

Isaiah tells us that a voice cries out:

In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (Isaiah 40:3-5, NRSV)

I wonder, when Isaiah was prophesying, do you reckon this way-making he envisioned could have looked something like this:

An important emissary for an African queen, robbed of his gender, finds himself seeking good news in a faraway land. He is accomplished in every way, but his accomplishments are invisible in this strange place. His tongue and his darker complexion betray him as an outsider to important Romans; his status as a eunuch compromises his oneness with traditional Jewish folks. And yet on a wilderness road, you might be so bold as to call it a desert highway, he meets an apostle, who heard it from a friend, who heard it from a friend, who heard it from another, that there is good news to be had and found in the story of Jesus. And lest we forget, tales of a Holy Spirit that provokes new apostles into remote places; serendipitous water, enough for baptismal fountains, that appears in desolate lands; and that same Holy Spirit, snatching up apostles to send them to the next village, and leaving their recent converts rejoicing, toe-tapping, even, in recognition of new life, and new possibilities.

Yes indeed, friends, the glory of the Lord is revealed. I wanna live in a world that duly and rightly recognizes the power of strong black women, too, a power that has been evident through the ages. I want to live in a world where it's not an anomaly to see them wield treasures of influence, too. I want to live in a world where strangers get to ride in fancy coaches, too, and where they have the access and resources to express their powerful intellect, too. And I want to live in a world that isn't SO Jerusalem-centric, in order that its apostles can realize and

acknowledge the incredible spiritual gifts of the Gentile world, and not only recognize those neighbors, but pursue them, love them, collaborate with them, celebrate their value and dignity as children of God, welcome them as whole members of their community. I wanna see the glory of the Lord revealed in global neighbors.

Yes, indeed, friends, all people shall see it together. Philip the evangelist, one of seven deacons chosen by the Jerusalem church, spent time converting friends in Samaria, before eventually befriending the Ethiopian Eunuch in today's story, and later ministering to the community at Caesarea Maritima, the location where Peter met Cornelius the Centurion, the first Gentile convert of record. The Ethiopian Church traces its roots to this encounter, and today, has more than 36 million members. The work that Jesus starts in Galilee, fans out from Jerusalem, and across the world. And all people, in Samaria, in Ethiopia, in Caesarea, even in Charlotte, see it together.

And yes indeed, friends, the Lord has spoken. Jesus narrated and lived in a community of collaboration – neighbors loved, served, supported, and encouraged one another. Today's story is a microcosm of the ministry of Jesus, and it is a flawless execution of his command for us to go and do likewise. The Ethiopian displays a curiosity and openness to seek new life. Philip steps out of his comfort zone, and willingly trusts where the spirit will lead him, and how the Spirit will employ his gifts. It's not just that Philip engages a new friend, and a new friend responds. It's that Philip invites the Ethiopian into this unfolding story AND the Ethiopian becomes an active participant. And then, the drama spins off into another circle of characters, who in turn, become the new active participants. The Lord has spoken, and speaks again, in every generation.

For me, today's passage paints a wonderful picture of Isaiah's highway, of redemption for the suffering servant, of the lived experience of Jesus becoming a reality in every generation to follow. And yes, there are angels, and mysterious, even inexplicable things afoot in today's text. But don't get distracted by these grand details – our author is simply reminding us that this collaboration of resources, and people, and opportunities, is divinely-inspired, is fulfilling the very things that Isaiah, and later Jesus, promise for the future.

I think the appearance of water is the best example of divine fulfillment in our text. The Ethiopian demonstrates discipleship: he is curious, he is open, he is eager to be part of the story. But most of all he is opportunistic. The carriage passes a body of water, and he applies his knowledge in a creative and authentic way. He senses the spirit; he values the ministry of presence; he uses what's available to achieve his ends. And Philip, for his part, celebrates this initiative by creating sacred space in newfound water. I am reminded of hospital chaplains who use tears to baptize in grief; or congregations that substitute blankets in lieu of water for those friends with water phobias. Of course, I also think about a certain church who used tea kettles of boiling water to warm a baptismal filled with a garden hose on a frigid January morning not too long ago.

The Spirit freed Philip to access neighbors near and far. The Spirit provoked a curiosity in neighbors like the Ethiopian Eunuch. And the Spirit empowers resourceful, opportunistic believers.

Sardis Baptist Church, as we consider how we might play a part in the construction of that grand, Holy Highway Isaiah describes, where do we see water that offers the potential for new life? And what are those things that are preventing us from accessing such water?

Isaiah tells us that the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and that ALL people shall see it together. Today's story affirms that hope. I dare say our construction project will be hastened by our willingness and action to befriend new neighbors, to utilize new water sources, to rejoice in the presence of the Spirit, and to seek out new villages where we too can tell the story.

Friends may it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.