

**UNHINDERED: See What Love Can Do Sermon Series
A Dry and Dusty Road (Acts 8:26-38)**

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WATCH/LISTEN: fbcjc.org/sermon/unhindered-a-dry-and-dusty-road/

On a dry, dusty, desert road, a chariot tumbles along, wheels bouncing and creaking over the rocks, swaying back and forth along the uneven roads. A cloud of dust chases it down the path as the horses pull the chariot forward in a never-ending game of cat and mouse. The boredom on these long, dusty rides was suffocating, so it was common for people with means to bring along something to read to pass the time. The passenger in this chariot, a respected and high-ranking official from the court of the Queen of Ethiopia (whose kingdom stretched north from the River Nile into what is now northern Sudan), this passenger, this official was deep in thought as he read the scroll of the prophet Isaiah along that dry and dusty road.

Now, we don't know how he got the scroll. We know he was returning from the temple in Jerusalem, having traveled there with the purpose of worshipping. Maybe he was in Jerusalem on business for the Queen and added a temple visit on at the end. Maybe this was his sole purpose for the trip. Maybe he was welcomed into the Temple to worship when he arrived. But maybe he wasn't. You see, he was different. Have you ever felt different or like you stood out in a crowd? First, he was Ethiopian which at that time referred to anyone with dark skin, an African. So, he would have stood out at the temple in Jerusalem because of the color of his skin. Second, he was a high-ranking official in a foreign royal court, so his clothes and style would have stood out as someone fairly significant from out of town. And third, he was a Eunuch. A eunuch was a male typically castrated before puberty, sometimes with their consent, but usually not. Because of the castration, eunuchs retained high voices. They didn't develop body hair or facial hair like men. They looked and sounded different from the men and women around them. And the temple the Ethiopian visited – maybe for the first time - was a highly gendered space. Men and young men to one side, and women and children on the other. There was an area designated for foreigners and for gentiles or non-Jews. Everyone in their place. So, it makes me wonder, "As a eunuch and a foreigner, where would I have gone? What space in the Temple would welcomed me warmly?"

Was he welcomed in any space? Or was he only allowed into the gift shop where he could purchase a scroll for himself. Regardless, while at the temple in Jerusalem, this educated, literate official from a foreign land had a hunger to know more, so he most likely purchased a scroll to read, and on this long dry, dusty ride back home, we can see him in the chariot, reading with a puzzled look on his face.

These are the words he was reading in the scroll from Isaiah 53: *"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."*

Many of us can totally relate to reading something in the Bible and going, “huh?” What does that mean? This educated royal official is reading this and asking the same question, “Huh? What does that mean? Who are they talking about?”

Maybe he read these words and hears a bit of his story as a Eunuch in them. “Led to slaughter?” Yes. “Silent before its shearer?” Yes. “in humiliation justice was denied him.” Yeah. Could this passage be talking about someone like him? And if not, who and what does it mean?

Now, along this same, dry and dusty road comes a guy named Philip, a guy who has no idea why he is on this desert road other than he was prompted by the angel of the Lord to Get up and go to this very road. Now, this wasn't the first crazy thing the Lord had asked Philip to do recently. You see, Philip was a leader in the early church and major things had been happening recently. The church was growing but making enemies along the way. In the previous few chapters of Acts before our text today, the believers were being severely persecuted and killed in Jerusalem. Soon, this boils up, and the church is scattered – believers fleeing the city for their lives. But as they scatter, they not only take what few possessions they can carry, they also carry the story of a Savior named Jesus. The Book of Acts is the story of how the Spirit of God, through the faithfulness of the Jesus followers, is unhindered in sharing the good news. Nothing will stop it, nothing will hinder the ever-expanding mission of the gospel. The kingdom of God is on the march to the very ends of the earth, and it will not be stopped.

