

KISSED BY GOD!

SNC, April 26, 2009, revised from May 2,000, Acts 8,
Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

ACTS 8:26-38

- I am fascinated at the way the gospel of Mark ends- the Easter reading from Mark ends- the women have had this amazing experience of the risen Christ, and they're told to tell the others, but the scripture says that they didn't – they told no one for they were afraid.
- We need to know that they were afraid, because we're also afraid to tell what we know. Clearly they got over their fear. Because word did get out about their experience and others had their own experiences.
- Today our scripture is from the Book of Acts, which tells about the spread of the gospel, the spreading of the good news of the risen Christ, the telling of the tale, the sharing of the knowledge.
- In today's reading, it is Philip who shares with an Ethiopian eunuch.
- This eunuch was a slave. Being in the power of others they could do to him what they chose, and likely as a boy he had been castrated. This would make him safe as a male servant in a female household.
- Particular eunuch had leadership capability- rose to be in charge of the queen's treasury. Tradition has it that it was through this man that the Ethiopian church was founded.
- In that day and age, and to degree still today- meaning and purpose in life was wrapped up in one's offspring, in the number of children who would bear one's name. This man was thus robbed not only of his manhood, but of all meaning and purpose- his name would not continue.
- Clearly drawn to Judaism, but would not have been allowed to enter the temple proper- In Jewish law eunuchs were excluded from the temple (assembly of the Lord) Deut 23: 1 - so even though his work took him to Jerusalem, but he could not have had access to God through temple sacrifice.
- Clearly wealthy- Must have spent much money to purchase his own scroll of Isaiah-, materially secure, but spiritually empty.
- Philip: disciple, had been with Jesus since the beginning. Not of the inner circle. Successful evangelism in Samaria. Obedient to vision of angel that tells him to go to wilderness road. We have a strong sense in this story of the holy Spirit at work.

SERMON

I love spending time with my brother and sister in law, but I have to say it's rather like entering a whirlwind- they're the kind of people who schedule more into each day than most people can handle in a week.

This means that they are always rushing madly, and are continually leaving something of their belongings behind somewhere.

I recall a visit with them here in Toronto- the first day they arrived we gathered as a family for dinner, my brother, my cousins and their children, and Graeme couldn't wait to announce to us, that a miracle had happened that day.

You have to understand that word was strange on his lips. My brother is a dyed in the wool, practicing atheist. What was the miracle?

That morning he had rushed off to the bank to get some cash. He produced his credit cards, but they wanted his passport too. So he literally ran back to the hotel, got his passport, dashed back to the bank, only to discover that he no longer had his credit cards: his wallet was gone.

There he was in a foreign country- totally bereft of all buying power. Not a good feeling. He got on the phone to begin to cancel his cards, Helen meanwhile retraced his steps-between the bank and the hotel, thoroughly examining the ground- nothing.

Perhaps he'd left it in the hotel room. She spent 20 minutes going through every item of luggage. Nothing.

She retraced his steps back again. This was now about half an hour since his mad dashing back and forth. I mean what are the chances of still finding a wallet half an hour later on a downtown Toronto street?

As she's walking, she catches sight out of the corner of her eye a man walking in the opposite direction to her and he's opening and closing a wallet and looking at the cards in it. Very familiar looking brown wallet.

Plucks up her courage, excuse me, did you just pick up that wallet. My husband has just lost his. What's his name says the man? Sure enough it's Graeme's wallet.

Now if Helen had left the hotel a few seconds earlier or a few seconds later she would have missed passing the man at exactly the moment he was opening and closing the wallet.

It's a miracle, my brother said. My cousin, knowing the irony of this word on my brother's lips, said, "Graeme, face it, you've just been kissed by God."

Have you ever been kissed by God? That moment of synchronicity, of perfect timing, when suddenly the universe feels like a friendly place after all, and we feel that we're being looked after?

A woman in our congregation told me this story- and gave me permission to share it with you. She had asked one of the prayer team to pray for her son about to undergo an operation.

The prayer seemed to be answered miraculously in that the operation was no longer deemed necessary; so when this same woman's sister urgently needed a place to live, she went back to the team for prayer.

Now her sister had the day before sent a fax to Mayor Lastman telling him of her plight. The next morning the telephone rang. "Hello", a man's voice said, "it's Mel Lastman here". "Right", she says, "and call me Queeny" "What?" says the voice. "You're Mayor Lastman, and I'm the Queen of England- who is it really?"

"No, this is Mel Lastman- you wrote to me"- and he starts to tell her the details of the letter she wrote.

Well the long and the short of it was that he passed her on to the appropriate authorities and told her that if she didn't get what she needed, she must just call him at city hall. A miracle indeed!

Perhaps he would have answered her personally anyway. But it's the timing, the synchronicity of prayer and result that makes us sense that something more is at work. That God is real, and cares about us.

In today's scripture there is a similar synchronicity of events. I bet when that Ethiopian arrived home he was just bursting to tell his story. It was a miracle he would say.

So many years I'd been searching. So many ancient writings I'd read, so many places I'd traveled to, back and forth, trying to uncover some hope, some meaning for my miserable life, and this time it was Jerusalem.

It was as I expected- I was refused entry to the temple-but I managed to purchase a scroll-- by a Jewish prophet, Isaiah. And on the way home, I'm reading it, and I come to these words, words that leapt out at me, grabbed me..

