



# *In Between*

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MISSION SUNDAY  
ACTS 8:26-40

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Something that the larger Women's Missionary Society body does, for Mission Awareness Sunday, is ask a mission-experienced minister in our denomination to provide a sermon about mission for churches to use, which we can adapt and personalise for our particular congregations. I have chosen to take them up on it this Sunday. The heart of today's message was written by Rev. Dr. Blair Bertrand, who, along with his family, has spent many, many years as a missionary of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in the African country of Malawi.

And while I have added some St. Andrew's details to this sermon, Rev. Bertrand's perspective on mission, because of his time in Malawi, is not something I could ever share with you as my own, so I hope you will appreciate and be challenged by his message.

Many churches have stained glass windows and many of those windows show us stories from the Bible. We have several beautiful ones here, and many of them proclaim some part of who Jesus is, or remind us of what Jesus does. There is the Good Shepherd window; that one shows Jesus calling two of his disciples, the fishermen Andrew and Peter; that one, the moment when the apostle Paul encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus; and then there is the communion window, showing a man, woman and child in close relationship, made one with Christ and each another, surrounded by elements that speak of the sacrament of communion. Often, these windows tell other, more subtle, stories. The small words at the bottom of windows tell the story of love and loss, of legacy and family, of service to Christ by members of our St. Andrew's family, and how we remember and are inspired by our shared past.

In a church far from here, in a small city named Zomba in a country called Malawi, there is a window that tells yet another story; we can see it here on the screen. It is of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch so it does tell a Biblical story. And it is dedicated to lost loved ones so it does tell the story of that congregation. But it tells another story too.

Philip is pictured as standing above the Ethiopian eunuch at the moment of baptism. The eunuch looks up with joy and it is clear that his eyes are gazing up at Philip. Philip is white and the eunuch is black. Malawi is mostly made up of black Africans. The window is in an old Presbyterian church built by Scottish missionaries. Philip, a Middle Eastern man, would have had lighter skin than an Ethiopian. But the idea that he would have skin as white as a Scottish missionary is not believable.

And why select that moment and that pose? There are other possible moments in the story. The eunuch is rich and powerful, the text makes that clear by having him look after the treasury and placing him in a chariot. In contrast, Philip has nothing and is on foot. Why not have the eunuch inviting Philip into his chariot? Or both of them, side by side, reading the Word of God?

There are many possibilities but this is how the Bible story we read together today was told at that time and in that place. It was a story of white missionaries bringing the Gospel to black Malawians. It is not a unique story.

The European and North American missionary efforts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries spread all over the globe. And praise God that they did! Churches from Nigeria to Korea to Japan to India to Guatemala to Nicaragua were strengthened. Now there are more Presbyterians in places like Korea and Malawi than in Scotland or Canada. We are talking about Zomba today, a small city in a small country (Malawi) on a big continent (Africa), because of that missionary effort.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada continues to partner with the church in Malawi. Presbyterian World Service and Development, International Ministries, the Women's Missionary Society, and many congregations all have long standing relationships and ministries there. Most recently here at St. Andrew's, our Mission team has directed our generosity to PWS&D projects in Malawi that build infrastructure to provide clean sources of drinking water. And all of that is good.

But consider: this window tells a story about mission, many decades ago. I wonder if we wanted to design a stained-glass window about mission today, how might we design that window? How do we understand mission in our world?

The Ethiopian eunuch can guide us in answering those questions. By reflecting on the three questions he poses in this story, we can get some insight into what mission could look like today.

The first question the eunuch asks is, “How can I understand, unless someone guides me?”

For centuries, biblical scholars have noted how incredible this question is. Recently, theologian Barbara Brown Taylor noted that “the text presents the Ethiopian as someone wealthy enough to ride in a chariot, educated enough to read Greek, devout enough to study the prophet Isaiah, and humble enough to know that he cannot understand what he is reading without help.” He is wealthy, educated, devout, and humble. His status as an Ethiopian eunuch, that is, his status as a foreigner and someone who is ritually unclean, likely keeps him out of the Jewish Temple. But the writer of Acts doesn’t let us see him as an outsider. We see him as devout, owning and reading Scripture on the bumpy road home. Even with his power and his spiritual dedication, his piety, he asks for help.

