

August 18th: Water

Good morning again, traveling companions. Earlier this summer, we began a new journey together—our sermon series titled “Dis[place]d: Finding Home Together.” This series is meant to be a sojourn into the biblical story, and a tool to help each of us identify the displacement in our own lives, so that we might find comfort in God’s promise of a future home.

When Pastor Heather introduced this topic, she defined this concept of displacement for us, saying that to displace something is to remove it from its usual or proper place, and this can apply to both tangible things like individuals and intangible things like emotions. Displacement can be temporary or permanent, but often the same underlying feelings apply to this sense of disorientation and confusion. So if you are with us this morning and identify with any of those feelings, or are going through an experience of displacement in your life, we invite you to enter into this time of meditation with an openness to God’s presence and the peace that is waiting for you in this place.

In June and July, we focused on examples of involuntary and voluntary displacement—and now we turn to passages that will give us insight into what it looks like to find home together in the midst of those displacements. So as we enter this final stage of our journey, we’ll be attuned to these experiences of home and what it can feel like to build that sense of community wherever we are.

Before we take a closer look at our text, would you pray with me?

Creator God, you hovered over the waters at the dawn of time, and your Spirit brought life out of the darkness. You turned the nothingness of our universe into beautiful abundance and diversity, your hands shaped time and space into the fullness of our world. As we journey into new spaces and into contact with the entire spectrum of your creation, remind us that we are united by your grace

and love for us. Remind us that we find your forgiveness in the waters of baptism, and renew our commitment to living as your liberated disciples. Amen.

This morning we're back in the New Testament—the portion of the Bible that takes place in the first century world. We're back in the context of the Roman occupied Mediterranean, and so when we look at these texts, it's important to consider how the realities of empire are at play in the lives of our biblical characters. This is because empire and cultural boundaries are a critical aspect of scripture—and this ancient world operated in very different ways from our modern society.

In the world of empire, the political and cultural systems depend on stratification. The world of empire depends on a few people being at the very top, and lots of people being at the very bottom. In this system, a vast majority of people have to be oppressed, marginalized, and exploited, so that a tiny minority can live in luxury. That's how it worked—people were separated out by social class, citizenship status, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and more. All the categories that humans might use to describe themselves or group themselves together were a mechanism for keeping certain people apart, so that these rules about honor and reputation could be enforced.

I think we can all understand that this system resulted in massive displacement—both physically and culturally. And so this is a major issue for the early church—it's something that the early disciples and leaders wrestled with in all of the communities and churches that were established around the Mediterranean.

The Book of Acts tells the story of this early movement of Jesus followers—and how difficult it was to navigate these systems and practices of empire. In these pages, we hear about how different factions navigated conflicts, how individual leaders traveled to spread the gospel to people outside of their typical communities, and how these stratified people were transformed into a unified tribe of disciples. It's an exciting time, but also disorienting. There is so much that has shifted in such a short amount of time—and it's a lot to grapple

with. And it's tough to lead a movement of liberation inside of a system that is dedicated to keeping people oppressed and in their proper places. It's tough work to resist those social pressures in order to build something more just and more liberating.

And so today's passage introduces us to someone who is actively engaged in this resistance of empire's intended displacement.

This piece of chapter 8 begins with specific instructions that are given to Philip, one of the disciples in charge of spreading the gospel. In verse 26, we learn that an angel of the Lord came to him, and said, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

Philip obeys this divine command, and begins to travel in the direction that God instructed. On his journey, he encounters a man who is described as the Ethiopian eunuch, who held a position of influence in the court of the Queen of the Ethiopians. Our biblical author tells us that the eunuch is returning home after a visit to Jerusalem, and is resting in his chariot while reading the Scroll of Isaiah, one of the Old Testament's most important prophets. Again Philip hears some divine instructions, which urge him to go to the chariot and stay near to the man inside it.

When Philip begins a conversation with the eunuch, he discovers that the eunuch is deeply curious about Jesus, and so Philip begins to share the gospel with him. After traveling together for a short while, it's clear that this conversation has deeply impacted the eunuch—so when the two see a source of water, the eunuch stops the chariot. This time it's the eunuch giving instructions—he says to Philip, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" Philip agrees to baptize him, and the eunuch departs from this event rejoicing in his new sense of identity and salvation.

To many of us, it seems rather unlikely that Philip and the eunuch would find water while traveling through the desert—but I think we'll just have to accept that God had a bigger plan on this particular day, and that certain miracles

occurred in order for this event to take place. And it is a miracle, because in this culture of empire, this kind of encounter should not have taken place. This kind of relationship would have gone against all the rules and societal guidelines that governed everyday and spiritual behavior. This kind of conversation breaks down the barriers that should have existed between a Jewish man turned follower of Jesus, and the Ethiopian eunuch.

And let me explain why this is the case.

