

May We Grow Back, Not to What Was, But to What We Can Become

Sunday, May 2, 2021 | The Fourth Sunday After Easter | [Acts 8:26-40](#) | [John 15:1-8](#)
Knox-Metropolitan United Church | Regina, SK | Treaty 4 Territory | Cameron Fraser

The reading from the book of Acts is extremely rich in possibilities which I believe I have only the space this morning to name. But I hope it sparks interest and I'll link 3 sources I explored which I'd recommend others interested in this read for more depth:

<http://www.emilymdscott.com/writing/2019/1/31/longing-insistence-joy-the-queer-calling-of-the-ethiopian-eunuch>

<https://www.wilgafney.com/2012/05/04/black-jewish-and-queer-the-ethiopian-eunuch/>

<https://petersontoscano.com/ethiopianeunuch/>

These three sources lift up the joyful queering possibilities of this narrative.

This story is also the subject of a Chapter of *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians* by the amazing trans Biblical Scholar Austen Hartke.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzAtY9XwKc8>

I of course approach this story as a cisgender man, and so do so with great humility and gratitude for queer Biblical scholarship and an attention to the call from such Queer preachers & scholars as I have read this week to lift up queer readings in every context.

The story of Philip and this one that the text names an Ethiopian eunuch.

And it needs to be stated from the outset that Eunuchs play vital roles in several spaces within Scriptures which has been used by trans people of Christian faith to resist modern insistence that the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures condemn transness.

Tradition in the Ethiopian Church names this one as Bachos

The Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney names this one as Abdimalkah (one who serves the queen)

Queer theologian Peterson Toscana employs the phrase "this one" both for its gender expansiveness, but also its echo of Jesus' title "the Son of Man/The Human One" ...because of the salvific role played in expanding the boundaries of the early Jesus movement and a historic honorific remembering this one's reverence within the Tradition of Ancient African (i.e. pre-missionary) Christianity.

I'll use all three here as we think of this as a story that has the potential to challenge narrow readings which are often imposed upon it.

There are intersections in this passage, and the ways it has been read over the centuries, of gender conformity and non-conformity, race, and Christian supremacy to Judaism.

As co-founder of *Seminary on the Street*, nonviolence instructor and abolitionist Nichola Torbett notes:

it is profoundly ironic that this story has been co-opted to serve imperial, colonial aims.

This encounter between Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch has become biblical justification for missionary forays into Ethiopia and other parts of Africa and the rest of the world to convert people who "otherwise couldn't understand the scripture"

This certainly was the dominant reading I was taught in my early adulthood in evangelical circles

We were taught to read ourselves into Philip, the Christian who had the answer that was needed (even though we eventually learned it was to a question no one was asking).

This reading of course erases Philip's Jewishness.

The Ethiopian Eunuch story is often lifted up as the first Gentile baptism

But Bachos Abdimalkah has just come from Jerusalem

The NRSV translation of the Bible says "was in Jerusalem to worship"

The Inclusive Bible (which we read from this morning) says "on a pilgrimage"

This is language of a convert, not to Christianity, but to Judaism

With an eye to recognize the presence of Judaism in this text, resisting the tendency to read early Christianity in competition with Judaism, Gafney also challenges us to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as Yeshua ben Miryam L'Natzaret (Jesus born of Mary of Nazareth).

Yeshua ben Miryam L'Natzaret – a reminder that we in the West encounter a historical Jesus very unlike us culturally and ethnically – and this is profound good news.

I'd mentioned already that this passage is full of complex intersecting ideas (both in the text itself and how it has often been read, or at least its dominant reading as a text lifting up Christian Missionizing).

This complexity is reflected in the setting.

An angel from God said to Philip, "Be ready to set out at noon along the road that goes to Gaza, the desert road." So Philip began his journey.

The reality is that, despite the building of roads and aqueducts being a major focus of Rome's Empire building project (as folks familiar with Monty Python's *Life of Brian* might recall) there would have been no simple path:

...there was no single road in the Roman era that transversed the fifty miles from Jerusalem to Gaza. One would have to travel a series of spider-web zig-zagging roads from Jerusalem south to Hebron, west to the Ephrathah Valley crossroads, south to Beersheba and northwest to Gaza on the coast, if one wanted a chariot-capable road.

That this spiders web of roads is reflected in the ideas of the text as well, is, I hope, becoming clear. Jewishness, migrancy, gender, and it gets more complex.

Bachos Abdimalkah is reading from a scroll

We live in a world where if someone were to ask us to look up Isaiah 53 we'd just pull out a phone.

Living in a post-Gutenberg era where we can pick up a bound codex version of the Hebrew and Christian sacred texts at Chapters or find one left by the Gideons in a Holiday Inn night table drawer, we might miss the significance of that scroll.

These are not commonplace items.

In this moment it would be unlikely that a particular synagogue would have a complete version.

