We may also infer that this man had great personal wealth: he traveled in his own chariot and he purchased a handwritten scroll of the book of Isaiah, an expensive souvenir from his journey. But he had no one with whom to discuss this prophecy.

Enter the Apostle Philip. The Holy Spirit worked it out so that the Ethiopian man is joined along the way by Philip. They travel together and there is time for conversation. The topic is Scripture, particularly the words of Isaiah. Philip and the eunuch talk about this passage as they travel together. As the journey unfolds, Philip connects this passage from Isaiah with the story of Jesus, and the Ethiopian man comes to understand what the passage means. In his conversations with Philip, the Ethiopian man moves from knowing nothing really about Jesus to receiving the gift of faith and being baptized. It is quite a journey they make together. Then Philip vanishes, led by the Spirit to go to a new place. Philip and the Ethiopian man are companions for just a little while, for a short time, but for a crucial time.

The journey the Ethiopian man makes, his spiritual growth in understanding this passage through the presence of Philip and their travels together, has much to say to us. As our spiritual journey unfolds, we come to new understandings of what Scripture means and we see more completely the power and the promise of the gospel. In the company of one another and with the companionship of the Holy Spirit, our spiritual journey leads us to new places. For the Ethiopian man, a spiritual outsider, seeking the gospel truth meant becoming a spiritual insider, a child of God, and a disciple of Jesus.

**He started as an outsider**. As the Ethiopian man hears and comprehends the good news about Jesus’ death and resurrection, he asks Philip, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:37). Of course, we would say that nothing prevents anyone who makes a profession of faith in Jesus Christ from being baptized. But this was not the Ethiopian man’s experience. His race and his physical condition placed him outside the original covenants God made with Israel. The scribes and pharisees in Jerusalem believed that only those who belonged to the chosen people of Israel would be saved. Yet, in baptizing the Ethiopian, Philip proved the opposite to be true. For the followers of Jesus, water and the Spirit are thicker than blood, race, status, or physical condition.

The early Christians learned this lesson rather early. In short order, Paul was off on his missionary journeys, spreading the good news far and wide among the Greeks and Romans. Three centuries later there would be more Gentile Christians than those of Jewish origin, and the Roman emperor himself would bow the knee to Jesus. The good news of Jesus Christ continues to reach out and include countless groups of outsiders: the put-out, the put-down, the put-aside. The good news of Christ’s gospel offers hope and healing for those whom the world despises.

**He sought the truth**. The Ethiopian man’s heart was uniquely receptive to the gospel message. He went looking for the truth about God, all the way to Jerusalem, at great personal effort and expense. He bought and read the words of Isaiah to discover the truth of God’s love and grace for him. When Philip asks him if he understands what he is reading, the Ethiopian man answers, “How can I unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:31). So, Philip begins to tell him about Jesus. Each of us needs a companion to help and guide and encourage us in our spiritual journey.

While it is Philip who gets in the chariot with the Ethiopian man, it is really the Holy Spirit that provides the guidance the Ethiopian man seeks. The Holy Spirit, working through Philip, does the teaching, creates the faith, and leads the Ethiopian man to his baptism. “Like a lamb 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” (Acts 8”32-33). The Ethiopian man is open to that direction and his journey goes on in a way he could never have imagined, taking him to the water of baptism, the assurance of faith, the power of God’s promise.

**He became a child of God.** In reading Isaiah’s wordsand in discussion with Philip about Jesus,the Ethiopian man discovered his true self as a child of God. And in his revelation, we discover our common humanity as children of God, created in God’s image, to live and love as God did for us in Jesus Christ.

Writing of this passage, N. T. Wright, the English New Testament scholar says:

“Isaiah…wasn’t simply looking through a long-range prophetic telescope, seeing Jesus a few hundred years away, and describing him in cryptic poetry. Rather, he was meditating deeply on the fate of Israel in exile, and on the promises and purposes of God which remained constant despite Israel’s failure to be the light to the nations, or even to walk in the light herself. Gradually a picture took shape in his praying, meditating mind: the figure of a Servant, one who would complete Israel’s task, who would come to where Israel was, to do for Israel and for the whole world what neither could do for themselves, to bear in his own body the shame and reproach of the nations and of God’s people, and to die under the weight of the world’s wickedness. Only so, he perceived, could the promises be fulfilled. Isaiah wrote a job description for a Servant who would accomplish God’s will, and rescue Israel and the world!