In the ancient world, eunuchs were a uniquely marginalized group—and due to strict rules found in Deuteronomy 23, they were excluded from Israelite community and spiritual events. This wasn't so much of an issue in the time of the United Monarchy, as castration was not actively used by the nations of Israel or Judah, but it was practiced in other empires and cultures such as the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Persians. In these settings, castration was sometimes used as a punishment for grave offenses, or as the mark of permanent slave. When the nation of Judah was taken into captivity in Babylon, many of these male captives were sold into slavery, and therefore forcibly made into eunuchs. When the people of God were able to return to the land of Judah, they had to grapple with the proper place of these eunuchs in Jewish society—would they be allowed in the temple? Would they be welcome at festivals and rituals? Could they eat in mixed gender groups, or only with one gender?

In many ways, eunuchs of this time period were their own social class—distinct from other groups and individuals. Although modern texts might use masculine pronouns for these individuals—they were much closer to what we might now label as “nonbinary” or “gender nonconforming” in the eyes of their neighbors. They occupied a space on the fringes of society—neither male nor female—and therefore kept away from gendered activities or roles. They were treated as less than, left out, or not pure enough for typical community relationships.

But this eunuch is not just a eunuch—he is a foreigner, a native of Ethiopia, which Jews of the time viewed as a land “at the ends of the earth.” It was so far removed from their local context and way of being—this far off land was a nation with its own governance structure led by a queen, its own religious practices, its own set of norms and rituals—all of which was so different from what was normative for Jews of this time period. And it was easy to exclude things that were considered strange. When the Ethiopian eunuch traveled to Jerusalem, it’s likely that this convergence of unfamiliar qualities and identities would have prevented him from actually engaging in worship at the temple. He might have been allowed into some parts of the temple area, but certainly not into the inner courts reserved for the people who would have been considered “faithful Jews.” He would have been rejected from this experience of the divine presence because of his status as a sexual minority and ethnicity.

Therefore, we can see that this Ethiopian eunuch was the last person that Philip would have expected to be interested in Jesus and in baptism. The eunuch was so far outside of Philip’s normal, everyday experience—but still Philip engages with him in a way that provokes curiosity and transformation. The voice of God tells Philip to draw close instead of staying away, and the result of that obedience is a relationship that defies both the rules of empire and the rules of Jewish culture—this obedience to the voice of God results in connection instead of displacement.

But here’s where I think it gets really cool. Remember how the eunuch was reading from the scroll of Isaiah while sitting in his chariot? Well the ancient prophet actually has something to say about eunuchs—something revolutionary. In Isaiah 56, God shares a profound word of inclusion for these left out, inbetween, marginalized folks—verses 4 and 5 say this: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever.”

Wow. Isaiah actually promises that eunuchs will be welcomed as part of the family. Isaiah promises these outcasts a future of covenant—a future of deep commitment and relationship. Isaiah promises that these people without hope of biological children will still have a legacy that will be carried on from generation to generation.

Now imagine with me for a second, that this was text that the eunuch was reading, and imagine that Philip's appearance along the road wasn't a coincidence. We don't know this for sure, as our text doesn't explicitly tell us the details, but imagine that our friend the eunuch hears this message of belovedness, and then it is confirmed by the good news of Jesus—who says that this is not some far off hope but a living reality for right here and right now.

And Philip makes this radical inclusion manifest in this very moment. The request to be baptized is answered with immediate belonging, and the act of submersion under the water fulfills this ancient prophecy of Isaiah in a way that goes above and beyond the eunuch's wildest dreams. To be baptized in these desert waters is to receive the promise that God gave hundreds of years before. Do you see how this simple act, and this simple substance, are the cure for the displacement that his eunuch was experiencing? Do you see how in this sacred encounter the eunuch's rejection is replaced by rejoicing? Do you see the miracle that is baptism?

And I think this is good news for us too—revolutionary, even.

Our culture still likes to separate people out in categories, and we still like to put labels on people in order to differentiate and exclude. We still like to draw lines in the sand, and build walls between us—old and young, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, straight and queer, white and non-white, in or out. Many aspects of our society still depend upon us to be fearful of and hostile to people who don't think, believe, act, pray, vote, and love like we do. Certain news outlets actively foster outrage and hatred of things that we cannot understand or that seem unfamiliar to us. In our modern version of empire, focused on status and boundaries and enforcing certain norms, marginalized

and oppressed groups still face tremendous displacement—life on the margins is still a difficult and disorienting experience.

But it doesn't have to be like this. It really doesn't. Our cities and neighborhoods don't have to be this way. We can resist these impulses just like our biblical ancestors did. We can be like Philip, who answered the call. We can be like the Ethiopian eunuch, marginalized but drawn into this holy mystery.

When we're overwhelmed by the stratification and displacement of our human world, we can look to this incredible story to be reminded that there is in fact a place where all of those barriers come crashing down. If you're sick and tired of the division in our communities, let's remind ourselves that there is in fact a place where the lines we've drawn and the walls we've built are washed away. If you're longing for wholeness and peace, let's find hope in the promise that there is a place where we can receive the fullness of God's love and promises for us. There is a place where we can experience the restoration and healing that Jesus offers us. There is a place that we can call home together.

And where is that home? My friends, it's in the water. In the water, we find divine belonging that the world will never be able to take away. In the water, we find a kind of community that our culture does not have the power to destroy. In the water, all of us can find rest.

And the best part about the water is this: there is nothing to stop you from entering it, today or tomorrow, or whenever you're ready. There's nothing that can stand in your way.

Amen.