

**Sermon Preached May 3, 2015**  
**Year B, Easter 5**  
**St. John's Episcopal Church**  
**Beverly Farms, Massachusetts**  
**The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury**

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

Christians throughout the ages have sought converts to their beliefs. We all know of evangelists on street corners with a Bible in one hand and a bull horn in the other. But have you ever considered that other religions are also evangelists? In fact ancient Judaism often recruited new converts to their faith. Many ancient writings give details about the requirements of gentiles who wished to embrace Judaism, what was expected of them in belief or behavior. These proselytes had to accept the one God. They often were circumcised, observed religious laws, and made a sacrifice at the Temple as a part of the conversion rite. They learned Torah and were adopted into the Jewish life.

The reading from Acts this morning tells the story of one of these new proselytes. Now, we don't know all the details, but between scripture and what we know of ancient society we get a pretty good picture of what was going on. A plausible story might go something like this:

Once upon a time there was a young Ethiopian boy. He was orphaned at a young age and sold as a slave. His new owner believed this new slave would be more useful and valuable were he castrated, so he was made a eunuch. This poor boy of nine or ten, abandoned and alone, having undergone brutal surgery, is then sold again to the household of a rich man. Here the boy is taught to care for the women in the harem. He learns that as a eunuch he is trusted by his

master in a way that other males are not. He's smart boy and keeps his eyes and ears open.

As he grows up, the young slave does not mature like other men, he is more docile and retains his high voice.

But he is quick and bright and his natural intelligence and good nature win him the respect of all who work in this large household. Soon his master recognizes that this eunuch has other gifts and decides to expand his talents. The eunuch is taught to read and write his native language as well as Greek, the language of international trade. He learns math and numbers and quickly takes charges of the master's bookkeeping.

Somewhere along the line, because of outstanding service, he earns his freedom. Through his work he comes into contact with other officials who handle money for other businesses and the state. It's through these contacts that the eunuch comes to the attention of the court of the Candace, the queen of Ethiopia. He is hired by the treasury department and continues to learn and grow in his career. As he matures, he becomes known for his wisdom and right judgment and earns the respect of his peers.

Because he never can marry or have children, he devotes himself to his work. He still feels the pain of being a eunuch, of having been castrated against his will, but he has risen far above what anyone might have expected of him.

As he advances in his career, he finds himself traveling. The queen has business dealings

with many of the neighboring countries, with Egypt, Greece, and even Israel. The eunuch learns about different people and cultures and becomes quite cosmopolitan. He even earns the notice and favor of the queen herself who eventually makes him the Secretary of the Treasury, in charge of all her finances. It is a huge responsibility and an enormous honor. But the eunuch is an educated, well-traveled man with a sound mind. He is delighted with his new position.

In addition to the new people and cultures with whom he comes in contact through his work, he also learns about various religions. Many of the men of other countries are eager to share their religious beliefs. He is particularly impressed with Judaism. The idea of one God is an appealing one, and the scriptures of theirs, which he has seen, are enlightening. He becomes so enamored of their beliefs that one day the eunuch decides to travel to Israel, to Jerusalem, and worship at the Temple himself. He wants to become a proselyte; he wants to become a Jew.

When he gets to Jerusalem he is amazed at the beauty of the Temple and the faith of the people. He himself is very exotic to the citizens of Jerusalem. This is not a poor Arabic man, but a wealthy black man with a high social status. He's from another country with another language and culture. He is a eunuch. Yet he spends a month there learning from Jewish teachers. He observes the Sabbath. Sadly, he is not entirely welcomed. You see, the book of Deuteronomy says that eunuchs may not be admitted into the Temple. Therefore, he is never allowed to be fully a Jew. Despite all his achievements in life, overcoming great odds, he is still seen as lesser than the lowliest Jewish slave. But he has learned much and before he leaves for home he obtains some of the scriptures in order to study them on his own.

He climbs into his carriage pulled by horses, is followed by his servants and starts off on his trip. He heads south from Jerusalem towards the coastal city of Gaza and from there he can head on down to Ethiopia. To keep up his studies the eunuch reads to himself from the scriptures. Like all people in the ancient world, he reads aloud. But before he gets more than a few hours from the gate of the city a man starts running along side his carriage. "Excuse me!" a scruffy man calls to him, struggling to keep up, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The eunuch doesn't, so he stops the carriage and invites Philip in to explain it to him.

So Philip tells the eunuch all about Jesus. The reading from Isaiah which the eunuch was studying foretold what would happen to Christ. Philip explains to him how Jesus lived and how he had died. He explains how he rose again and was the Son of God. He explains that the Jewish scriptures were fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Jesus was the one who was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and it was done for our sake.

The eunuch was very excited about this! In fact, it was the most wonderful thing he had ever heard! Everything in his life made sense in a way it never had before! His life in Ethiopia and his learnings in the Jerusalem were merely the preparation for the full Word of God. This was good news indeed! The eunuch saw some water and promptly stopped the carriage. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and was baptized by Philip. Philip was then snatched up by the Holy Spirit and the eunuch went home to Ethiopia rejoicing in the Lord. There he continued in his faith in Christ and brought the good news of Jesus to far off lands. The End.

What I wondered as I thought about this story is, how did the eunuch come to believe the word of Philip so quickly? Surely the Holy Spirit had a role, but was there more? What in particular about the good news struck a chord with this man?

I think it may have had to do with parallels between the eunuch's experiences and those of Christ. He knew Jesus could identify with the horror, pain and humiliation of his castration because Christ had experienced the horror, pain and humiliation of the crucifixion. The passage the eunuch was reading in Isaiah sounds a lot like what they both experienced, "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." Here is a God who is not distant, but one who knows and understands his pain! Here is a God who doesn't say "Don't worry, be happy!" But "I understand your pain. I love you. I will always stand by you. I will die for you."

In addition, if you remember, when the eunuch sees the water and stops the carriage he asks "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" This is a powerful question. Because as you may recall, there is a lot to prevent him from being a full member of the Jewish community at that time. But to his delight, the body of Christ has no such restrictions and he is happily baptized into the faith. Christianity is inclusive.

This is more than simply identifying with his pain. Jesus is showing that there is new life on the other side of castration. The eunuch was excluded from the Temple, but through Jesus, he is recognized as a valued child of God. His castration is irrelevant. Through Jesus we have a different kind of wholeness, one not concerned about race or differences, but one based on the

faith in our hearts and the knowledge of our belovedness.

Jesus knows our pains and loves us all the more for enduring them. He takes what is broken in our lives and makes it whole. He shows us that the love of God extends to people of all colors, all conditions, and social standings. Even an Ethiopian eunuch, one who is vastly different from the Israelites, is a whole man in the eyes of Christ. Whatever our shortcomings, our differences, or however we have been hurt in our lives, we are healed and accepted by the love of our God.

Amen.