

“God is Going to Trouble the Water”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Acts 8:26-40
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
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“What is to prevent me from being baptized?” asks the audacious Ethiopian eunuch upon finding water. This man is both a sexual minority and an ethnic minority—out of place in so many ways—and yet convinced in his own heart and soul that he *belongs* in the baptismal waters. I find myself wanting to give this man a round of applause, cheer him on. I find myself wanting to ask, “Where did you find your courage?”

Who gave you permission and said you could do this? Was it Philip? Mr. Eunuch, you’re the one that spotted the water and stopped the chariot. Was it the very Spirit of God calling you forth? How did you know you were wanted by God and how can we share in your boldness? Oh sir, I wish we knew your name! If only we could properly praise you, add your name to the list of heroes who forged a path for our own belonging.

Perhaps your namelessness makes you all the more universal—we can name you whatever we need to name you—so that your story reaches our story. Your need to belong reaches our need to belong. Your name is our name. In the Bible, Ethiopia was often portrayed as the very edge of the known world. You with your unknown name show us there is no limit to how far or to whom the Gospel can reach.

Dear Ethiopian Eunuch—I’ll call you, Harvey—I wonder so much about you. For example, did you choose to be a eunuch, or did it choose you? Dear Ethiopian Eunuch—I’ll call you, Bayard—would the writer of the book and the keepers of records have included your name had you not been a sexual minority? I’ll call you Michael—did it hurt when they, you know, altered you?

Dear Ethiopian Eunuch—I’ll call you, Sylvia—when the text says you had gone to Jerusalem to worship and were returning home, did they let you in the temple or were you turned away? After all, the Bible clearly says (and I quote from the book of Deuteronomy 23:1), “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.” Dear Christine, what gave you the guts to show up on the temple doorstep, ready to be let in for worship? Dear Willmer, what prompted you to worship when the world said God despised you?

Dear Ethiopian Eunuch—I’ll call you, Rosa—if they did let you in the temple, did they let you in all the way or did they make you stand in the back?

Dear Ethiopian Eunuch—I’ll call you, Martin—what captivated you so about the prophet Isaiah? I’ll call you James. Did you hear in Isaiah echoes of your own story, your own pain and rejection and the mistreatment of your people?

Dear Ethiopian Eunuch—I’ll call you, Galileo—where did you get your curiosity and the audacity to ask questions no one taught you how to ask?

Dear Ethiopian Eunuch—I'll call you Lucy Hicks Anderson—did you intend to take the wilderness road or is that simply where life took you? I'll call you Julia Foote, where did you find your voice and decide to use it, proclaiming for yourself, "There is water! Who is to prevent me?" Did Philip tell you he had four prophesying daughters?

Dear Harvey Milk, dear Bayard Rustin, dear Michael Dillon, dear Sylvia Rivera, dear Christine Jorgenson, dear Willmer Broadnax, dear Rosa Parks, dear James Cone what is to prevent you from being God's beloved? Let not God's church stand in your way when it is God who calls you forth! Alleluia. Alleluia. Let it be so.

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I have often wondered if, as he was riding in the chariot reading the scroll of Isaiah, the Ethiopian eunuch saw in Isaiah's suffering servant echoes of his own suffering. For though he served the queen's court and had the means to travel to Jerusalem, he unquestionably still faced hardship for being different. The way I read it, his own experiences no doubt prompted his curiosity about the man Isaiah describes—"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." The eunuch wants to know, *who was he?* Who is this man with whom I can identify?

The way Philip reads the text, Isaiah is prophesying about Jesus. Jesus is the one who "bore our griefs and carried our sorrows (Isaiah 53:4)," forever shattering our loneliness, our aloneness in the face of oppression. *This is God*—the one who come to be with and among the oppressed of the earth.

James Cone, the black liberation theologian, was already written into this sermon before I learned that he died yesterday at the age of 79. Though I've never read James Cone's thoughts about the eunuch in particular, my reading of this story is undoubtedly shaped by Cone's understanding of the cross.

I want to wade into a theology of the cross for a moment here and I hope you'll wade in with me. The water is fine, but this might require some extra concentration:

Cone describes the crucifixion of Christ as a first century lynching, which situates the cross as a tool in the hands of the oppressor and a source of terror for the oppressed. More importantly Cone situates God in Christ *on that cross* as one who identifies squarely and unabashedly with the oppressed. In other words, God enters the fray of human suffering taking the violence upon God's own self as an ultimate act of solidarity.

You may have been taught about the cross in a different way. Perhaps you were told that God in God's righteousness really needed to punish something and so God beat up his own son in place of us. Christ on the cross satisfied God's blood thirst. This is one way Christians have explained the mystery of the cross through the centuries, but it's certainly not the only way.

James Cone explains the cross in a different way, releasing the cross from being a mere source of atonement for our personal shortcomings and casting it as something far bigger and more universal. The cross becomes the biggest demonstration of God's incarnation among us, for God

not only puts on human flesh but willingly enters the experience of *despised human*, thus making God's identification with those who suffer front and central to who God is and how God acts in the world.

In this understanding of the cross, "God the Father" does not "need" a human sacrifice for sin. God needs the world to stop the sin of sacrificing humans, and thus God allows God's own self to experience the worst of human brutality. Picture Jesus black and hanging from a noose.

Theological jargon aside: If you can visualize God black and swinging from a tree, you can start to feel the gut wrenching depths of God's commitment to never leave or forsake.

This understanding of the cross as God's ultimate act of solidarity does not eliminate humanity's need for atonement. Our need for atonement is still there, but that for which we need atonement is our own participation—conscious or unconscious—in the powers that oppress and terrorize the earth and its people. In other words, God is the God who is murdered with us when we are murdered *and* God is the God who offers forgiveness and transformation when we murder. We need God's mercy, you and I, not so much because God is zealous for purity but because God is zealous for God's children and we have failed to protect one another. Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy.

Now, I just threw a lot of theology at you (thank you for wading in with me!) because I think it is important. I think it is important, particularly in this age we live in, to understand with deepest conviction that Christ is *for* the downtrodden, the oppressed, and the outcast. Liberation theologians have reminded us that this is not tangential to the Gospel but central to it. Without the baptism of an Ethiopian eunuch—sexual and ethnic minority that he was—we do not have a Gospel. If we leave him out, we have left out Christ himself. The Social Gospel is not a version of the Gospel—it *is* the Good News we are called to proclaim, called to live. It is the Good News into which we are baptized.

If the Good News doesn't trouble the waters, then it is only "good" news for a few, and that means it is not so good, not so Christian, after all. One way to say this is that if we don't leave the hour of worship at least a little bit troubled, I'm not so sure we've heard from Jesus. And so today I pray:

O God in Christ, wherever our waters are smoothed over by complacency, wade right in and stir us into action. Wherever our waters are calm in the name of false unity, wade in and disrupt our dishonesty. O God in Christ, wherever our waters are *too* still because our privilege has sheltered us from the valley of death, wade in and baptize us into seeing what we had not seen before. Where our waters suffer the comfort of homogeny, wade right in and disquiet us all.

Dear Ethiopian Eunuch, man of many names, challenge us so that we might see you, and in seeing you, we might see Christ. Dear Ethiopian Eunuch, meet us in our loneliness and proclaim to us that we belong so that we might share in your audacity and know we are wanted. All of us. Each and every one of us. No exceptions. Amen.