

“What the water said”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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1 John 4:7-12 and Acts 8:26-40

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Imagine, for a moment, that you are Philip. You are an up-and-coming preacher. You just converted crowds of Samaritans. Because of you, men and women who were paralyzed are now walking. You got the attention of none other than Peter and John, two of the original disciples of Jesus. You’ve got a gift. You think, now, it’s Jerusalem, it’s the big city for me. But instead this angel comes out of nowhere and tells you to walk some dirt road, a “wilderness road.” It is midday, and it is hot. Desert sand covers the plains. The sun blares without shade or remission. Your eyes burn from sweat. You wonder, *What am I doing here?*

Now imagine that you are the eunuch in this story. You are a complicated man. You are a person of power and means. You ride a chariot, the Lexus of the ancient world. You wear fine cloth. You are the treasurer to none other than the Queen of Ethiopia. You own a scroll, an expensive item in those days, and are clearly literate and well educated, also rare in those days. And yet, you are a foreigner in a strange land. You are beyond the safety of your country, vulnerable. And you are a eunuch. You no longer have the power to have children. Perhaps you were forcibly cut. That trauma remains with you. You don’t fit into the gender binary of male and female. Every day, you face people’s judgment and prejudice. In fact, you are, according to religious law, unclean. You don’t even get a name in this story. You are an untouchable. That is both your power and your powerlessness.

On this dirt, country road, these two men meet, Philip and the Ethiopian. These are not just characters or references in a story; they are human beings like you and me. Philip, who appears only in a few texts, and the Ethiopian, who appears here and nowhere else, have entire lives before this moment; they have parents, siblings, struggles, and joys. And they will have futures. Whole legends crop up about this eunuch, how he goes back to Ethiopia and founds a church there, an ancient church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, long before any European, so-called Christian conquerors ever arrive.

And between these two strangers hangs a question, “Look! Here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

As is typical with the New Testament, the text quickly moves on to the next action, to the baptism. But I want us to imagine a deep and pregnant pause between these two verses, between the question and the action. Because the eunuch has actually asked a very difficult, complex question.

What is to prevent him from being baptized? Well, actually a lot. He is a foreigner. As a eunuch, he is clearly not circumcised and is therefore lacking the sign of the covenant. He is, according to law, unclean and not permitted in the temple to worship. Leviticus 21:20 and Deuteronomy 23:1

are quite clear on this matter. Plus, Philip is not an apostle. He has not been authorized to perform baptisms. Even in Samaria, Peter and John had to be the ones to introduce the people to the Holy Spirit. And if Philip were a Presbyterian, well, he would need to consult the *Book of Order*, where he would see that only people ordained to the ministry of teaching elder can perform baptisms, and only then, at the approval of the session, in the presence of the congregation, and in consultation with the adult to be baptized.

On the other hand, Isaiah 56 reverses the exclusion of eunuchs and foreigners in anticipation of a messianic age. The text reads, “Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely separate me from the Lord’s people’, and do not let the eunuch say, ‘I am just a dry tree’... I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for *all* peoples” (Isa. 56:3, 5, 7). Certainly, from Philip’s perspective and from some Jews’ perspective, such as those in the Qumran community, the messianic age was here. And had not an angel of the Lord, the Holy Spirit, sent Philip here, for this exact moment, for this exact person?

So, there are two different answers Philip could have given to the eunuch’s question: two different schools of thought, both with sound arguments to make, both with scriptural backing.

Philip is now sweating because of more than the heat. He is nervous.

I imagine many of us have felt that way, found ourselves stuck between two or more ideas that seem to have merit, and we can’t make heads or tails of what is right.

It is easy to feel this way when watching today’s media: do you listen to the pundit over here, or the pundit over there? We are confronted, this day, with great challenges: poverty, student debt, terrorism, war, pandemic, bullying, kids killing themselves, climate change, cancer caused by chemicals and pollution, a booming business of trafficking in people (modern day slavery), natural disasters, more than 2.3 million American citizens incarcerated... not to mention just trying to make it day to day, survive high school, provide some kind of decent life for our children and families, care for our friends, have a little fun, and oh yeah, worship God. And everybody’s got an answer. Everybody’s got a theory. And there are sides to everything: Are you liberal or conservative? Do you watch Fox or MSNBC? Are you a Leviticus person or an Isaiah person?

In these situations, it can be incredibly hard to know what to do—which side to choose or whether to choose a side at all. In an age when everything has been thrown into doubt, we do not know by what measuring rod we can judge the truth or falsehood of anything.

In our text, Philip doesn’t give a verbal answer. All we have is a question, a pause, and then action, a baptism.

What happened in that pause? What was said in the silence? What did the water say, that dirty puddle of water, drying quickly in the desert heat? What did it say?

Because whatever it said, whatever the water said, whatever was communicated in that pause, caused Philip and the eunuch to get out of that chariot and baptize.

The title of this sermon is “What the Water Said,” an adaptation of a subtitle of T.S. Eliot’s poem, “The Waste Land”. It is a complex, allusive poem about the search for life, for meaning, for water, where there seems to be none. It is a poem written in the wake of World War I and in the presence of a European continent devastated by more than war. And in this poem, there is a subheading that reads, “What the Thunder Said.” And under that subheading is a verse that has stuck with me ever since my first reading of the poem. The thunder of course is the sound of water, the sound before water, before rain. Eliot writes, “Then spoke the thunder... *datta*: what have we given?” *Datta* in Sanskrit means, “give.” It comes from a Hindu *Upanishad*, where the one instruction from the Creator God to humans is this: *datta*, give. Give what? The poem continues, “The awful daring of a moment’s surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract / By this, and this only, we have existed.”

By this, and this only, we have existed: the awful daring of a moment’s surrender.

What did the water say? It said the same thing the thunder said: give.

Suddenly, for Philip, the answer is obvious, and the answer is not so much an idea, but a person, a person sitting beside him, a person thirsty and hurting, asking for water and God.

Suddenly, Philip has his answer, and we have our answer: the quality of our ideas is measured by how much they give, how much they love.

When we say Jesus is the answer, we can judge how true that is by how much that answer gives: it gives life, salvation, hope, love. And so too our ideas are tested when we find ourselves on wilderness roads, confronted by real people (like Philip and the eunuch in this story), not just debates, but people, and how much we’re willing to give them.

This is the old rubric from our *Book of Confessions*—that the accuracy of any theological statement or interpretation of Scripture can be gauged by asking whether it fulfills the greatest commandment, as taught by Jesus: that we love God and that we love our neighbor.

We can debate the solutions to poverty, talk about taxes and economic theory, but in the end, here is a homeless woman. We can debate the science and politics of climate change, we can discuss causation and responsibility, but in the end, here is a child with environmentally-induced cancer. We can carefully exegete Scripture, its context, and what it has to say about sexuality and gender, but in the end, here is a teenager who just wants our love, our acceptance.

How much do your ideas give? How much do *my* ideas give? When surrounded by pundits, media, blogs, and gurus of all sorts, we have a knife that can cut through it all, a single word from a muddy pool of water in a desert, the water of baptism.

The water that said, “Give.” *Datta*. **Amen.**