Asking for help can be hard for us, because it means admitting aloud that there is something we haven’t figured out or don’t know about or can’t do on our own. It is the eunuch’s humility that so many Bible scholars note with wonder. He has all the material resources he needs, yet he lacks something: he cannot understand his faith without help. The eunuch knows it and with courage and humility, he reaches out to Philip.

In the Zomba window, the missionaries are imagined as Philip. They are the ones who bring answers to the unknowing Ethiopian eunuch. But what if we flipped their roles around: could the opposite be true, too? North American Christians are wealthy and educated. Perhaps we are the Ethiopian eunuch and what we need then is piety and humility. Visitors to Zomba from Canada love the music they hear in worship. Reports back are filled with rapturous descriptions of the passion and joy of the people. And that is true and maybe something we can learn from. But there are even deeper things of God that we might learn about.

Take the Rev. Dr. Takuze Chitsulo who is one of the ministers in Zomba. He has a PhD university degree in the Old Testament, an achievement that the Presbyterian Church in Canada supported. He analysed the minor prophet Habakkuk in relation to the move from one party rule to multi-democracy in Malawi.



Pretty heady stuff that would play well in an Old Testament course here in Canada. He is a scholar and a minister. But he is also aware that evil does not just take the form of oppressive structures. Sometimes evil takes a personal turn. Spirits, demons, and those who use them are part of everyday ministry. The Presbyterian church in Malawi conducts exorcisms. This belief and practice would likely make many wealthy and educated North Americans uncomfortable.

If we were to take the role of Phillip in the Zomba window, we would try and change Dr. Chitsulo's mind about that, and the Malawi Christians, too. But if we were to take the role of the Ethiopian eunuch instead, we would be humble and instead of dismissing these ideas, we might ask questions, to learn more about their beliefs and ideas because they are different than ours. Dr. Chitsulo humbled himself to learn in a very Western way, excelling at his PhD. What would it take for us to humble ourselves and listen to his and his church's view on evil and the spirit world?

The Ethiopian's humility can serve as an example, and teach us an important lesson: mission must start from a place of humility. Whether we are reaching out to our neighbours across the street or across the world, we cannot start by assuming that we have all the answers, or answers that our neighbours need. Our comparative wealth and power, and our way of doing things and thinking about things, can blind us to the fact that we, too, need help in understanding what is happening around us and in learning about what other people think and believe and do.

Humility can be easily misunderstood. False humility can cause us to be self-defeating in our thoughts and attitudes, a kind of "we don't know anything, so we can't do or say anything" belief. It can also be used to cover-up or hide our pride and our judging attitude. True humility is an honest assessment of our limits and the strengths of another; it's open-heartedness and genuine respect for others. The eunuch's second question, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" guards against misunderstanding humility, and shows us what true humility looks and acts like.

The eunuch does not humbly ask for understanding from just anyone. He asks Philip. What we know of Philip is that he followed Jesus and learned from him, as one of his disciples. We know that he has become an evangelist, a proclaimer of all that he learned from Jesus and about him. Philip brings the Good News of Jesus Christ to many.

When he preaches people respond, asking for baptism and going forth with joy. It doesn't seem to matter where Philip is, the Good News just pours out of him. He has been kicked out of Jerusalem but still he preaches; he goes to Samaria, a place people from the city of Jerusalem don't like, and still he preaches; and now, the Holy Spirit takes him into the wilderness on the roads of North Africa and still he preaches. According to Philip's example, mission means that the Good News gets preached to those that need to hear it, and everyone needs to hear it.

When Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch meet, the eunuch was struggling to understand an important passage of Isaiah, specifically Isaiah 53:7-8, what we would call one of the Suffering Servant songs and understand as a reference to Jesus. But we can assume that the eunuch has been reading that whole part of the book Isaiah. I hope each one of you have or will experience what the eunuch must have experienced in his reading: he found himself in God's word, already considered and welcomed into God's saving plan.

In that part of Isaiah, eunuchs are actually mentioned. It is not too much to think that the Ethiopian eunuch wondered if the words of Isaiah could be for him, could be a promise of salvation for him, could be a word of promise for him. When Philip opens up the Scripture and answers his questions, the Ethiopian eunuch sees Jesus, sees the salvation that God has offered him, sees that the promise of the Holy Spirit really is for him, too.

