

EASTER 5

Year B

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Acts 8:26-40

²⁶Then 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.) ²⁷So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³²Now 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.

³³In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth."

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As 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?" ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When 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. ⁴⁰But 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.

Commentary from Aidan Stoddart

Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch returning home from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Prompted by the Spirit, Philip befriends him and they discuss the Scriptures. In the end, the eunuch is compelled by a Christological reading, and he opts to be baptized forthwith. (One can appreciate the matter-of-fact quality of the eunuch's declaration in v. 36: "Look, here is water!") Philip is then snatched away quickly by the Spirit, but this doesn't seem to faze the implacable eunuch. He simply goes "on his way rejoicing" (v. 39). There is much to appreciate about the example of the Ethiopian eunuch.

The eunuch has a curious, prospecting faith that mines the Scriptures for meaning. But the eunuch is not only curious. He takes the initiative. He acquires the Scriptures to study them. He asks to be baptized. He is not a passive recipient of the Gospel; he actively engages with it.

The eunuch is an African with an ethnic identity different from many of the characters we meet in the Bible. His faith is a testament to the diversity of the early Church. Remembering his story can help us to decenter a white missional perspective when we discuss African Christianity.

As far as sex, sexuality, and gender are concerned, the eunuch is a liminal or ambiguous figure not only in his own time but in our own. The confidence and joy with which he claims his identity in Christ may be inspiring to hearers of this story who occupy similarly liminal identities in our culture. He is a reminder that the Gospel belongs to those for whom the binary categories of society don't always work. Those whose identities are liminal or ambiguous are beloved in Christ and are invited to claim that belovedness.

Discussion Questions

In the spirit of the Ethiopian eunuch, how might we bring our curiosity to God in prayer? And how might we claim our unique identity in Christ?

Psalm 22:24-30

- ²⁴ My praise is of him in the great assembly; *
I will perform my vows in the presence of
those who worship him.
- ²⁵ The poor shall eat and be satisfied,
and those who seek the Lord shall praise
him: *
"May your heart live for ever!"
- ²⁶ All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn
to the Lord, *
and all the families of the nations shall bow
before him.
- ²⁷ For kingship belongs to the Lord; *
he rules over the nations.
- ²⁸ To him alone all who sleep in the earth bow down
in worship; *
all who go down to the dust fall before him.
- ²⁹ My soul shall live for him;
my descendants shall serve him; *
they shall be known as the Lord's for ever.
- ³⁰ They shall come and make known to a people yet
unborn *
the saving deeds that he has done.

Commentary from Aidan Stoddart

Today's short portion of Psalm 22 is a fairly joyful excerpt. The seven verses chosen for Easter 5 (B) celebrate corporate worship (v. 24); proclaim abundance for the poor (v. 25); portend the unification of the world in faith (v. 26); declare the kingship of God, even over the dead (vv. 27-28); and they express the vow of the psalmist to dedicate not only his life, but the lives of those yet to come, to God, in remembrance of God's saving acts (vv. 29-30). These are the final verses of Psalm 22, and they paint a stirring, triumphal, glorious picture. But ironically, the most intriguing thing about the excerpt is everything it leaves out. Most of the preceding twenty-three verses are not so rosy; Psalm 22 famously begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and proceeds for most of its length as a desperate plea for God's help. This is the very psalm that Jesus quotes, despairingly, just before dying on the cross (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34).

The dark, earlier verses may seem pretty out of step with the celebratory verses chosen for today, but the juxtaposition is theologically fecund. The suggestion of the psalm is that the celebration we discover in the end cannot exist without a relationship to the suffering we discover in the beginning. Joy and despair go together, as parts of a single story, and this psalm highlights the transition from the very depth of suffering to the very height of salvation. The progression invites us to consider the trajectories of our own lives: if we are suffering, joy may be coming sooner than we might think; if we are joyful, we can nonetheless remember the suffering we have passed through before arriving here. And there is no celebration without hardship.

Discussion Questions

How can this psalm speak to those who relate more to the earlier, darker verses of Psalm 22? How can it preach to those who still wait upon the help of God?

1 John 4:7-21

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶ So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Those who say, "I love God," and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Commentary from Aidan Stoddart

This reading is one of the deepest and most beautiful reflections on the love of God in the entire Bible. It is rooted in the declaration of v. 8, that "God is love." This is to say, love is not only a characteristic of God. Rather, love is God's substance. Love is who and what God is. We can't know God without knowing love, since, on some level, God and love are the same "thing." But is love a "thing" after all? We might be inclined to think of love as a thing, a *noun*, like a fond or passionate feeling. Love can indeed include fondness and passion, and certainly God has passionate fondness for us. But according to 1 John, God's substantial love is not only a *noun* like fondness or passion. God's love is a *verb*. It is revealed *through action*: through God sending his Son and making an "atoning sacrifice for our sins" (v. 10). The love of God is not only a thing; it is a *thing done*. And not only that: the love of God is a thing done for others—not least, for us. Acting on behalf of others is therefore the core of God's loving being. In short, this means that, in order for God to be most himself, God must act for others' sake. God's love is an active gift of the self to the other.

The passage also makes clear that there is a deep relationship between God's love and our own: "Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another" (v. 11). God's love spurs ours; we must love in the way that God does. We are called to a love that is a self-sacrificing action on behalf of others. This is, of course, a tall order. But it is also potentially a liberating one. If, as this passage suggests, divine love is an action rather than a feeling, then we are freed to consider how we can love those for whom we do *not* harbor fond, affectionate feelings—or, to put it more bluntly, how we can love those whom we don't like.

Discussion Questions

How can we, as a church, embody the kind of love described in this passage: love that is not a sentiment, but an action? Who can be included in our love that we might not expect?

John 15:1-8

15 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Commentary from Aidan Stoddart

In this discourse from John’s Gospel, Jesus explores a metaphor. Jesus is the vine and the disciples (read: us!) are the branches. The metaphor facilitates an analogy. Just as the vinegrower “prunes” branches to make them bear more fruit, the disciples are “cleansed” by the words of Christ. The connection between the two ideas is clearer in the original text, since in New Testament Greek, “prunes” and “cleansed” have the same root: *katharos*, meaning “clean” or “pure.” This root is the origin of our word “catharsis.” Literally, Jesus’ words provide catharsis for us and help our lives to bear fruit. But crucially, Jesus’ words are not only the words of a teacher or instructor in the conventional, didactic sense of those terms. Jesus isn’t standing and speaking next to the branches, or outside of them. Jesus is the vine from which the branches spring. Jesus is the ground of the branches’ being. And so, the Jesus who speaks words of catharsis to us speaks as one who grounds our very life and existence. He does not stand outside of us. He sustains us, and we sustain ourselves in and through him. To live is to be connected to Christ, to spring out from his life; to be spoken to by Christ is to be spoken to by the very life of our life, to be cleansed by the upwelling truth within us and before us.

Discussion Questions

How can we connect with Christ, the vine to our branch, the ground of our being, here and now?

How do we find our ground in the present moment, whatever is happening? And how do we “abide” in that ground across circumstances?