Neighbouring communities would share and rotate.

They were too rare

Too costly (in time and resources) to make

For these to be commonplace

That scroll which Bachos Abdimalkah reads from in this episode would like be the property of the court of Cadace/Kandake:

Amanitore, the co-regent of Meroe, called Kush in the Hebrew Scriptures who reigned from about 1 to 20 or perhaps as long as 50 CE. Kush was later called Nubia and finally, Ethiopia. It corresponds with parts of contemporary Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt

We should remember that the Israelite religion has been introduced into the broader Ethiopian cultural context centuries earlier through the connection between Solomon of Israel and the Queen of Sheba.

Ethiopian Orthodox tradition names that the two maintained a diplomatic relationship long after their brief encounter which is recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. This would have included sending gifts back and forth, including copies of the Scriptures.

So this reader is not ignorant to the tradition and classic missionary readings depend on erasing the millennia of culture on the African continent.

So Philip's question, *do you understand what you are reading* could be read with some ironic and when Bachos Abdimalkah replies *How would I know unless someone explains it to me...*

Could this be read as a bit of a joke?

Popular evangelical interpretations map onto this interaction, the idea that the world is simply desperate for enlightened Christians to come along and interpret the Gospel of Jesus onto their worldview filling in the gaps in their ignorance like the God-shaped hole in their hearts.

"You are like sheep being led to slaughter,
you are like a lamb that is mute in front of its shearers:
like them, you never open your mouth.
You have been humiliated
and you have no one to defend you.
Who will ever talk about your descendants,
since your life on earth has been cut short?"

Quite a reading to follow last week's Good Shepherd Sunday in which God is a shepherd eh?

Depending on our background with church, some of us may have been taught that the people of Israel, through Isaiah, understood this to speak of a Messianic figure for whom they waited, and that it was in Jesus that these words became fulfilled.

Certainly, Jesus' story of arrest and abuse are reflected here.

And when we play a zero-sum game of prophecy fulfillment there can be only one right answer.

Yet the Judean people saw this text reflected in their own history

These words spoke to them of the suffering of their ancestors when Babylon destroyed their land.

These words spoke to them of the time of the Kings in which the poor suffered.

Expansive readings of the early Christian Movement hold that Jesus' early followers held all of these together, no one overshadowing the other.

Back to Philip asking if Bachos Abdimalkah knows what this means...

First this one who is the head of the treasury of the Queendom, is fluently reading Hebrew. This One would be a representative of the Queen throughout Greek speaking world...also they are literate, which Philip would most certainly not be.

But then also, does this one who inhabits a body that that does not conform to the categories some insist are the only ones acceptable.

Does this one whose skin is (to use the words of the Hebrew text in Song of Solomon)...

*black and beautiful,
O daughters of Jerusalem,
like the tents of Kedar*

Does this one who has just returned from Jerusalem Temple worship in a time of colonial control far from their home where they are revered.

Does this one know what it means to have the expectation of silence?

The expectation of erasure?

Does this one whose name and title, whose Jewishness, whose brilliance will be erased in the text

Does this one know what it means?

Does this one whose body and descendants (and yes I am using that word intentionally) will reflect the life of Yeshua ben Miriam whose exclusion and pain and resilient triumphant young Philip never saw because he was in hiding with the rest of them?

When this one sees water this one knows that there is nothing

About bodily organs, chromosomes, expression, and dress, appearance, conformity or not, nothing that may have denied this one entrance into the temple that should deny this one entrance into the sacred source of all life.

This one knows their worth

The Christian Tradition in Africa that predates European Victorian Missionaries with their white Jesus and colonial inclinations of theft and displacement, venerates this one.

Bachos Abdimalkah as one through whom God births the African Church

Who is then made a prop in 5 centuries of white evangelising readings.

Today as the legitimacy of gender and sexual diversity has again become a question of public debate in our city.

May this one who bears in their body and their confession of worthiness

Good News with which they go away rejoicing after Philip disappears

This morning may this one and all of those who bear their spirit today be our teacher

This one who on the intersecting roads between Southern Jerusalem and Gaza,

Who dwells on the intersections of class and race and gender non-conformity

Who does not need the temple to name them beloved

Who does not need Philip to name them worthy of the water

We give thanks for the joy of Bachos Abdimalkah, Black, Queer, Jewish...Beloved.

We give thanks for all those who bear this joy today.

And we are aware of whose joyful hearts are heavy.

And so we pray, like the words of our opening blessing, that these ones would be safe and well and protected:

*And so may a slow
Wind work these words
Of love around you,
An invisible cloak
To mind your life.*

Yet also, our prayers move us to act and stand and speak alongside and to amplify.

As an Affirming Ministry, we have committed to ongoing learning and to work in solidarity

May this one show us a way, and may we be attentive to what that way looks like in our moment...