

Sermon Series "Acts" - Philip the Evangelist  
Acts 8:4-40  
Colebrook Congregational Church  
July 2, 2017 / Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Today's selection is the second part of my sermon series on the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, and focuses on Saint Philip the Evangelist, one of the Seven Deacons elected from last week's selection, and the stories about how he started the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy from the first chapter in Acts.

Before going any further, one thing needs to be made clear. There was an Apostle named Philip, one of the Twelve Disciples...This is not the same person. This is a Deacon who came later, and has been referred to as "Philip the Evangelist" through history to avoid confusing the two.

The story of Philip the Evangelist is often skipped. It has usually been seen by scholars as just an interlude between the two grander stories of Stephen becoming the First Martyr and of Saul's Conversion to Paul. And even when it is covered, Philip's two stories are usually taken separately.

However, when viewed together, and also in consideration of the larger story arcs happening, a couple different pictures emerge. When we focus on Philip's story by itself, we see a story of the religious education and guidance of both immature and earnest faiths. We can probably say that Philip was the first Christian Educator. And then, when we view Philip's story as a part of the story of the early church, we see how Philip's work was necessary to the spread of Christianity. As Jesus told them, the Good News was to be preached first the House of Israel, and then spread out. The Apostles have already preached in the synagogues in Judea and to various Diaspora Jews, but that is only part of the House of Israel. Their are the Outcasts of Israel, the Samaritans and the Ethiopians. So, Philip's story is the restoration of Israel that began with Jesus' messianic mission, and was necessary before Paul could start the mission to spread Christianity to the Gentiles.

So, to start, Philip went to Samaria. In the Gospels, Jesus actively avoided going into Samaria, with the one exception found in the Gospel of John, where Jesus talks with a Woman at the Well. The reason Jesus gives to the Disciples for this is that the Samaritans are not ready for the Good News. But now they are, so that is the reason for Philip going there.

The reason why the Samaritans are considered Outcasts of Israel stems partially out of racism to some, partially because of the local Roman garrison, but mostly because they built their own Temple to God that they prayed and offered sacrifices at, that was not the Temple in Jerusalem, which was the only valid Temple. They were seen as renegades...but were still technically a part of the family, so to speak.

During Philip's Mission in Samaria, one figure stood out, Simon Magus, a magician who later becomes the boogeyman of the Early Church. Before that though, he was amazed by the power of the Spirit, and sought baptism from Philip. However, his motives were not good, focusing on the accumulation of this power that was greater than his own magic powers; unlike Philip, who received his powers from the Holy Spirit with redemption as his motivation.

This comes to a head when Peter and John arrive in Samaria to baptize the Samaritans with the Holy Spirit. Simon offered to pay for their apostolic powers, and the word used in Greek refers to a legal authority of decision making, because he wants that and what he can do with it them. They rejected Simon for this, and this is also why the buying or selling of religious offices is called simony.

Now, this is the last time that Simon Magus is mentioned in the Bible, but from this story, the Church Fathers, the great church leaders in the earliest generations after the Apostles, considered Simon Magus as the source of all heresies, and especially a founder of Gnosticism, citing him often in their writings. He also appeared in many apocryphal texts to various degrees.

In the Acts of Peter, an apocryphal book excluded from the Bible, Simon Magus is described performing magic to try to prove himself divine, levitating above a crowd in a forum. Peter prays to God to make him stop, and Simon plummets to the ground. Some sources describe grand battles pitting the power of God against Simon's sorcery.

But taking just what Luke has written in Acts, Simon is just a benign person who illustrates the dangers of an immature faith, warning not to rush too much, instead studying more, and learning more pure motives.

That sort of convert, which Simon was not, is exemplified by the Ethiopian Eunuch. He is not named, but tradition from the Ethiopian Church calls him Bachos, so I will refer to him as such. Now Philip was directed by an Angel of God to travel on a certain road, where he met Bachos sitting in his chariot reading from the Book of Isaiah. As opposed to Simon Magus, Bachos has an earnest faith, asking questions, seeking understanding, and ultimately requesting baptism. He then returned to his home with his new faith. Bachos' response to the Good News is being raised up as the better one.

So, why the sudden appearance of an Ethiopian? Ethiopians held a special place in the heart of the Judeans. They were viewed as respectable by them, and fellow Jews...mostly...at the very least they were very good proselytes. To understand this, we need to take a step back. There are different oral traditions that explain the connection between Israel and Ethiopia, which goes back millenia.

Some focus on the Tribe of Dan, one of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, and one of the ten Lost Tribes, migrating to present-day Ethiopia and settling there, either during the Exodus, or during the Civil War after King Solomon died, or when Babylon conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel. There are many more stories throughout ancient history of how Jewish refugees found safety and new homes in Ethiopia.

Then there is the legend of Menelik, who was supposed to be the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, and also the founder of a nearly 3000 year dynasty as Emperor of Ethiopia, which they named after King Solomon.

Legend also says that as an adult, Menelik visited King Solomon and returned with some immigrants as well as the Ark of the Covenant, leaving a replica in the Temple.

Throughout their history, Ethiopia had felt a kinship with the Israelites, then the Judahites, and then the Judeans. They saw themselves as observant Jews as well, following all the same rules, and they also took very seriously their role as the defenders of the Ark of the Covenant and its contents on behalf of all Judaism. This was why the Ethiopians were viewed differently from the Samaritans by the Judeans. Their respect and observance of the Law, as well as recognizing that the Temple in Jerusalem was the one true Temple. Unlike the Samaritans, they do not set their own Temple, they traveled to Jerusalem, they studied and observed the same Law.