This salvation prompts a third question, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" In other words, since the Ethiopian eunuch was humble enough to hear the Good News proclaimed to him, what now could stop him from responding?

In this story, there is nothing that seems to stop the Holy Spirit from acting. Notice that while we focus on the eunuch and Philip, it is the Holy Spirit who is doing much of the action. The Holy Spirit guided the eunuch's reading and understanding of what he read, just enough to prompt him to ask for help to know more. The Holy Spirit comes to Philip and gives him directions to help him help the eunuch. And we must also believe that it was the Holy Spirit who brought these two travellers together, at just the right moment, in just the right place, for this conversation to happen at all.

In response to their conversation, both Philip and the eunuch go down into the waters of baptism and as they come up the Holy Spirit moves each on his own path.

Philip goes on to evangelize elsewhere while the eunuch goes back to Ethiopia with rejoicing. The answer to what can stop the eunuch from being baptised is “nothing.”

In fact, we have to ask ourselves the question, “Have I really heard the Good News if I do not respond by seeking out God, rejoicing, and carrying the message back to my people?”

Stepping out of Rev. Bertrand’s message for a moment, this is an especially timely question for us to ask ourselves right after Easter. There are any number of examples in the Bible about people hearing the good news from Jesus or one of his disciples, and being so inspired that they turn their lives into a means of sharing that good news, from the Samaritan woman at the well to the apostle Paul himself. But none so exuberantly as those first good news proclaimers on Easter morning: the women who found that empty tomb, and raced home to the others, full of hope and excitement and the possibility of new, risen life in our risen Saviour. Hearing the good news, knowing it to be for us...what happens after is the real litmus test for whether or not the gospel has taken hold of our hearts and minds, and begun the transforming, freeing, life-giving work of salvation. Have we really heard it if we don’t respond by seeking God with joy and taking the message home, and to every place we go?

The Ethiopian eunuch was already faithful, he had come to Jerusalem to worship, but his encounter with Philip brings his faith to a whole new level. Now he returns to his home with a new sense of the Good News and how it is, deeply and personally, for him. The eunuch also returns home with new ideas and new knowledge to share, and a new sense of mission.

We might have begun today thinking that Philip is the missionary here but, in the end, the Holy Spirit uses both as missionaries: Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch, and the eunuch to other Ethiopians. In the end, it is the Holy Spirit’s mission, God’s ever-expanding saving plan, that both get to participate in, without anything to stop them.

For centuries, the Western church operated from a place of power. It was our mission, our strategies, our resources, our people. What this story reveals is that our mission is best when it is not actually our mission. Mission is best when it is God’s mission that we participate in. Which begs the question, “What is God’s mission for the Presbyterian Church in Canada today?” And closer to home, what is God’s mission for us, for St. Andrew’s, today?

Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch each answer that question differently, but they do it from the same place. It is the cross-cultural encounter that revealed the mission of God: the two came together in the wilderness, a place that was neither of their homes but was on the way to both, and entered into the eunuch's small chariot to focus on reading Scripture.

Journeying out from where we are comfortable and surrounded by the familiar people and ideas, meeting those who need help: that is what Philip shows us about mission. Inviting others in to our space, with our humble interest and questions about what they believe and know about faith: that is what the eunuch shows us about mission. Is it possible for us, right here in Sarnia, to find those in-between places where we might encounter someone who is very different than ourselves and in doing that, have God open up a new mission for us?

Let's have another look at that mission window in Zomba's Presbyterian Church. Now, can we imagine that window from Zomba differently? Might it be that if we were to design it today that we might portray the humility of the eunuch, acknowledging that the one who has worldly power needs something from the wandering evangelist Philip? Could we make it so that they are sitting side-by-side, both of their faces alight with the Good News as they read the Scripture together? What about putting in the Holy Spirit moving them in response out of the waters of baptism, sending them on their respective missions?

Could mission today be less about a one-way imparting of information, and more about meeting in the wildernesses in between our homes? More like what Philip and the eunuch experienced, discovering God's mission for them, for us and our neighbours, together? Thanks be to God. Amen.