**HOMILY, October 13, 2024 Acts 8, selected verses “Three Strikes and You’re In!”**

**THE FIRST READING**   And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city.

**THE SECOND READING**   Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.  “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

**THE THIRD READING**    This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.  In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”  The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both 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 suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

Welcome, pardners! Welcome back to the sixth sermon in our little round-up of the Book of Acts. I’m a-gonna skip my usual folderol about chapters and the sermons that go with them, because today is Cowboy Sunday, and cowboys are more direct than pastors, generally speaking. Besides, this story is *so great* that I want to jump right in with both boots, so here we go!

We pick up where we left off last week, with Saul of Tarsus observing the brutal murder of Stephen without comment or intervention. Some rabbi, huh? And the beans get spilled as this chapter begins, when we learn that Saul *approved* of Stephen’s death. In fact, he may have been one of the guys who objected to Stephen in the first place, getting him up in front of the Sanhedrin, and then kind of watching people’s coats when they shed their outer layers for a less encumbered stoning experience. He approved of this brutality, and when the new trail boss in town approves, things can go sideways quickly, which they did. The apostles newest helpers, including today’s star, Philip, were scattered throughout Judea and more alarmingly, into Samaria. The original gang held on in Jerusalem, but many, hundreds probably, without tons of training or resources, they were sent packing. And Saul began a house-to-house search, imprisoning followers of the Way, but there was one thing he didn’t count on, and that was the energizing effect of the Holy Spirit, vital and active and motivating *amazing things* in these early Christian converts. Philip went to the dreaded Samaria, the place Jews avoided if they could, and the fervent wish of the persecutors, that they could nip this upstart rabbi Jesus’ following in the bud, well, that didn’t pan out at all!

In fact, quite the opposite occurred…because away from Jerusalem, the Spirit apparently had more sway. Miracles and healings, accompanied by fine and convicting preaching, got tongues a wagging and knees a-bowing in Samaria. And when he was ready, Philip got a very special visitor. Listen: *Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”* So he had to cross south out of Samaria, skirt the craziness going on in and around Jerusalem, and head for the southernmost city in Palestine, Gaza, right across the way from Egypt. We need to listen sharp right here, pardners, because the history of the Church swings on a wide gate in the next few verses. *So Philip started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet.* Philip had successfully gotten through the Jerusalem area without running into the black-hatted Saul, and was south of there, heading towards Gaza, when he encountered one of the Bible’s most unusual characters, a man with several strikes against him from the start. Philip met the Ethiopian eunuch.

How strange *was* this? Well, lemme put it this way – this guy was almost another species, he was so unusual. First strike – he was Ethiopian. Not that there weren’t darkly-complected folks in Judea, but not many, and virtually always slaves or street-workers. Second strike? This really rich, really dark fellow worked for a woman. Yea, I said it. Judaism was patriarchal with a capitol P, friends, and working for a woman? Ridiculous. Suspect. Unmanly. But it is the third strike that assured this guy’s loneliness, isolation, and social rejection, because this guy…was a eunuch. In cowboy terms, he was gelded. And while some women found eunuchs very attractive – no risk of pregnancy, for starters – most men were *really uncomfortable* in the presence of this kind of man. Two thousand years later, we here in progressive California are struggling along with the rest of our nation to understand and accept non-binary folks who don’t fit in our mental boxes, so you can reckon it was a lot weirder back then. This guy, to use our modern language, was inter-sex, neither fully male nor really female, either. And these three strikes, his skin color, his subservient employment, and his gelding, they assured he was on the outside of nearly every human interaction. But God, as y’all know, isn’t bound by human narrowness of mind. Back to the text…

*The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” So Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.  “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.* Philip was certainly Spirit-infused here, and none of our typical social discomforts kept him from his mission. He climbed up in the ‘chariot’ – and we are talking more like an ox-cart here, not some sleek Ben-Hur contraption – and listened to the eunuch read, in passable Hebrew, dontcha know, one of the suffering servant passages from Isaiah. And this guy is totally lost, a convert to Judaism but without the grounding one gets when one grows up that way. He can’t quite pinpoint who this suffering servant might be, but Philip has no doubts, and uses that very text to describe the ministry, the tortuous death, and the life *after* death of Jesus. It never occurs to him that he is wasting is breath, that this weirdo went all the way to Jerusalem but was not even allowed into the Temple. It never occurs to him that this guy would never be welcomed into the fledgling Church. Philip is what scholars call a Hellenized Jew – that is, one who has incorporated Greek philosophy and much more tolerance into his noggin. Peter or John probably wouldn’t have given this guy the time of day, but with the Spirit’s help, Philip is accepting and welcoming and basically everything you want in an evangelist.

*As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both 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 suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.*A little context here, friends – baptism was not something that Jews did. Baptism meant renouncing one’s former spiritual path, meant admitting that they needed cleansed and purified. Converts *into* the Jewish faith were ritually cleansed, but those who were already Jews? Rubbish. We are God’s chosen people, we don’t need yer stinkin’ bath! And so it is especially profound that this Jewish demi-man asks the most important question in the most innocent way: what would prevent me from accepting Jesus? Would my race, my employment, my castration, which have kept me at arm’s length my whole life, would these still be impediments? And, praise God, Philip goes down into that water with this eunuch and changes the course of history forever. Like I said, the gate swings wide in this passage, and try as we might, we have never fully shut it again.

We need to stop, but let’s rope this one point and wrassle it good…the Spirit wants everybody to come in fer supper. Weird? C’mon in. Socially unacceptable? C’mon in. This human construct of ‘three strikes and you’re out’ is exactly that and nothing more. God, it seems, isn’t bound by our timetable or our notions of who is or isn’t good enough. God is playing the long game, friends…and that game only ends when everybody is on the team. Amen.