

(Acts 8:26-40 NRSV)

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?" ³⁷ 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.

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What Is to Prevent Me From Being Baptized?

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: May 21, 2000

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Text: Acts 8:26-40

Israel's story is extraordinary in so many ways. It began with a dubious promise to Abraham and Sarah. They were promised to be the beginning of a great nation, but at nearly a hundred, they hadn't had their first child together. But then, after they both laughed out loud at the prospect, a son, Isaac, which means laughter, was born. The joke was on them.

From such tenuous a beginning finally did come a nation. It took God to deliver them from Egypt and Pharaoh, and it took all Moses and Aaron could do to deliver them to the promised land. But eventually, in God's good time, the promise of a land and of a people God made to Abraham and Sarah was fulfilled. This may have taken some thousand years. Another fifteen hundred years would be Israel's saga in the promised land, her rise and fall, her exile, and her return. In all twenty-five hundred years were lived in the light and the concept of God's promise. This would be God's people. And this would be the land of God's people.

At this twenty-five hundred year juncture Jesus was born and Christianity began its own time-line. This is a sensitive moment, and one from which we have not yet fully recovered. Like most reformers, Jesus never meant to start a new religion. Matthew has Jesus tell us that he intends not to change a letter of the Jewish law. Jesus never meant to start a new religion, and his earliest followers probably didn't, either. From what we can tell, the earliest Christians, those first followers of the resurrected Jesus, saw themselves as Jews who believed that Jesus was the Jewish messiah. For awhile the Jesus following Jews and the regular Jews worshiped together as members of the same religion.

Ultimately, their differences tore them apart, and that's the part we still struggle to recover from. In this period of rupture, when relationship between the followers of Jesus and the rest of the Jews ruptured, things became bitter. Names were called, and to be honest, lies were told, or at least stories became distorted. Unfortunately, in this time of hostility, the Gospels were written. And in the Gospels, the angry Christians blamed the Jews for Jesus' death, when everyone knew better, when everyone knew it was the Romans who had done it. Unfortunately, for much of the two thousand years of Christianity, the Gospel

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record has been read as history, and the Jews have been held responsible for Jesus' death. It has led to vilification and even genocide. Because the results have been so horrific, every preacher at every chance should set the record straight. The Romans not the Jews executed Jesus. The Gospels have, we must admit, misled us on this point, and the price in human suffering has been high. Even the Pope found it good and right to ask forgiveness on this count. And so should we all.

Now, it is with this sensitive backdrop that I want to take a look with you at what changed when Christianity came onto the scene. What were the fights between the other Jews and the Christian Jews about? What were their differences? And what difference did it all make?

The most traditional understanding of the problem is that the followers of Jesus believed he was the messiah the Jews had been waiting for and that the rest of the Jews did not. Ultimately, this rift became too severe to manage, and the only possibility was for a new religion to be born. As we have noted, it was a hard and painful birth, as most are.

But as important as this break between those who thought Jesus was the Messiah and those who didn't was, I'm not sure it marked the most important change that was to come.

Until now Judaism and Israel were about a promised land and a chosen people. As we read the stories, it becomes evident how strong an ideal this was. In Egypt, the Hebrews and the Egyptians are fully separate. Even Moses, left in the river and raised in Pharaoh's house, is always and ever a Hebrew. Imagine all the time the Israelites were in Egypt, and there seems no intermarriage, no mixing of the people.

Later, in the promised land, one of the greatest sins the prophets warn of is of Israelites being corrupted by co-mingling with their neighbors. Those of other religions, races and nationalities are corrupting influences, the enemy, the outsiders. For chosen people of a promised land, purity and separation were fundamental elements.

And in the exile, the goal of the Israelites was to avoid being subsumed by Babylonian culture. Faithful Israelites avoided intermarriage and other opportunities to become Babylonian so that they could return one day as a remnant to the promised land and rebuild it.

It is probably important to say here that this is a very different mentality from that of Hitler's Third Reich. Hitler believed in the superiority of an Aryan race, which implied that other races were subhuman and should be eliminated. The Jews thought of themselves as God's chosen people in their particular promised land, and basically wanted to be allowed to be who they understood themselves to be. While their rhetoric against outsiders was sometimes high, it was almost

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always protective rhetoric, not aggressive. The Jews were isolationists, but they were not genocidal.

So, the Israelites were not looking to conquer the world and destroy other world powers. On the other hand, they were quite anxious to protect their piece of turf and their own identity.

At the time of Jesus this isolationism was coming under some pressure from two quarters. First, similar to today in a way, the Mediterranean world was becoming a smaller place. Shipping, the Roman roadways and the fact that empire put vast territory under one rule meant that people were more mobile than ever before. Jews began to relocate in various of the Roman cities. Contact among other peoples and other religions grew. And suddenly, non-Jews became interested in the religion. There arose in city after city groups called “God Fearers,” who were non-Jews who were attracted to the Jewish religion, and who attended synagogue, but who, at the time, were not permitted to become Jews.

Second, within Judaism, the early Christian movement demonstrated inclusivist inclinations, even though there was clearly tension. Mark and Matthew both record the story of a gentile woman who comes to Jesus asking for help. Jesus says that the children (the Jews) should be fed before the dogs (the gentiles). In a rare reversal, this woman teaches Jesus when she says, “Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

By the time of Paul, and largely through him, the inclusive direction of Christianity became certain. While Paul records disagreements with the Jerusalem church on the details of the issue, Christianity became a religion open to converts and a religion with a distinct evangelizing mission. Paul’s whole ministry was starting and nurturing new Christian churches all around the Mediterranean shore – in Corinth and Philippi, Colossas and Thessalonica, Ephesus and Rome.

The Acts of the Apostles is a version of much of this work. And that brings us, finally, to this morning’s scripture. Philip runs into an Ethiopian court official who is driving down the road reading the prophet Isaiah. This means the official was probably a God Fearer, a person interested in the Jewish scripture and religion.

Philip explains the scripture from a Christian perspective to the Ethiopian, and it is not long before the Ethiopian asks, as they come to a pool of water, “What is to prevent me from becoming baptized?”

In the context of the story, the answer is almost inconsequential. The question is almost rhetorical. Philip doesn’t even answer it directly. He just stops the chariot and baptizes the man. “What is to prevent me from becoming baptized?” The clear and simple answer is nothing, nothing at all.

And that is a startling thing. It was startling in its own context. Here early Christianity opens its arms to a new convert. Here was a man certainly not from

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the chosen people. In fact, he was almost certainly a black man. And he came from Africa, maybe near Egypt, possibly related to those very ones whom Moses had fled. But no longer were these facts barriers to inclusion. What is to prevent me from becoming baptized? Nothing. Nothing in all the world, said the early church.

If there is a more important contribution that Christianity has made than this, I know not what it is. From the beginning, Christianity's hallmark has been to answer the question, What is to prevent me from becoming baptized? By saying, Nothing, nothing at all.

This Christian openness has always had to fight against a human impulse to exclude. It is ironic that in a tragic chapter in the history of our own country African people were declared non-human by good Christian people, and that until very recently there remained churches and clubs and public facilities where black people were unwelcome. Sadly, there are still far too many who would use Christianity to condemn those unlike themselves rather than to invite everyone to the baptismal font.

Whom ought we welcome through our front doors? Whom ought we invite into our midst? To whom ought we say, There is not one thing to prevent you from being baptized into the full life of this community? Our earliest Christian witness is abundantly clear on this point. The answer is everyone, everyone who comes responding to the love of God and seeking fellowship in this community of God's people. As a Christian church this is our commission, this is our charter, this is our identity. Amen.

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