in Jesus Christ!**

**Let us pray: Loving and Gracious God, by Your Spirit allow each of us to become better acquainted and more capable of reading and understanding Scripture that we might engage our unchurched friends in spiritual conversation and asking perceptive questions in trying to understand their life situation and invite them into a faith relationship with Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.**

