

Sunday, May 2nd, 2021  
Fifth Sunday of Easter  
Immanuel United Church

Prelude

Welcome

Call to Worship:

To the God of Earth,

**We come as creatures of Earth.**

To the God of the cosmos,

**We come as beings made of stardust.**

To the God of mystery and making,

**We come to the Living One who is our source and home.**

Prayer:

**O Living One — we come, puzzling at your mystery, yet in wonder and awe. Creator God, we wonder at your mighty works.**

**O Living One — we come in quiet breathing. Spirit, we breathe in your gifts with gratitude.**

**O Living One — we come in silent movements. Beloved Christ, we follow you into the quiet space.**

Sacred Silence

Hymn: VU 278 *In the Quiet Curve of Evening*

<https://youtu.be/z1w-lrOU2-Y>

Scripture: Acts 8:26-40

Then an angel of the Living One (Lord) said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was 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 him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now 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.

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 him 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?' He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Living One snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his 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.

The Choir Anthem: MV 48 *I Can Feel You Near Me, God*

(The Singers are Judy Gierys, Connie Kryschuk, George Stevens, Ron and Eileen Metcalfe.)

Reflection: **Why this text? Why now?**

I am sharing this reflection in the hope that the Spirit will inspire us to nurture and grow our faith community as the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip do in today's story from Acts. This reflection is largely based on a collaborative scholarly work on a "queering" of Acts. (The Queer Bible Commentary.) Queering means lots of things: here, one of the practices involves finding LGBTQ and Two Spirit people, their/our identities and journeys in the sacred stories of Hebrew and Christian scriptures. "Queering is the verb form of the word queer and comes from the shortened version of the phrase, queer reading. Queering is a method that can be applied to literature, film, scripture and so on, to look for places where things such as gender, sexuality, masculinity and femininity can be challenged and questioned. ... Even the term queer itself can be queered, because much of queer theory involves working to fight against normalization even in the field itself. In the context of queer theory, "queering is something we do, rather than something we are (or are not)."" (That last quote is from Wikipedia)

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch in the book of Acts tells us the spiritual journey of the first Gentile to become Christian. It is a significant story for queer people of faith because the eunuch is a sexual minority in the context of the Jewish religion during this time.

The reason the eunuch is considered a sexual minority is because Deuteronomy specifically prohibits eunuchs from joining the worshipping community of Israel. In today's story, the eunuch is returning home to Ethiopia after having been to Jerusalem to worship. The eunuch could have been a 'God-fearer': someone who believes in the ethical principles of the Torah and who reveres the God of the Jewish people, but does not follow the law in its entirety, nor submit to circumcision. The eunuch in today's story is a court official of the queen of Ethiopia, a "perfect servant" (Katherine Ringrose), a third gender, (made so by castration). Eunuchs were highly revered and trusted as court officials, serving kings and queens. Eunuchs were considered

'perfect' servants because they had no allegiance to family and could not jeopardize the dynastic lineage with their own offspring.

In today's story, the Spirit tells Philip to travel south, to the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. Philip obeys and encounters the Ethiopian eunuch on this road. Having returned from Jerusalem, the eunuch is riding in his chariot, reading a passage from the prophet Isaiah out loud. Philip overhears him, and at another prompting of the Spirit, he asks the eunuch if he understands what he is reading. The eunuch replies, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?'

The passage is from one of the Servant Songs in Isaiah, in which the servant is humiliated and denied justice. The perfect servant, who is revered in his own land of Ethiopia but cut off from the worshipping community of Israel/other places, is seeking to understand the identity of Isaiah's suffering servant of Israel.

'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.'

Have you ever had a dream inside a dream? The experience of the Eunuch may be like this: You are dreaming, and inside the dream, you are dreaming another dream. Double dreams. The Ethiopian eunuch in today's story, the 'perfect servant', is reading out loud the servant songs in Isaiah and seeking to understand who the suffering servant, whom Isaiah talks about, is; perhaps finding the inner connection between his own story as a servant and the suffering servant in the book.

When we prayerfully and faithfully put ourselves before the Word of God, or the Bible, and seek understanding, we can ask: **Why this text? Why now?**

I believe the Ethiopian Eunuch is doing this. Seeking to ponder, Why this text? Why now? With me, and in front of me?

Some queer people of faith read this story as our own. Queer people of faith have been kept from full participation in the church or religious communities because of what is perceived as our outsider sexual status. Queer people of faith are denied ordination, communion, joining worship, and rejected from even simply and humbly sharing a community meal with others at the table. Mona West says, "Like the Ethiopian eunuch, we have struggled to make sense of scripture, to find our place in it, when others would use it to condemn us. The good news is that there have been those 'Philips' who have interpreted scripture in ways that have been empowering for the queer community." Philip, to some, like Father John McNeill, is the patron saint of the queer community and the Ethiopian eunuch is considered the first baptized gay Christian. And the eunuch "rides on into history 'full of joy'". I have heard my colleague, Cindy

Bourgeois, currently the co-chair of Affirm United in the United Church of Canada, say that she finds her transgender spiritual ancestor in the existence of the eunuch's journey recorded in Acts.

