

“A Guide for Desert Travel”

Psalm 13

Acts 8:26-40

Have you ever noticed how the people of God have a knack for winding up in the desert, as if Israel hadn't spent enough time there wandering around after being delivered Egypt? But for some reason they find themselves returning time and time again to this barren land. There is just something about this place.

Almost unsurprisingly, this is where we find ourselves in this passage today. Luke, the author of Acts, tells us that Philip has been instructed by an angel to go south. He then proceeds to tell us that this place is a desert. At first glance, this detail seems unnecessary and even awkward. It is so awkward, in fact, that biblical scholars aren't too sure if he is describing the road or Gaza; although, curiously, neither one is a desert.

So why is this detail included? Is Luke confused about geography? Maybe. But with all the details that could have been included to clarify this strange passage but were left out, the details that were included become all the more important. So maybe this detail was meant to stick out like a sore thumb. And maybe Luke, knowing his audience would recognize that this place wasn't a desert, instead used this detail to draw to mind this place that has served an important function in Israel's history.... this place where Israel wrestles with God and searches for God. After all, this had been the history of God's people, stemming from their namesake, Jacob, who wrestled with God. So perhaps the desert Luke is describing is metaphorical, and with this, Luke sets the stage in this passage. If this is the case, I would like to suggest that we pay careful attention to what's coming.

You see, given the history of God's people and the desert, it seems that before long we, too, will end up in a similar place... or, if we are honest with ourselves, perhaps we would admit that most of our life is spent in the desert. We are all trying to get across the Jordan into the Promised Land. As for right now though, we are just trying to learn to depend on God day by day. If this is the case, it seems appropriate then that we should figure out what we are supposed to be doing in the desert place, for if anything is clear about the desert in the Bible, it is that the desert serves a formative purpose in the lives of those who must travel through it. Maybe this passage can teach us a thing or two about sojourning in the desert. But, first, we must figure out who we are in this story, as the two main characters are there for very different reasons, and we must understand our purpose for being there before we can understand what to do there.

My first inclination is try to identify with Philip. He is the guy we want to be in the story, right? He is a super evangelist... just going anywhere he is called without asking any questions. And while I would love to say that I, like Philip, go willing into the desert, even if it is a metaphorical one, to serve God, I don't. I mean, really, who just leaves a thriving ministry like Philip had in Samaria without asking any questions? God has called me at what seemed to be the wrong time and to the wrong place, and let me tell you, there was no little discussion about me going there.

And after looking at the passage, I realized that once again details... or lack there of, matter. You see Philip has only one recorded comment in the forty verses of chapter eight, seeming to make him a passive participant in God's plan. It seems he is meant to point attention away from himself to far more interesting characters – like Simon, the magician who is found earlier in chapter eight... and the Ethiopian eunuch. These are the people who have real struggles... like us. Maybe Luke wants us to focus on them.

So what is going on with the eunuch? Well, we are told that he is an official in the royal court of the queen of Ethiopia. He is returning home from Jerusalem, where he had gone to worship God. Now, perhaps we don't pick up on this because this is a very different context than our own, but he cannot even get into the Temple, which would be the primary reason to go to Jerusalem to worship. As Isaiah 56:3 reveals, both foreigners and eunuchs were banned from the Temple. He is both!

So why did he go there? Well, it seems as though there is a longing inside of him for something more... something more than the pagan deities of his homeland could offer him. So he goes to Jerusalem to search. Now, he is traveling home, and he is still searching and he finds himself in a spiritual desert... a desolate place where he feels lost and where he is thirsting for something that will satisfy.

On the surface, this man might seem very different from us. I mean, I don't think we have any royal officials in here. And obviously none of you are banned from the place of worship, especially not for the reasons that prevented him. But, like him, we *have* all felt this longing for God at some point, haven't we? Perhaps the law hasn't blocked us, but there have been spiritual roadblocks in our lives that have prevented us from reaching God. Maybe the roadblock was an addiction, or guilt, or maybe we had just become too comfortable in our relationship with God and neglected it.

Whatever the reason, we find ourselves in these deserts, traveling great distances, not because we were called, but because we are searching for God. We feel like Job, who cries out, "I travel East looking for him – I find no one; then West, but not a trace; I go North, but he's hidden his tracks; then South, but not even a glimpse." We go South... into the desert. So, what do we do when we find ourselves in this spiritual desert? Well, perhaps the eunuch can provide us an example of how to make our time there constructive. What does he reveal?

First, we find him reading Scripture in the desert. For the eunuch, Scripture isn't just some light travel reading to pass the time. He is desperately trying to understand God... to find God. It is here that we discover that Scripture can serve as our map in the desert. Now, anyone who knows anything about desert travel knows the last thing you want to do is wander aimlessly. Deserts don't have landmarks, so it is easy to get lost and end up walking in circles for days. I have enough trouble navigating around Pittsburgh, which has huge landmarks. I remember the day that Elizabeth and I moved to Pittsburgh. One of my neighbors told me, "You can see where you want to go in Pittsburgh, but it is really hard to figure out how to get there." I have spent the last three years discovering the truth of this statement. I can usually look around and find downtown, or the Cathedral of Learning, or East Liberty Presbyterian Church, but it is really easy to get turned around and end up going in the wrong direction.

So what happens when you find yourself in a desert, where there aren't even landmarks by which to orient yourself? It seems to me that it is pretty easy to wander aimlessly in this sort of place. The desert is the last place you want to be lost, too, as one can be quickly become dehydrated there. A spiritual desert is the same, if not worse. This is why we need a map... we desperately need a map to guide our travels.

