

**Fifth Sunday of Easter:**  
**Series Title: “Counter-Cultural Community”**  
**3 May 2015**

FUMC—Arlington, TX 76011

“Wherever You Go”—*Preaching Text: Acts 8:26-40*

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Thanks to the Interstate Highway System, it is now possible to travel  
from coast to coast without seeing anything (Charles Kuralt).

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We ground our Easter worship series on the Acts of the Apostles. Luke begins Acts with Jesus teaching the disciples between his resurrection and ascension. Prior to the ascension the disciples ask Jesus a legitimate question: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” This question was certainly on the minds of the community Jesus formed around him. Since Jesus’ death they all wanted to know if now was the time that God would act on the believer’s behalf. But Jesus discourages such questions by replying: “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”

Instead Jesus gives them a task and even something of a geographical roadmap for the work that God now assigns them. Jesus promises first that, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” Then Jesus tells them, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” If we read Acts from beginning to end, then this is exactly how the gospel advances—first in Jerusalem, then on to Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth—Rome and Spain (see: Romans 15:24, 28).

We titled worship today: “Wherever You Go.” This Acts’ lesson reminds me of the geographical location that we jokingly describe as “the end of the earth.” To which a reply is “it may not be the end of the earth, but you can see it from there.” Gaza is on a continuum that we read about in Acts 1:8: “. . . you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The “the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza” is somewhere between the phrase Samaria and to “the ends of the earth.” Thus the gospel pushes farther and

farther from Jerusalem the center toward the limits of human habitation. Hear our day's lesson:

26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) 27 So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship 28 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." 30 So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 32 Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. 33 In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."

34 The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" 35 Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" 38 He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. 40 But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea (Acts 8:26-40).

Luke's story tells us that the Holy Spirit takes Philip to encounter a significant governmental court official, He is in Ethiopia the Chief Financial Officer in the court of the Candace (the queen). She is a "big deal," and by association so is he. Yet he is something of what the Hebrews call a God-Fearer—a sort of less than full Jewish person. He worships Yahweh nonetheless. This fellow reads Isaiah on his way back to Ethiopia from Jerusalem. He and Philip connect and the apostle interprets what the CFO reads. Then promptly, the Ethiopian asks for and receives baptism as a believer in Jesus as God's Messiah, promised by Isaiah.

This Lucan story may interest us I propose for three reasons—perhaps among many. First, it reveals to those who study the Bible and its interconnections that Luke takes a prophecy

from Isaiah (see: 56:1-7) seriously and weaves it into this particular story—which you have to admit has as its hero a rather strange character—an Ethiopian and a eunuch. This passage reminds us that God extends the divine covenant to all who obey. This includes those that have previously been refused full fellowship in the community of faith, i.e., eunuchs, foreigners, and outcasts. Thus, God acts to save people like this eunuch. But we also see an example of how God’s mission will go forward and how the Holy Spirit pushes it. This Spirit tells Philip to go here and go there and the spirit also snatches Philip away.

A second feature of Luke’s story is that while often it seems like the gospel has a “preferential option” for the poor, this heroic character in our story is returning to a cushy job which entail riches and power—no doubt about it. Yet Luke understands that the gospel is for rich and for poor. Perhaps this Ethiopian eunuch will share his new found baptismal faith in ways that may establish it even to that remote “end of the earth” destination of Ethiopia.

Last, we note that as Philip is snatched away, the Ethiopian “went on his way rejoicing.” He leaves on the heels of his baptism as a person who has experienced joy—indeed possesses joy. I do not know if Luke intended it or not, but this story is counter to the one in chapter 3 where the man crippled from birth is healed. Not a person expresses joy at this wondrous miracle. All who witness this healing event mostly question who, how, what, and why this has happened. Thus the observers offer precious little joy as far as I read the text. Yet, this baptized one—this Ethiopian eunuch—returns home with joy. This story might remind us that growing into the baptized community both produces and sustains joy. Let us rejoice and be glad in it (Psalm 118:24).