

Right Place, Right Time

Hespeler, April 28, 2024 © Scott McAndless – Fifth Sunday of Easter

[Acts 8:26-40](#), Psalm 22:25-31, 1 John 4:7-21, John 15:1-8

Our reading this morning from the Book of Acts tells the story of an extraordinary encounter between Philip and a man who is described only as a eunuch from Ethiopia. It is one of the most extraordinary stories of a right place at the right time encounter that you may have ever heard. On the one hand, Philip is there, apparently because he has received a divine message directing him to this place, a deserted road in the middle of nowhere.

What About the Ethiopian

That in itself is quite extraordinary. But I'm actually a little bit more curious today about how the other person in the encounter came to be there. It says that he **“was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.”**

That description makes me ask a few questions. What was he doing on that road? What was an African and a eunuch doing worshipping in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem? And what kind of experience would a man like that have had in that temple at that time? Perhaps even more interesting in an age long before the printing press made books affordable to anybody, how did he get his hands on a scroll of the Prophet Isaiah? There must be quite a backstory before he ever met Philip on that road.

An Ethiopian Jew

His name was Bachos – at least that is the name he is given in Ethiopian Christian tradition. He had lived in Ethiopia all his life but had lived there as an outsider – a Jew. Jews had had thriving settlements in Africa for over seven centuries at that time and, though they had intermarried with the natives, they had maintained their traditions and worship. There was a huge Jewish settlement at Elephantine on the upper Nile where Jewish mercenaries served the Egyptian Pharaoh by guarding his southern frontier. They had even built their own temple there and carried out their own sacrifices.

Bachos' parents had come from there. They had traveled south to Ethiopia to seek opportunities and a better life for their children. And they had placed many of their hopes upon their eldest son. The operation he had had to undergo had been a necessary part of that.

A Rise in Court

Ethiopia was prosperous and ruled by a powerful queen, called the Candace, who was wise and beloved. Her faithful servants were rewarded with wealth beyond all dreams. But, in order to gain such a privileged position, the Candace needed to know that her servants were devoted to her alone.

It was understood that, if a man could have a child, he would be honour bound to provide for his family first. It would be shameful for him to do otherwise. So, there was a requirement to cut off even the possibility of having children.

And so, it had been done. It was a great risk for his parents to take, of course, for there was no guarantee that he would even get a position at court. But that gamble paid off. Bachos was smart and talented. He quickly rose in the ranks of the civil service until he had



control of the Candace's vast treasury. It was everything that his parents had ever dreamed of.

Personal Discontent

But was Bachos content? He was daily aware of the enormous price he had been forced to pay for his success. He wondered what all his wealth meant and if it would all come to nothing when he was dead. He began to seek out a deeper meaning in his life and some sense of something that would last beyond this present life.

Having been raised among the Ethiopians, he had been constantly surrounded by Ethiopian gods and the worship of them. He had mostly gone along with the local customs to get along. But as time went by, he found that the teachings about Wak, the Adbar and Ayana were not satisfying his deep craving for meaning. He decided to explore the Jewish heritage that he had mostly forgotten.

Candace

He went to his queen, fell to his knees and begged for permission to connect with his roots and find the meaning he was craving. He wanted to go all the way to Jerusalem and the great temple of the God Yahweh. The Candace understood that this would be a very long journey and that she would be without one of her most trusted eunuchs for nearly a year. But she was a wise woman. She had seen him struggle with his identity and purpose. She knew that, if he was granted this, it might make him a better servant. She granted him permission to go.

Egypt

Five months, that was how long it took to get to Jerusalem. He had found a ship on the Red Sea that had taken him to Lower Egypt. He had seen the pyramids and ancient Egyptian temples on the way to the great city of Alexandria. There he had connected with the large Jewish community in that city – studying for a while in their synagogue and learning a great deal about their understanding of the tradition. But he still felt as if he had to go to Jerusalem. And so, he took a ship and sailed to Gaza and then hired a chariot to drive to the city.

The Court of the Gentiles

The temple at Jerusalem, even after the incredible wonders he had seen in Egypt, was a marvel. The courtyard of the Gentiles was filled with people, not only with locals and with Jews who had been dispersed all over the known world, but also with many Gentiles who had come to see this famous place and to observe the strange Jewish rituals.

But Bachos was not here just to observe strange customs. He wanted to connect to his own heritage. And so, he headed across the courtyard to the gate that led to the court of the people of Israel. It was also known as the women's court because there was another court further in that was reserved for Israelite men. The gates to each court would be a test.

The Court of Women

There were temple guards at the gate. And as he approached, they looked him up and down with clear skepticism. He could understand why, though it did feel vaguely insulting to him. His skin was much darker than that of almost anyone he could see beyond the gate. His facial features looked different. And his black hair was thicker and curlier. It was like he could hear what they were thinking. He certainly didn't seem to belong here.

But when he was asked, he could provide the names of his Jewish ancestors back almost a dozen

generations. They let him through with a few sideway glances.