That's the background when Philip enters, laying the groundwork to include another part of the House of Israel in hearing the Gospel message, fulfilling Jesus' promise. Like the story with the Samaritans, the pattern of an Apostle following up does happen, and Ethiopian tradition says that it was Matthew who traveled to Ethiopia.

So, Christianity started in Ethiopia with Philip, but wasn't declared the state religion there until 330 AD. While today there are Protestants and Catholics present, the largest and oldest tradition is the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, which is also considered to be one of the oldest Christian Churches as well. This is not like the Eastern Orthodox in Greece or Russia or Eastern Europe, they are of a type of Church called Oriental Orthodox, which developed outside the influences of the Roman or Byzantine Empires. This type of church split off from the those within the Empire after the Council of Chalcedon in 451 over the nature of Jesus; and it also includes the Syrians, Armenians, Coptics, Eritrean, and the St. Thomas Indians. And only this year, the Oriental Orthodox Church has reconciled with the Roman Catholics.

The Ethiopian Church was not influenced by Greco-Roman or German elements like how the Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants were, with like Christmas Trees, yet they have been heavily influenced by the parts of Judaism in the Old Testament. The teachings of the Old Testament are

also more heavily emphasized than in other churches. Their Bible has a larger Old Testament, including the Catholic recognized books and several more.

Many of the churches in Ethiopia are monolithic, carved out of a single rock, usually down into the bedrock. On the cover of the bulletins, it shows a drawing of the church in Lalibela as seen from ground level.

Back to Philip.

When taking the whole story of Philip, and placing it in context with what is going on in Acts at this point, we can see that it is no mere interlude, but it is an integral part of a progression that fulfills Jesus' intentions and mission given to the Believers. Jesus told the Disciples to start with the House of Israel, preaching the Good News among them first, before expanding out among the Gentiles. Starting with Pentecost, the Disciples preached to Jews visiting from all over during a Festival. Then Peter & John preached to the Judeans in Jerusalem and in the Temple. Then Stephen preached to those who returned from Exile. Now we have Philip preaching to the Outcasts, the last groups.

Up to now, Acts has recounted conversions from all the various groups that make up the whole House of Israel, from the resident to the pilgrim, from the most pious to the most detached. And it does this to prepare the reader for Jesus' shocking commissioning of another Jewish convert who will carry the Good Word out beyond Israel as “a light to the nations.” More on that person next time.

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

Loving God, we thank you for the work of Philip the Evangelist, through whom we see the importance of Christian Education and through his efforts to teach and preach, the Way was prepared for Your Word and the Good News to spread out into the world and flourish. May we be ever ready, like Philip was, to help guide those who question and seek You out. Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

Loving God, it is with awe and wonder, joy and gladness we offer You our thanks, and pray for Your creation, its nations, and peoples, for your church, for ourselves and all in need.

We give You thanks for all Your gifts to us—for food, for health, for each breath we take; for Your guidance, for our Joys, and for our loving friends and families. And thank You for all who have sacrificed of themselves for us.

We ask Your forgiveness, for sins known & unknown. We know that we can do better and be more aware of ourselves and of those around us.

We pray for those around us who need your care. We pray for those who hunger or are homeless. We pray for those in pain—the abused, broken-hearted and lonely. We pray for the sick in body and in mind, and for those who grieve. We pray for the caretakers who bring comfort to those in need. We pray for all who put themselves between us and harm in this chaotic world. We pray for the victims of terrorist attack and for their families.

Help us to see Your presence burning in the hearts of others; grant that we may all be united in a fellowship of love and prayer; give us the courage to pick up our cross and respond to the needs of the world, give us the stamina to follow You, to be Your hands and heart in the world; and enable us to witness to Your grace and mercy.

We also pray for:

The Suddath Family  
Sean Larose

Deanna Muzzulin

Sue Kenny

We offer these prayers in confidence and trust, as well as the prayers of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Psalm 68:24-35

24 Your solemn processions are seen, O God, the processions of my God, my King, into the sanctuary—

25 the singers in front, the musicians last, between them girls playing tambourines:

26 ‘Bless God in the great congregation, the Lord, O you who are of Israel’s fountain!’

27 There is Benjamin, the least of them, in the lead, the princes of Judah in a body, the princes of Zebulun, the princes of Naphtali.

28 Summon your might, O God; show your strength, O God, as you have done for us before.

29 Because of your temple at Jerusalem kings bear gifts to you.

30 Rebuke the wild animals that live among the reeds, the herd of bulls with the calves of the peoples. Trample under foot those who lust after tribute; scatter the peoples who delight in war.

31 Let bronze be brought from Egypt; let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out its hands to God.

32 Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth; sing praises to the Lord,  
*Selah*

33 O rider in the heavens, the ancient heavens; listen, he sends out his voice, his mighty voice.

34 Ascribe power to God, whose majesty is over Israel; and whose power is in the skies.

35 Awesome is God in his sanctuary, the God of Israel; he gives power and strength to his people.

### Acts 8:4-40

Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralysed or lame were cured. So there was great joy in that city.

Now a certain man named Simon had previously practised magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, 'This man is the power of God that is called Great.' And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, 'Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.' But Peter said to him, 'May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money! You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness.' Simon answered, 'Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me.'

Now after Peter and John had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news to many villages of the Samaritans.

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.) 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 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 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.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.'

The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 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?' He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 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. 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.