

Call to Worship: Galatians 3:27-29, NRSVUE

One: *As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*

Many: There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

One: *And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*

Opening question: Share thoughts from last Sunday. What have you reflected on this week as you remember Ben Schonberg's baptism celebration or Ben Wideman's sermon about Anabaptist perspectives on baptism?

Scripture: Acts 8:26-40 (Reader's Theater on the next page)

Scripture Context:

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch shows up early in Acts, the chapter after Stephen's martyrdom and the chapter before Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. The eunuch embodies and transcends all of the categories in the Galatians passage above. He is neither Jew nor Gentile, but likely a Jewish proselyte (what the Jews of the time called a "God-fearer") traveling from Ethiopia to worship at the temple, perhaps drawn by the writings of the prophet Isaiah, specifically the passage in Isaiah 56:4-5: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, 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."

Neither slave or free, the eunuch was bound for life to his position as the powerful treasurer of Queen Candace. He was eligible for service to the queen only because he was born or made a eunuch – neither male nor female. An outsider in many ways, the eunuch likely identified with the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 – the passage that Phillip finds him reading. How did Phillip explain these words as "the good news about Jesus?" What inspired the eunuch to seek baptism, and how did he understand this ritual?

Ethiopian Christians trace their history to this encounter in Acts. The Meserete Kristos Church – our Anabaptist sibling in Ethiopia – was born in 1959 through North American Mennonite relief and medical mission work. Persevering through persecution during the communist era, it is now about ten times larger than Mennonite Church USA. Ask Ken and Laura Litwiller if you'd like to know more about the Ethiopian church, past and present.

Response Questions:

What stands out to you from today's reading about the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch?

Share your own story of baptism. What drew you to "the good news of Jesus?" How has your understanding of baptism changed since then? What stories, scriptures and experiences have shaped your perspectives on baptism?

Sharing - A time to share from our lives.

Close sharing in whatever way the Spirit moves. You may choose to use ‘*God of love, hear our prayer*’ after each sharing, and close with:

Holy One, you meet us between the words,
beneath the words, beyond the words. Hear our
prayers. Amen

Benediction: adapted from *Voices Together* 1055

Go, knowing that you are beloved by God.

Go, rejoicing - like the Ethiopian eunuch – in the good news
about Jesus.

Go, living the message of God’s grace, peace and love.
Amen.

Acts 8:26-40 NRSVUE – Reader’s Theater (for four readers)

Reader 1: An angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.)

Reader 2: So he got up and went.

Reader 3: Now there 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.

Reader 1: Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.”

Reader 2: So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

Reader 3: He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

Reader 4: Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.”*

Reader 3: The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?”

Reader 2: Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

Reader 3: As they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized? He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

Reader 1: When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing.

Reader 2: But Philip found himself at Azotus**, and as he was passing through the region he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

* Isaiah 53:7-8 ** 19-20 miles away