

If I were going to make a movie of the story of Phillip and the Ethiopian, I would begin with an image of a vast desert landscape with shimmering heat rising from the sand in the scorching midday sun.

A lone figure appears, walking along a dusty road, with a long piece of cloth wrapped around his head and neck shielding his face from the sun - his gaze fixed on the horizon. The only sounds would be the wind since this was such a desolate place in-between the city of Jerusalem and Gaza. The music playing in the background would give a hint of foreboding. This is not a place you want to be alone.

Who knows what could befall you along such a deserted road. And we, the audience, wonder, Why is this man walking here of all places?

The camera moves in closer so we can see this man's face focused on the horizon and yet pondering.

And then the scene cuts to a flashback of an earlier time. Of this same man smiling as he serves tables of widowed women in his hometown – a ministry birthed from the apostles of Jesus. There was so much need, the apostles asked him along with a few others to make sure the widows in his village had enough food to eat. His friend, Stephen, was another who served at these tables and then was killed – stoned to death simply because he boldly proclaimed the truth of the good news of God's love.

In that flashback moment the camera shows the look of terror and incredulity on Phillip's face as he watched his friend die. Would this be his fate as well?

He had to get away. He had to get clear on his life, his purpose. Serving the widows filled him with joy. Being a part of the Jesus movement had been life changing for him. But he was not ready to die. So, he fled like many of the Jesus followers. Most went on to Judea.

But he ended up in Samaria – a place known for its hostility against the Jews. At first he tried to blend in – to hide his identity, and gifts. But he couldn't help himself. As he got to know people he began to share his story that included his ministry in Jerusalem and how the community of Jesus followers had given him a new life and sense of hope.

And to his astonishment simply by sharing his story those around him softened. It seemed barriers of animosity and mistrust melted. Phillip was able to bring a sense of reconciliation, and many were baptized regardless of their ethnicity or background.

One evening as he is getting ready for bed, a bright light appears – and out of that light a voice instructs him to leave Samaria and begin to walk south on the road to Gaza.

At this point Phillip knows that his life is no longer his alone. The more he abides in the stories of Jesus and feels into the reality of that lived out love, the more deeply connected he is to the guidance of the Holy spirit.

He knows deep within, he has no choice but to follow – even if the instruction seems so absurd.

And so, the scene switches back to that desert road. In the distance a cloud of dust begins to form, with the sound of hoof beats and chariot wheels.

Phillip turns around to look towards that noise. A voice within, says, “wave down that chariot and get in.”

The chariot begins to slow – how odd it would be to find someone walking along this desert road in the heat of the day.

Phillip looks into the Chariot and sees a dark-skinned man adorned with the regalia of wealth and status, reading out loud from a scroll.

Could Phillip be hearing things? Was this man reading from the prophet Isaiah?

This dark-skinned man from the fringes of the inhabited world at that time – Ethiopia - invites him to sit with him.

Phillip discovers that this man works as the chief treasury officer for Queen Candace of Meroe.

At once Phillip knew this man was castrated in order to have such a high-ranking position.

So, he found it odd that this eunuch was reading Hebrew Scriptures. And had just told Phillip that he was heading back home after making a spiritual pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Phillip knew that there is no way this eunuch would be welcomed into the Temple. Eunuchs were despised as sexual deviants and scorned as freaks. They were outside the saving graces of God.

Phillip sat in silence as the Ethiopian continued to read the scroll.

I can imagine at this point; Phillip is giggling on the inside... if only my friends in Jerusalem could see me right now. There is so much about this moment that is weird. You couldn't make it up if you tried.

As so begins the sacred dance between these 2 souls - a dance that transcends barriers of language, culture and tradition. Phillip with his heart open senses this traveler carries within him a longing for something more – a hunger for the sacred mysteries that lie beyond the horizon. A hunger that had been denied him due to his status as a eunuch who cannot participate in Temple rituals. Who has been denied participation in a church community.

Phillip knows of that deep hunger in his own life. He realize show blessed he is that he has found meaning and purpose in the way of Jesus.

This darked skinned official powerful and yet marginalized, deprived of dignity and justice, senses Phillips open heart and they begin to talk.

Philip says, “Excuse me sir, do you understand what you’re reading?” Implying, “Do you know what you are seeking to know by reading? Do you realize what you are reading?”

Of course, in God’s scheme of things, the eunuch is not just reading any random Isaiah text. It’s an evocative passage about a shorn, scorned, shamed sheep-like figure to whom “justice” and the power to have offspring were denied.

The eunuch sees himself as this sheep-like figure. So, they ask Phillip, “About whom ... does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” (8:34) In other words – could this be about me?

We are not told what Phillip shared with this Ethiopian Eunuch. But we do know that Phillip must have shared the way this passage relates to the life and teachings of Jesus. In essence this passage from Isaiah speaks of a man who was oppressed and rejected, yet through his suffering, he brought salvation to others. His name is Jesus, the Messiah.

The Ethiopian's eyes widen with understanding as he listens intently to Philip's words. Could this be a sign that in God’s realm no one is rejected? Could it mean that he though despised and rejected could be loved and accepted? Was there eternal hope for even him?

Wasting no time with this revelation, the Ethiopian Eunuch asks, “Is there water nearby? What is to prevent me from being baptized?” What is to prevent me from being included in this way of Jesus?

Philip smiles, recognizing the sincerity in the eunuch's heart. Recognizing that this is why the spirit led him to walk along that God forsaken road.

And wouldn’t you know it, In the middle of that desert landscape they come across a pool of water, and Philip baptizes him into community – a community that promises to love and support him. A community that says, Welcome – the angels of dancing for joy for you beautiful child of God.

As the Ethiopian eunuch emerges from the water, his face radiant with joy, the camera zooms out to capture the vast desert landscape, calling to mind the expansiveness of God's love that can be found in the least likely of places with the least likely of people.

Before the credits role this passage from the first chapter of Acts appears.

“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”

Funny how God works isn't it?

There is no strategic plan for how the good news spreads. If the apostles would have tried to create and follow such a plan, I don't think we would be here today.

The movement from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria came about through the stoning of Stephen and the diaspora of Jesus followers after that.

The ends of the world came through Phillip, a server of food to widows, abiding with God. Trusting in his intuitive guidance to walk along a deserted road.

This story offers so many messages for us today.

It is a story of liberation, affirmation and inclusion that highlights the transformative power of God's love and the call to build communities of welcome and acceptance for all people.

It is a story of how the Holy Spirit dances with each one of us as we consent to abiding in God – of opening our hearts so that we too, can see as God sees and follow as God instructs even if that means walking along a deserted road.

It is not lost on me – that we are practicing this way of abiding collectively with our community dinners.

Our intentions were humble – to bring a sense of healing to the community through food and fellowship. We expanded our horizons and asked for help from the larger community. We learned what it is to serve just like Phillip with the widows.

Jesus reminds us with his parting words to the disciples before his death, “I am the vine, and you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation is intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. If you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how God shows who God is.”

And now we await that next call just over the horizon, making ourselves at home with Love and asking God to guide our feet.

Amen