Philip was one of those who fled, first going to a place called Samaria – a place most Jews would never go because they hated this group of people. But Philip went there anyway and preached about Jesus and the people believed and were baptized. In the midst of this amazing, fruitful, unhindered work, an angel of the Lord prompts Philip to get up and head out down this dry, dusty, wilderness road. In faithful obedience without knowing the why, Philip goes. And along that road, he sees the chariot, the chariot with the Ethiopian Eunuch who had just been to the temple, sitting inside, reading the scroll of Isaiah and trying to figure out what it means. Once again, the angel of the Lord prompts Philip ... go to the chariot, and Philip obeys. He doesn't only obey, he RUNS to the chariot and overhears the Ethiopian reading the passage from Isaiah aloud. Philip asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The Ethiopian replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

How many of us would admit to a stranger that we don't understand something? How many of us come up with excuses to get out of situations where we feel we might look stupid for not knowing something? How many of us refuse to ask for help? Unhindered by all of this and desperate to understand, this official invites Philip, a stranger on a wilderness road, to sit beside him in the chariot and to teach him.

And Philip accepts the invitation. “Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news of 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.”

What is to prevent me from being baptized? The Greek word in the text is **akōlytōs** which translates “unhindered”. What is to hinder me from being baptized? Upon hearing the truth of Jesus Christ explained by Philip in that chariot, I imagine the Ethiopian, so moved by God’s Spirit, that he just has a moment of “what’s to stop me from following Jesus? What or who can hinder me from surrendering my life to Christ? Nothing and no one. I have a teacher, we have water, and I believe. So, let’s do this.” And Philip – forgetting all the what abouts and the well, we’ve never done it that way Unhindered, Philip says yes. And Philip baptized him in that little surprising stream of water along the dry and dusty wilderness road.

You see, a new thing was happening. The Christian community enjoyed relative security in Jerusalem. It would have been so easy to just stay put, to get comfortable, to forget the charge by Christ himself to be witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. It would have been so tempting to just become stagnant, locked down in what was familiar and who was familiar and selfishly hoard the gospel for themselves. Whenever we are comfortable, whenever a character in a story is comfortable, it takes an inciting incident to move us. For the early church, it was persecution which scattered them. The gospel is now leaving town – not because the early Christians dreamed it up but rather because they were forced into a new reality. But once there, their commitment to Christ led them to obedience even when things were different. They didn’t go underground or hide. Wherever they ended up, they continued to share the gospel message. What was intended to hinder them instead launched them. Philip wasn’t necessarily burdened for the outsider or people beyond Jerusalem or Judaism; he hadn’t dreamed of baptizing an Ethiopian. But Philip was obedient to God in the small things – like heading down a dry, dusty road for no reason other than God asked him to go. And in their obedience, preachers like Philip find themselves led by the Spirit into the oddest of situations with the most surprising sorts of people. Because you see, the gospel is intended for everyone, everywhere, and the job of all followers of Jesus, empowered by the Spirit, is to keep it moving.

Jack Rogers, an American Presbyterian minister and theologian, writes that “the fact that the first non-Jewish convert to Christianity (the Ethiopian Eunuch) is from a sexual minority and a different race, ethnicity and nationality calls Christians to be radically inclusive and welcoming”.

This was not initiated by the Christians. It was not the agenda of the Church. It was and is God’s initiative, God’s agenda. The Spirit prompts and pushes us each step of the way to expand the gospel message beyond every possible boundary and barrier humanity creates - race, ethnicity, gender, religion, money, position. None of these would hinder the good news. No one was left out. It was, and is, for all. Theologian and author, Rachel Held Evans, wrote, “The apostles remembered what many modern Christians tend to forget – that what makes the gospel offensive isn’t who it keeps out, but who it lets in.”

In our complicated, real world, there's so much that can hinder: our fears, our assumptions, our prejudices, our traditions, our insecurities, our limitations. It is so tempting to huddle up and be comfortable; so tempting to keep out that which we do not understand and those who are different from us; so tempting to say no when God prompts us down an unknown road.

But on that road, there may be a chariot. And in that chariot may be an earnest seeker who courageously invites us to sit by him and talk about the One who is Love and Hope, the One who understands his story, and our story, and graciously includes all of us into God's grand story of love and redemption – a live-giving story that continues now and into the future, unhindered.