Words that bring to my mind the cause of all my shame, my ruined life, events I would rather forget; I'm reading

"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 imagine his future?
For he has been cut off from the land of the living.

How could Isaiah have known about me and my shame. Or was he writing about himself or someone he knew?. I had to know who he was writing about..

And at that very moment, at that moment, a head pops up beside my chariot. In the middle of the wilderness, out of nowhere, this Jewish man appears. The queen's treasure, I think, but he appears to be alone, so I remain calm.

Now listen to the question he asks me: He says, Do you understand what you're reading? Do I understand what I'm reading? How can I understand if no one explains it me? No one for miles around, and this man appears and asks if I understand what I'm reading.

Well, I pull the chariot to a halt. And I invite him to join me. He tells me that the one who is spoken of by the prophet is Jesus of Nazareth. That he was humiliated, beaten, crucified that he died and was buried, cut off from all life.

And hear this: that God raised him from the dead to bring hope to all who are cut off from life. Did this Jesus have children, I asked him- does his name continue on this earth.

He shook his head. Jesus never had children, he said, but his family is already greater than any family on this earth.

Everywhere that this story is told, people are being baptized in his name and they are receiving the Holy Spirit, and bearing fruits, not of the flesh, but of the Spirit. They are becoming part of the family of God and every day their words and actions add more people to the family of God," he said.

"Oh, could I be part of that family," I thought. At that very moment an oasis appeared on the horizon. My question tumbled out: Is there anything to prevent me from being baptized? I dreaded the answer...

Words I'd heard so many times before, you-you're not a man, - you know what I mean. I could hardly believe what I heard when he spoke: he said, "Nothing prevents your being baptized. Jesus died to make you whole."

And so I was baptized with water and the Spirit. I am no longer cut off- I've been grafted in to God's family. I have been filled with the Holy Spirit and I can bear fruits of the Spirit!

And it is my joy to invite you to be part of that family too". The rest is history. So began perhaps the Ethiopian church.

We live in wilderness times, when many people are spiritually like that eunuch, cut off from a sense of belonging, guarding our worldly treasures, but inside remaining dry and empty. Desperate for meaning, for purpose, for peace within ourselves.

There's a great need in this world for Christians to come alongside of other people, like Philip did, and to share what they know of new life in Jesus Christ.

People are crying out for the experience of being kissed by God. They sense that there is something more, they are hungry and searching in every direction. The spirit is alive and touching people, the Spirit is out there in the world, alongside of every hurting searching person, and is saying to us, "Come on now, I need some embodiment here"-

God needs us to do the kissing, so to speak. God needs our actions, our words, to let people know they too are part of the family of God.

Many of us are good at showing caring through our actions, through our service. Some of us give our time to serving a community meal, to working with refugee families, or ex offenders. We share our money and our goods with others, and this is truly important.

The holy Spirit uses these actions to prepare the ground for faith and knowledge of God's love.

But human beings are also hungry for meaning- and there may come a point when a person we know wants to know the reason for the hope within us, the reason for our love and caring, and the question is: will we be able to introduce them to knowledge of God in Jesus Christ?

I don't know how many times people like my brother need to be kissed by God before they believe, but I do know that God is out there doing the kissing and God needs someone to speak the words.

When we are there by the engineering of the Holy Spirit, in the right place at the right time, will we be ready and willing to speak?

You see once we've been kissed by God, once we've been claimed as God's family and we know it, we're then part of the family business. And the family business is to share the hope that is within us, to share our knowledge of Jesus Christ, knowledge of his power. Power that sets us free from the judgments of this world and claims every one of us as a child of God.

To God be all the praise and the honour and the glory. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Gracious and loving God,
we thank you for your abundant love and mercy;
we thank you for the times when we have been dry and needy
and you have sent someone to us,
to reassure us of our worth, to offer us new hope and possibility.

We thank you for all the people
who have shared their faith with us,
without whom we would not know you.

Lord Jesus Christ,
you came to bring hope to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted, and to set the prisoner free.
There are some here today who are hungering and thirsting
for new life, that only you can give.
There are some here today
who are bound by darkness and cut off from life,
who are seeking hope and meaning, that only you can give.
There are some here who have been so wounded
that they cannot believe in their own worth,
who are yearning for healing that only you can give

And so we lift them to you now in prayer.
Come Holy Spirit, dispel the darkness and fill each one with your light;
Open our ears to hear your message of truth:

Open each mind and heart and to receive your affirmation that we are indeed of infinite worth in your eyes; each one your precious child, loved beyond all imagining.

We lift to you all people everywhere who are lost in darkness; those who struggle with depression, with despair, with addictions, with eating disorders; those whose lives are overwhelmed with the darkness of war and violence and brutality.

Let us now with all our hearts
invite the light of Christ into every dark place-

and let us name in silence our particular concern.....
any person whom we know to be in need.....

We pray especially pray for:

Come Lord Jesus Christ with all your healing light and power.

Fill us with your Holy Spirit,
plant deep within us the seeds that will bear good fruits-
fruits of patience, of self control, of perseverance, of kindness and gentleness; fruits of
love and peace and joy, that will reach out to others
that they may know your love.

Use us Lord, and grant us wisdom
to know when the time is right to speak of you,
and to know the right words to speak.

In Jesus name, Amen