That hadn’t happened yet, but now it was beginning to, declares Philip; because the job description had found the right candidate at last. Jesus was the one through whom the slow and winding story of God’s people had reached its destination, and with it the moment of redemption for the whole world. No wonder the Ethiopian was excited. When you tell the story of Israel like that, with Jesus at its climax, it opens up to include everybody, including people like him, doubly excluded and now wonderfully welcomed. No wonder he wanted to share in the death and resurrection of this Jesus by being baptized, by having the whole story become his personal story. No wonder he went on his way celebrating — to become, if later tradition is to be believed, the first evangelist in his own native country. We today should ponder, too, the fact that the first non-Jew to come to faith and baptism in Luke’s great story is a black man from Africa.”

Like the Ethiopian man, we are all outsiders seeking the truth that transforms us into children of God. And, like him, there are a few simple things that we all need to understand as we gather at the Lord’s Table today: we are all sinners in need of a Savior; we are all loved beyond measure by God who is faithful; we are all forgiven and redeemed, because of Christ’s death and resurrection; we are all offered grace upon grace to live life anew and abundantly in Christ; we are all one in Christ Jesus.

We are all on a journey. God goes with us on the way. Oftentimes God is with us through the presence of those who accompany us on the road, even if they are with us for just a little while. May we be open to what we can learn from one another, so that we might be open to the God who is always on the move.

Prayer: Gracious God, You give us life; we must offer commitment. You give us Scripture; we must study. You give us children; we must serve as good parents. You give us talents; we must minister accordingly. You give us the church; we must extend fellowship. You give us the gospel; we must share the Good News. You give us each other; we must live in love. You give us money; we must invest in the eternal. O Giver of all that we call good and perfect, transform our gratitude for what you have placed within our hands into significant means of serving others as well as you. Amen.

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**A Companion for the Journey**

Sunday, May 2, 2021 Acts 8:26-40

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Last week I had the opportunity to hike with my son in the badlands of western North Dakota. I must admit, it was a challenge! We climbed tall buttes using switchback trails. We descended into dry creek beds. We walked the prairie, feeling like we were on top of the world. We saw some pretty-cool flora (pasque flowers) and fauna (sandhill cranes).

I must admit, too, that without an experienced guide and companions for the journey, I would not have made it. Our guide knew where to find water and good camping sites. By the second day, I was sore and tired, and for a few moments I felt like quitting. But my hiking companions cheered me on, encouraging me to dig deep and put one foot in front of the other. Together, we all made it to the campsite, where we fell asleep, exhausted from a long day’s hike. It is certainly nice to have companions for a journey!

In our reading from Acts, we encounter a man who is on a journey: a man from Ethiopia returning home from Jerusalem. As he rode in his chariot, he read and struggled to make sense of Isaiah 53, the verses about the Suffering Servant. Christians understand these verses as references to Jesus, who willingly underwent punishment and death for our sake. But the Ethiopian man did not have this context, so Isaiah’s words were tough to grasp; they were “obscure speech and difficult language” (to cite Ezekiel 3:5).

The text tells us that this Ethiopian man was a eunuch, a court official, and in charge of the entire royal treasury, and he traveled all the way to Jerusalem to worship (Acts 8:27-28). From this we surmise that he knew something about Israel’s God. Whether he was a believer or just curious is not clear, but I believe that anyone who made that kind of journey must have been serious about worshipping and learning more about Israel’s God.

This man was a eunuch, so we presume he did not receive a warm welcome at the temple. The law of Moses specifically prohibits a person of his physical condition from entering the temple (Deuteronomy 23:1). The scribes and pharisees would shun him on the streets. The learned rabbis, from whom he longed to learn, would not spare him any time. He was very likely returning home in great disappointment.