

“How Much Is Enough?” – Acts 8:26-40

Some of you I’m sure have been to a church service where they have a big screen up front and use a video projector to put up the hymns and prayers. In some of those churches the preacher will use those tools to do a PowerPoint kind of presentation during (or in place of!) the sermon. Well, this is one of those Sundays when I actually wish we had that kind of equipment – and that I had the kind of time that is needed to put together the videos, because our reading from Acts about Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch is absolutely ideal for that kind of presentation.

This delightful story recorded here in Luke’s Acts (bible class students will recall that Acts is the second half of Luke’s gospel) is laid out just the way someone would design it using PowerPoint. (For those of you who don’t know what I’m talking about, PowerPoint is not some divine finger, but is instead one of the component pieces of Microsoft’s Office Suite, and helps in the preparation of slides as visual aids for a presentation – *next slide*.) Of course I could stay in the academic realm and contend that this story is laid out in such a way that Buttrick’s “frames” approach would be appropriate, but that’s almost saying the same thing.

In any event, what we have in our reading is a delightful story cast in several scenes. The opening scene sets the stage, not only describing the location but making sure that we understand that it is in the wilderness. We’re not sure why, but the action will take place not in the streets of some noisy and chaotic town but out in the country, all pastoral and quiet. Moreover, in this opening scene we are primed and prompted to expect the miraculous intervening of the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit gives Philip his marching orders through an angelic messenger. So right from the beginning, as with any good story, our curiosity is tweaked as we wonder what could be the purpose of this divine task given to the first person that is introduced to us.

In scene two we are introduced to a second figure, this time an Ethiopian eunuch. Not just any eunuch, but a very important person who is in charge of the entire fortune of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. Now clearly this man is not Jewish. He is a foreigner – but nevertheless our curiosity is upped a notch because he has been in Jerusalem to worship. Again no explanation is given for this curious juxtaposition of a foreigner worshipping in Jerusalem.

Now that we’ve been introduced to the principal – or at least visible – characters, the pace picks up. The Spirit prods Philip to get close to the Ethiopian eunuch, and he does, running up to it and asking the occupant if he understood what he was reading from the words of the prophet Isaiah. Now here’s where my curiosity goes off-scale. How did Philip ever get close enough to hear what he was reading? Can you imagine the fate of some wild-eyed radical driven by the Spirit running up to the governor of a national treasury today? The sirens and flashing lights would erupt, the radio earpieces would crackle, the convoy would speed off to safety with the chief occupant pressed to the floor by security guards, and Philip would have been pinned face-down in the dirt in a heartbeat, if not shot dead first! I can’t imagine the Ethiopian eunuch’s security was any less than it would be today. And so we are primed even more to understand that something very unusual is happening on that wilderness road.

The tone of the next scene eases, and we are presented with a teaching time, in which Philip has the opportunity to explain to his esteemed host that Jesus is the sacrificial lamb spoken of by the prophet, and goes on to proclaim the good news about Jesus. This is a long scene as the chariot rumbles over the stones accompanied by deep discussions about faith.

And then suddenly the pace picks up again, as the eunuch spontaneously asks to be baptized, stops the chariot, and he and Philip head down to the water, where he is baptized by Philip. His duty done, Philip is instantly removed from the scene, and the eunuch goes happily on his way.

There is, to be sure, an epilogue that reveals to us that Philip discovered himself to now be in a small town north of Gaza called Azotus, where he carried on northward to Caesarea, all the while proclaiming the good news. The music fades, the credits roll, and this short movie comes to an end.

Although we are left with some questions hanging about some of the details, we are also left feeling good, feeling that we have been witnesses to a really important happening. And that of course is Luke's intent. This episode reveals clearly to us several of Luke's consistent theological themes.

First, it is clear that the Holy Spirit is the prime mover in expanding the gospel into the world. It was the Spirit that first moved Philip to head for the wilderness; then to approach the chariot; and finally to affirm the action of the baptism.

Luke also places a huge emphasis on the gospel being for people of all areas and ethnicities. The eunuch is clearly a foreigner (I can't help thinking of the scene in the movie *Lethal Weapon* where the South African consulate employee tells Joe Pesci that his friend Danny Glover is 'black') ... and moreover he is not eligible to be received into Judaism because he's a eunuch. The message is clear: the good news of Jesus is not just for Jews but for gentiles as well, and here the Spirit provides affirmation of that universality.

Thirdly, Luke want us to understand that Jesus is no out-of-the-blue new phenomenon, but is indeed the key that unlocks the meaning of the Old Testament, the Jewish scriptures. The interpretation of Isaiah is the central focus and theme of this story of Philip and the eunuch, illustrating how Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophetic promise.

So we are left feeling very good, as Luke intended ... but there is another big question looming in the background. This was a question that started to bother people very early in the church's expansion and still bothers some people today. That question is the meaning of baptism, or more specifically when is baptism legitimate or even who is eligible to be baptized. If you were following along in the pew bibles you may have noticed the little footnote showing that some ancient versions have an addition at verse 37. That extra text adds a response "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he [the eunuch] replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." after the question from the eunuch, "what is to prevent me from being baptized?" It is clear from this that the arguments about baptism started almost within the first one hundred years after Jesus' death and resurrection, and sadly those arguments continue right to today.

At the heart of the argument is the question, "how much is enough?" No, I don't mean the argument about how much water is enough, although that is a subject that will also generate huge dissention and division. I'm referring instead to the question "how much faith is enough?" in order for the baptism to be legitimate. It seems clear enough from Luke's original version that an imperfect and immature faith even as tiny as a mustard seed would be more than sufficient, and that what was really important was the acting of the Holy Spirit in the process. For many this seems to be not a happy or even sufficient answer. Reverting to a Pharisee-like stance of rigid rules they claim that a certain amount of faith is required, as in "if you believe with all your heart." Apparently under their scheme even the tiniest iota of doubt is enough to overwhelm the mighty power of the Holy Spirit. How much is enough of a requirement for belief to destroy baptism? At what point does the sacrament of baptism rely so much upon us that it is no longer a sacrament but merely a ritual of belief? Thank God that the answer to the question of how much faith is enough is up to God who loved the world enough to dwell among us in His Son Jesus, and not to those who would prefer to set barriers to exclude those they deem unworthy.

This was not an issue for Luke. For him the issue was clear, simple, and straightforward: the good news of reconciliation with God was available to all peoples and all nations through the power of the Holy Spirit, made so through the death and resurrection of Jesus, Son of God and fulfiller of prophecy. I believe we would do well to remember that as the central foundation of our faith. We need to remember that the Holy Spirit is ready to contact us in our journeys through various wildernesses, when we are puzzled and asking, “what does this mean?”, and when we are coming down from worship experiences and heading back into our daily lives. Thank God that the Spirit was there for Philip, and for the Eunuch, and is there for us as well.