The Court of Men

The next gate was a little bit more complicated though. As he approached, he could tell that the low-level priests standing by the door were examining him carefully. They saw, in the shape of his face and his body, the telltale signs of someone who had been mutilated in childhood.

As he drew near, one of them stepped forward to block his path with a sneer. “Sorry, friend, but this court is restricted only to the *men* of Israel. I do not believe that your *kind* is allowed. And that immediately started something.

Discussions

When Jews have the leisure to study and discuss the Torah, they love nothing more than to argue and disagree with one another. And so, the whole area around the gate almost immediately erupted into a great shouting match. On one side were those who agreed with the man who had barred the door. “The law is quite clear,” one cried. “Does is not say in the Fifth Book of Moses that **‘No one whose...’** well, that no one like him... **‘shall come into the assembly of Adonai’?**” (Deuteronomy 23:1)

But others quickly came forward to argue. “Ah, but does not the Prophet Isaiah say, **“Do not let the eunuch say, ‘I am just a dry tree.’ For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”** (Isaiah 56:3-5)

Bachos’ Reaction

Bachos really just wanted to go into the courtyard – to be in the place where the God of Israel was said to meet with his people. He was looking to experience God. But instead, he had suddenly become a thing for people to fight over! None of them seemed to care about him. They just cared about being right!

Even those who were arguing for him to be given access only seemed be speaking of him as if he were an inanimate object – and a flawed one at that! Somehow this was not quite what he had been looking forward to. He quietly slipped away while the learned scholars continued to argue over him, not even realizing that he was gone.

The Words of the Prophet

But there was one thing that remained with him from that encounter at the gate. The words that one of the scholars had shouted, the words that he said were spoken by the Prophet Isaiah, they remained with him. In fact, he couldn’t quite get them out of his head.

He hadn’t completely understood what the man had said. He did not speak the local Aramaic very well; the language of the small Jewish community in Ethiopia was quite different. But he had certainly picked up the idea that, according to this prophet, there really was a place for eunuchs, at least in the heart of God if not in the court of the congregation of Israel.

The Bookseller

And so, he decided that he needed to know something more about the words of Isaiah and his book. The court of the Gentiles was surrounded by a covered walkway lined with pillars. Various shops were set up along this walkway for the sale of sacrificial animals, incense and various other things. There was a small booth that contained a few scrolls. The Scroll of Isaiah was prominently displayed among them. It

was obviously a popular work.

It would have been painstakingly copied out by hand by some slave. When Bachos' eye caught sight of it as he walked past, he suddenly realized that this was the reason why he had been drawn to this place. It was not to perform a sacrifice in the court of the Israelites. He had been brought here to be connected with this book.

An Arm and a Leg for a Scroll

When he asked the price of the scroll, he winced at the answer. With that kind of money, he could probably buy a second house for himself back in Ethiopia. But, of course, what need did he have for a second house? He didn't even have anyone to pass his one residence onto when he was gone. The Candace had been incredibly generous to him over the years, but none of it meant much of anything to him. And so, he arranged for his chariot driver, a very large man that no one would ever dream of robbing, to come by later with enough gold coins to purchase the scroll.

Reading on the Road

And now, as that driver steered the horses down the desert road, Bachos had the scroll spread out on his knees while he strained to read the Hebrew script. **"Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."**

It was not easy reading – trying to make out the characters syllable by syllable while the chariot bounced along beneath him. But he was grateful to be forced to read so slowly. It was making him think and ask so many questions. **"By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living."** (Isaiah 53:7-8)

A Personal Message

He was struck by the words. They reminded him of his own journey, of the fear that he had felt when his parents had taken him for the operation. He had tried not to think of the unfairness of it all – the injustice of what he had been put through as little more than a child. And, though he hated to think of it, there was a sense in which he had indeed felt cut off from the land of the living ever since.

Now, Bachos had never felt as if anyone could understand his deepest feelings – never until now. But now his mind was left reeling. **"About whom,"** he asked himself, **"does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?"** He needed to know who could understand his feelings. But he did not know the answer.

That was when he heard the voice of someone who had seemingly come out of nowhere in this desert place. **"Do you understand what you are reading?"** the stranger wanted to know.

The Gift of Belonging

We don't really know what the backstory is for the eunuch being on that road to Gaza. But if he had gone to Jerusalem to worship – either as a Gentile (which certainly happened) or as an expatriate Jew – he would have no doubt been treated as an outsider, both as an African and as a eunuch. Even if he was a Jew, most would have had trouble accepting him as a true Israelite, as a man and maybe even as a human being.

We don't really know what Philip said to him to make him feel like he did belong somewhere. We just know that he began with that passage in Isaiah and used it to tell him the good news about Jesus. But I suspect that, whatever he told him about the good news, the thing that got his attention was that he told him that he could be loved and valued for who he was – that, even if he fit in nowhere else, he had a

place in the heart of Christ. That is where the good news always begins.