

The book of Acts tells the story of the expansion of the church. The church starts in Jerusalem, an occupied provincial capital on the edge of the Roman empire. The book ends with the good news being proclaimed in the heart and center of the empire, in Rome itself.

In the beginning, Christianity is a subset of Judaism. The followers of Jesus meet together for Eucharist. But they also go to the Jewish temple to pray.

Later in the book, Christianity will begin to be an independent religion, not a subset of Judaism, but an autonomous religious.

In the beginning, you have to become a Jew if you want to be a Christian. Later, you could convert to Christianity directly, without being circumcised or converting to Judaism.

So what happens in the middle? What moves the church from being a Jewish-only movement to being a religion open to people from all tribes and languages and peoples and nations?

Well, in the book of Acts, there are 3 turning points. The second comes in Acts chapter 9, the famous conversion of St. Paul on the Road to Damascus. Paul moves from being the great persecutor of Christianity to the great missionary who takes the message of Jesus Christ out into the Greco-Roman world.

The third turning point is Acts chapters 10 and 11. Peter sees a vision of clean and unclean animals and he is told to kill and eat, even the animals that aren't kosher. He interprets it to mean that the church needs to expand and that the good news is for Gentiles as well as Jews. We'll hear about that one next week.

Paul and Peter, turning points 2 and 3 in Acts. But before that, is the first turning point, our lesson today from Acts chapter 8.

This morning we heard the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. The Philip in this story is not the apostle Philip, one of the twelve. Instead, this is another Philip, Philip the deacon. He's one of the original 7 deacons.

In chapter 7 of Acts, Philip's fellow deacon, Stephen, becomes the first Christian martyr. In chapter 8 Philip leaves Jerusalem and preaches the Gospel to the gentiles in Samaria. His preaching falls on receptive ears.

And that's where we pick up the story today. Philip receives a message from God. "Get up, and go down the road from Jerusalem to Gaza." Philip does just this. And on that same road is an Ethiopian eunuch.

Ancient Ethiopia comprises the modern day territory of both Ethiopia and Sudan, which are south of Egypt. The ancient Egyptians called the region, Nubia. This man is described as being the treasurer for the Kandake, or Candace, which is the Nubian word for Queen. And he is described as a eunuch. He has voluntarily allowed himself to be castrated in

order to serve within the queen's inner circle. This was not uncommon in the courts of eastern monarchs. By making a man a eunuch, he wouldn't be a sexual threat to the queen's person, and thus could safely be part of her inner circle.

So from one standpoint, this man is of very high social standing. He's a high official for the Nubian queen. We also have further evidence of his high social standing. We are told that he is seated in his chariot, or carriage. And he's reading from the prophet Isaiah. We miss the significance of both these clues. The fact that he's sitting in his chariot reading means that he has someone else driving for him. He's got at least one servant with him. You couldn't read a scroll and drive at the same time. He's wealthy enough to have a chauffeur.

The fact that he has a copy of Isaiah also means that he's very wealthy. These scrolls were very expensive, and far beyond the economic reach of most people. This is a powerful, wealthy man.

And yet, from a Jewish standpoint, he has almost no status at all. It's not just because he's a foreigner. Foreigners could convert to Judaism. But this man would never be allowed to convert. That's because he's a eunuch. He wouldn't be able to undergo the rites of circumcision. According to the Law of Moses, a eunuch is automatically disqualified from participating in temple worship. He can't ever truly become part of the people of God.

Don't miss the poignancy here. This man is obviously attracted to Judaism. He owns his own very expensive scroll of Isaiah. He has traveled from his country to Jerusalem, which would be a 6 to 8 week trip one-way. He's attracted to the worship of the God of Israel. But because he's a eunuch, he can never participate in that worship himself.

And so he's rolling down the road reading from the 53rd chapter of Isaiah. In those days everyone who could read would read aloud. Reading silently was simply not done.

So when the Holy Spirit tells Philip to run up to the chariot, Philip will be able to hear what the man is reading. And hears the words from Isaiah. And he asks the question, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The eunuch replies, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invites Philip to join him and interpret the scripture for him.

That passage, Isaiah 53, deals with God's suffering servant: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth."

The eunuch asks Philip the million dollar question: "Who's the prophet talking about? Himself? Someone else?"

And that gives Philip the perfect opportunity to proclaim the Gospel. We're told, "Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus." And apparently they talk for quite a while. Because when they pass by an oasis along this desert road, the Ethiopian Eunuch says, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

Don't miss the importance of what he's saying here. He has been prevented by his condition from converting to Judaism. But there's nothing to prevent him from being baptized.

There's nothing that prevents his conversion to Christianity. He has embraced the Good News of the God of Israel made perfect in the person and work of Jesus Christ. And he's ready to be baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection. And so, Philip baptizes him.

Notice Philip's pattern for presenting the good news. It's actually a very good model for us. We tend to think of other branches of Christianity as being more focused on talking to people about their faith. But Philip provides a good model for Episcopalians.

First, Philip is sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit told him to take the Gaza road. The Spirit told him to run up to the chariot. Philip could have ignored either message. What's more, the Spirit has already prepared the heart of the Ethiopian man. He's ready to hear Philip's message.

Second, Philip meets the man where he is. Philip does not have a canned speech ready. He isn't standing there handing out prepackaged pamphlets. He meets the man where he is. He starts by dealing very specifically with the man's own questions. Philip does not foist his own agenda on the man.

And third, Philip is ready to present the Good News of Jesus Christ. Philip is focused on Jesus. We don't know all that Philip said. But we do know that after hearing it, the Ethiopian was ready to be baptized in the name of Jesus.

It's a good model to follow:

1. Be sensitive to the Spirit's promptings.
2. Start with their questions, not your agenda.
3. Be focused on Jesus Christ.

And with the Ethiopian eunuch, I have to add a postscript. He drops out of scripture, and we don't hear anymore about him. Yet in Ethiopia they claim that he returned to his country and proclaimed the faith himself. The church in Ethiopia looks to that Eunuch as their founder and patron saint. But Philip didn't know that would be the outcome. He was simply obedient to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

It's not our job to control the outcome. It's simply our job to make the most of the opportunities that God gives us. It's our job to be as faithful as we can with what we're given. If God gives us opportunities to share our faith, it's up to us to have the courage to do so.