So may I ask you this morning? How are you doing reading Scripture? Are you in God's Word on a regular basis? Are you using it as a "lamp to your feet and a light to your path"? Or are you wandering around lost in the desert hoping that you will run across something that will look familiar? Perhaps the reason we end up in the desert is because we weren't experiencing God and discovering our place in the story that God is writing through Scripture.

The other danger is that we abandon Scripture when things get rough in life... when life gets busy. Instead, our attention is consumed with trivial things. I will admit that I do this all too often. I feel like there are important things that I *have* to get done, so I skip reading Scripture for a day. But those days can turn into weeks, which turn into months. Abandoning Scripture when your life gets busy, however, is a really bad idea. You begin being guided by whatever is most important at the moment instead of the One who is writing all of history. The only way to make sense out of this barren land and find your way out is by way of a map. Plus, it provides us hope when things look bleak, reassuring us of God's presence and the Truth of His promises, even when we can't find Him. Scripture reminds us of who we are and whose we are. It tells us how to follow paths of righteousness that lead us to the Promised Land.

But the eunuch confesses he greatly needs help interpreting this map. Maps can be hard to read, can't they? It actually is pretty easy to get lost even if you are using a map. I learned this on a trip to Washington, D.C. this past year. Elizabeth and I were there visiting a friend. We had taken the subway from our hotel to meet our friend for breakfast at a restaurant near Capital Hill. We came up from the subway, and I was completely disoriented. I was looking at a map and leading Elizabeth and I in what I thought was the correct direction. After we walked for a few minutes, Elizabeth suggested that we were going in the wrong direction. She looked at the map and said to me, "You are holding it upside down." Sure enough, I had been taking us in the wrong direction.

Sometimes we are looking at things all wrong. If there is one thing that my time in seminary has taught me, it is that I need help interpreting Scripture. This is the reason why this church has a library filled with commentaries written by people who have studied the Biblical languages and the historical context in which Scripture was written. We need help finding the living God who is sometimes hidden in its static words. For the eunuch, Philip provides a living commentary for how to read Scripture. Philip not only carries years of tradition with him, but he has the key to unlock what the eunuch has been struggling to understand... this key is Jesus Christ.

So, from this, we find that we also need a tour guide in the desert. For the eunuch, Philip is literally a Godsend. You see, as Christians, we understand that we have been created for community, but we especially need this community in the desert. We need someone to help us see through the mirages, revealing us to what is real and what is illusion.

Our brothers and sisters in Christ can assist us with Scripture as Philip did for the eunuch, but they also serve us by providing a witness. As witnesses do, their job is to present testimony... this testimony simply points out where the living Jesus is and what He is up to in our lives. Our Scripture passage for today tells us that Philip “began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.” So, Philip started with the Scripture that the eunuch was reading, but I imagine that Philip ended up sharing with the eunuch what Jesus was doing in his life. And I bet the eunuch was able to see and hear the living Christ in Philip through the power of the Holy Spirit, who was clearly guiding this whole thing. It is our responsibility as Christians, as children of the light, as the salt of the earth, to witness to, to point to, what Jesus is doing in our lives and in the world. And when we don’t have the strength or focus to find Christ in our own lives, we need to look to our brothers and sisters in Christ who can help us with this.

Finally, a desert tour guide is helpful because they usually know where life-giving nourishment can be found in this desolate place. Moses leads the people to manna and to water flowing from rocks. And here, in this Scripture passage, Philip and the eunuch end up by a stream in the middle of the desert, which allows the eunuch to be baptized and quenching his thirst to find God. The eunuch asks, “What is preventing me from being baptized?” His whole life he had been searching but had been running into roadblocks. His whole life he had been prevented from coming to God. But here in the desert, he finds what he has been looking for. He hears the voice of Jesus saying, “Come to me all you who are thirsty. Those who drink from this well will never thirst again. Come to me those who are hungry. I will give you the bread of life.” In this baptism in the desert, he gets to experience the life-giving waters of Jesus, in whom he is baptized and through whom he has received new life as a child of God. In this baptism, he is brought into the family of God and is no longer excluded.

In just a moment, we have the amazing opportunity to experience a meal that nourishes us in our baptism. It is a meal in which we are invited to come to Jesus to eat and drink of the One who gives us life. We, as the children of God, are all invited. There are no roadblocks for those who confess and know Jesus as Savior, for He has removed all barriers. We look forward to the day when we will sit at the table of the Lord with all of God’s people of every time and place and enjoy this feast. Until that day, this is our desert meal.

In conclusion this morning, I hope that we learn from this Scripture passage that our struggle in the desert isn’t meaningless. We have come into this barren land to find God. Isn’t it interesting that sometimes the God we failed to find in the Temple is found in this most unlikely of places? It turns out that the desert can be a redemptive place. While our desert vacations might be discouraging at times, God uses them to shape us and transform us. So, I hope that you do not just find yourself identifying with the eunuch because he is in the desert thirsting for God, but I hope that you also relate to the outcome of his story. Like the cries of Psalm 13... what begins in despair will end in praise. As Eugene Peterson’s Message translation captures so well... “I’ve thrown myself headlong into your arms – I’m celebrating your rescue. I’m singing at the top of my lungs, I’m so full of answered prayers.” We, too, can leave the desert rejoicing.