

June 23, 2024
Rev. Lisa Schrott
Acts 8:26-40
Home

Dr. Marcia MeFee, curator of the material we have been using for the Quest worship series this June muses that, "Returning home is not the end of the journey. Returning to "business as usual" too quickly can rob us of important moments of integrating what we have experienced into our hearts and knowing what implications it can have for our lives."¹ Our New Testament scripture this morning is a story of someone whose life was transformed on the return trip home. Here now these words from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 8.

Then 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.) So Philip 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. They had come to Jerusalem to worship and were returning home; seated in their chariot, they were reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard them reading the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" They replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And they invited Philip to get in and sit beside them. Now the passage of the scripture that they were 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. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to them the good news about 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?" They commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized them. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw Philip no more and went on their way rejoicing. But 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. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

¹Marcia MeFee. Returning Home. Script for Week 4 of Quest. Online at https://docs.google.com/document/d/160JIQqvifr5Le9iD8DfUbjvs5_1Ywq1h/edit

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“There are a lot of voices telling you that you can’t do it. I didn’t think I could do it. But I did it! I did it.” These words were repeated over and over again by the six remarkable and fierce women who graduated with their high school diplomas from the Global Institute of Lansing (GIL) on Friday. It was an incredibly moving ceremony – I freely admit to tearing up and crying through much of it. It was an especially poignant and joyous celebration, as it was the first all-female graduating class at GIL, and GIL celebrated its 100th graduate.

The speakers at the graduation ceremony, including the graduates themselves, noted just what these women had achieved – the obstacles they had overcome, from the practical and logistical to the cultural and political. The women came from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Honduras, Iraq, Laos and Myanmar. English was not their first language – nor for some, not even their second or third language. They were working full time, raising children, caring for family members. Some came from cultures and traditions where education for a female is not valued and certainly not a priority. There were many things that could have prevented them from furthering their education AND yet, these remarkable women had the tenacity and will to devote to hard study to achieve a high school diploma.

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For the six women who graduated from GIL on Friday night and for thousands of other refugees overcoming tremendous odds on their way to greater Lansing area, a new definition of “home” became part of their story. Our newest neighbors knew what they were fleeing. They were fleeing a homeland that had become too dangerous. However, they were often not sure where they were going. A different kind of journey – a different kind quest – than most of us take on our travels and sojourns. And yet, just as we “return home” after our travels, our refugee friends are seeking a home where, like our words of preparation from Malala Yousafzai remind us, “To me, a home is where you feel loved, safe, and cherished.”²

I couldn’t help but think about Malala as the GIL graduation ceremony approached this week. My introduction to Malala was over 10 years ago, after she wrote her memoir *I am Malala*. Malala wrote the book to share her story of fighting for the education of women in the Swat Valley of northwest Pakistan. She was an outspoken critic of the Taliban who had controlled this area of Pakistan and especially critical of the Taliban’s ban on girls attending

² <https://refugeeweek.org.uk/theme/>

school. She was part of a group of girls who continued going to school despite the ban and despite threats to her and her family's safety. The threats were not idle and in October 2012 Malala was shot in the face by a gunman who had boarded her school bus, specifically looking for her. Two of her classmates were also injured. If the Taliban thought that they could silence Malala with a bullet, they were wrong. Way wrong. Rather than silencing her, Malala was empowered to tell her story to more people. To promote human rights however she could. To keep fighting for access to education for girls and young women. To write a book and travel the world to tell her story. I saw an interview with Malala shortly after her book came out. She was about 16 at the time, a bit shy, yet confident in sharing with the world her passion about the education of women. A year later she won the Nobel Peace Prize, the youngest ever Nobel Prize recipient.

Malala was born in the Swat Valley of Pakistan, where the birth of girl is mourned rather than celebrated. Malala relates that she “was a girl in a land where rifles are fired in celebration of a son, while daughters are hidden away behind a curtain, their role in life simply to prepare food and give birth to children.”³ Malala had the strength to defy the cultural traditions that ruled their world. Throughout her autobiography Malala tells of the ways that she both confronted the culture imposed on her and the ways that she went around the culture. Her spirit was evident in the voices of the six women graduating from GIL on Friday night, full of dreams to be lived.

We see a similar theme in our scripture this morning in the interactions between Philip and the unnamed individual in Acts 8. Philip, one of the apostles, was called by God to reach out to this person, seated in chariot. While unnamed, we learn much about them. They were from Ethiopia. The region of Ethiopia was often referred to as Cush in the Hebrew scriptures. It lay to south of Egypt and was composed of a number of tribes, of which the Nubians were the most powerful.

The Ethiopian was reading the prophet Isaiah from the Hebrew scriptures while seated in their chariot and had come to Jerusalem to worship. There is a long standing tradition that the Hebrew faith was brought to Ethiopia by the Queen of Sheba after her visit to Solomon. Although not explicitly stated in the telling of the story in 1 Kings 10, traditions of a son named Menelik fathered by Solomon have been important to people of Ethiopia, including that Menelik returned to Israel as an adult and brought the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred container holding the Ten Commandments, back to Ethiopia where it has remained ever since. This has led scholars to posit that the Ethiopian in our story this morning was Jewish and that Philip's explanation of the passage from Isaiah was a fulfillment of Jesus' words in Acts 1 for the apostle to be his “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Ethiopia, being symbolic of the end of the world. It should be noted that there are some scholars who think that Luke left the religious tradition of the Ethiopian “purposefully

³ Yousafzai, Malala with Christina Lamb (contributor). *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*. London:Weidenfeld & Nicolson; 2013. p9

ambiguous” and that they may have been a Gentile. If the book of Acts is presented in chronological order, this would mean that the Ethiopian was baptized and became a follower of Christ before Cornelius, the Roman Centurion, who is often noted to be the first Gentile convert.⁴

There are two other important attributes to note: our Ethiopian friend is portrayed as an important official – one of influence and likely some financial means. They are a court official of the queen and in charge of her entire treasury. They are traveling by chariot, with a driver. Their journey is not one of footsteps or donkeys, as would be the case of those with limited means. And they are a eunuch. Now for whatever power and sway they held in the courts in Ethiopia, and there were positions in royal courts specifically assigned to eunuchs, their status as a eunuch would have made them stigmatized in both Jewish and Gentile societies. We do not know why their source of masculinity was not present – by birth, through violence, by choice. What we do know is that they did not fit the conventional understanding of gender in the ancient near East or Africa.

I love this passage of scripture for the complexities of this individual who dared to ask what could prevent them from being baptized. No single story here. A foreigner, whose dark skin stood out amongst the semitic features of those in Gaza where our story takes place. An official not of the ruling Roman empire, but of Ethiopia, whose rulers were a dynasty of queens. A reader of the Hebrew scripture and one who worshipped in Jerusalem. And an individual who was gender non-conforming in an era where the stigmas and violence ran deep, just like in our world today.

This complexity did not trouble Philip, nor give him any hesitation. We hear that Philip began to speak, and starting with the scripture from Isaiah he proclaimed the good news about Jesus to this one claimed by God. And 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?” They commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized them. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and they went on their way rejoicing.

They returned home rejoicing. They had come to Jerusalem to worship and were returning home rejoicing, transformed by the love and grace of Jesus Christ. Home – as Malala Yousafzai remind us, “To me, a home is where you feel loved, safe, and cherished.”⁵ Contrast this rejoicing, to the lament, the longing for home, we heard Ellen read from Psalm 137.

⁴ Michael Wood. The Queen of Sheba. In Search of Myths and Heroes. PBS. Online at: https://www.pbs.org/mythsandheroes/myths_four_sheba.html

⁵ Demetrius K. Williams. The Acts of the Apostles. In: *True to Our Native Land. An African-American New Testament Commentary*. Brian K. Blount (ed.) Fortress Press; 2007; p 225-227.

As the Rev. Emily Wilkes, Mission Specialist for Domestic Refugee Ministries, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance shares, “What, then, does home mean when you've been forcibly uprooted? How do you feel safe, experience a sense of belonging? How can you sing the song of your heart in a foreign land? Psalm 137 viscerally describes the grief of being forcibly displaced from home. ... They ask: How could we possibly be expected to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? When we work with people who have been forcibly displaced, we know there is grief for their home - the land, the people, the traditions, the songs, the art, their sense of safety, their center of wellbeing and personhood. Home was where they felt God was present. ... Accompaniment looks like building the capacity of those who have been displaced to plant new roots, to find ways to sing the songs of their hearts even in a foreign land.”⁶ I think of the words we will sing in our last hymn this morning, *Gentle Jesus*. “Lead me, ever lead me, though the night be dark and cold. Stay here, never leave me, lonely pilgrim, safely hold.” This hymn was written in 2015 by PCO friend and former choir scholarship student Dr. Philip Rice in response to the Syrian civil war refugee crisis.

In this month when we celebrate our commitment to the refugee community, our newest neighbors and to the LGBTQ+ community, our charge is to welcome people home, welcome people to a place where they feel loved, safe, and cherished. Where there is unconditional acceptance into a community of grace; into a home where we all are embraced for bearing the image of God, whether we grew up down the road, up north or around the globe; where we all are embraced for bearing the image of God, no matter who we love or gender identify.

When we embarked on our quest series a few weeks ago, I shared that one didn't have to travel around the world to be transformed – the journey we take – our quest – can happen in our own backyards, if we open ourselves to experience the radical call of welcome that happens through leaving our preconceived notions of others behind; when we embrace encounters that help us move beyond a single story; when we reflect on the new heaven and new earth we are creating; and when we work toward a home where all feel loved, safe, and cherished. If you have had a chance, or will have a chance, to have your world enlarged through travel this summer – amen and amen. If you have returned home with a deeper understanding of our shared humanity and a commitment to making our community a more welcoming home, amen and amen. If you are enjoying all that the greater Lansing area has to offer this summer, I invite you (and everyone) to include in your Quest, some of the activities of Refugee Awareness Week this week - a fashion show, a talent show, an art exhibit, a book festival, an opportunity to tour a facility providing programs for our newest neighbors. And I invite you to take part in activities related to Pride Month. And mark your calendars for Saturday, August 10, when Meridian Township hosts its Pride Festival. Not only will we be a sponsor for the festival, we will partner with other local churches to host a worship service on Saturday morning. We welcome all to be at home with us. Join me in prayer.

⁶Emily Wilkes. World Refugee Day 2023 - Three Reflections on Scripture. Online at https://pda.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/pda/pdfs/world_refugee_day_2023_scriptural_reflections.pdf