When we prayerfully and faithfully put ourselves before the Word of God, or the Bible, and seek understanding, I invite you to ask: **Why this text? Why now?**

The prayer gathering to commemorate Yukoodang was held on April 22nd and Korean Rainbow United participated with two videos - - One with the "We Are A Rainbow" song and the other with the Prayers from Michael Blair (General Secretary of The United Church of Canada), Cindy Bourgeois and myself. I read the other participants' prayers written in the bulletin before the prayer gathering was livestreamed on YouTube, but the prayers spoken from the heart and vocalized from the lips of those who offered them were profoundly emotional - a deeper experience compared to just reading them. In this global time and space, we really need to stop the Christian Right from spreading their hatred and bigotry to all corners of the world. There is a narrow-minded bigotry that results in verbal, physical, and spiritual violence, driving sexual minority members to their death and to the knife-sharp edges of society by condemning, discriminating and excluding them habitually and structurally. This discrimination, done in God's name, undermines God's love and righteousness.

I hope the following video, with the prayers, (<https://youtu.be/m-ixakuMRMI>) can inspire in us the sense of sitting with one another in the rainbow chariot and riding on into history 'full of joy' like the Ethiopian Eunuch and Philip. The Pentecostal Holy Spirit moves us to tear down the veil of death and discrimination and to backstitch a splendid and strong rainbow in the places of hurt. The English root of God is the verb "call." God calls us to the full joy of missional solidarity, with all who have their healing needs and needles.

The English translation of my prayer is here too:

Quilter God, you put your heart into every stitch when you make your patchwork rainbow. Hear the prayers we've put our souls into, as our words rain down like flower petals.

We pray that over the clouds that rain down discrimination and oppression based on the binary of black and white, let us see more rainbow bridges of solidarity that connect Canada and Korea, the West and the East, the North and the South. Help us to proclaim our interconnection through the splendid and strong rainbow backstitches, we pray in the name of Queer Christ.

Queer God,  
Queer People's God,  
particularly, we remember sexual minority Christians, LGBTQ+ theological students, Rainbow and ally ministers in Korea. The rainbow covenant you make with your people – your children's life-long calling, its process and ordination – must be protected and preserved against the exterior forces, hatred and discrimination based on identity.

God who mends every stitch of your love patchwork when it is broken, Connect us. Even if the paradise Yukoodang dreamt may never be perfect anywhere in reality, connect us to find each other, hand in hand, with our eyes locked on one another's, and cry "Love knows no defeat!" "You can do it!" "This struggle will bear the fruit of justice in the end." Crossing over the boundaries of nations and denominations and the wall of apathy. Quilter God, hear our prayers, the raindrops falling like flower petals onto the soul-hungry world below.

Hymn: MV 121 ***Hey Now, Singing Hallelujah***

<https://youtu.be/iVydEwOb5DY>

Communion

Friends, Jesus invites us to share in this joyful feast!

**People will come from east and west,  
from north and south,  
and take their places at the banquet  
in the family of God.**

The Holy One is here.

**God's Spirit is with us.**

Lift up your hearts.

**We lift them to the Living One.**

Let us give thanks to God.

**It is right to offer thanks and praise.**

It is indeed good and right

to give you thanks and praise,

O God of many names.

You made a covenant with Noah

and caused nations, in their amazing diversity,

to spread over the face of the earth.

As of old you led your people

out of enslavement to promise,

so, too, you lead us

into new possibilities —

right relationships through intercultural covenant

— there to find you anew.

In the fullness of time, you sent Jesus,

in every aspect human as we are.

He grew up in a small town in Galilee,

far from the seat of religious and civil power.

He spoke with a distinct accent.

He learned of the breadth of your grace  
from a Gentile mother.  
Beside Jacob's well,  
he was moved by an encounter with a minority woman  
and disclosed his identity as the Living One.  
Therefore, with these and our other ancestors in the faith,  
both named and unnamed,  
who through the ages and all over the world  
have borne courageous witness to the hope within them,  
we praise you, singing:

**Holy, holy, holy God,  
Power of life and love!  
Heaven and earth are full of your glory!  
Hosanna through the ages!  
Blest is the One who comes  
to bring your justice to earth!**

On the last night he spent with his friends,  
Jesus took an age-old tradition of his people  
and transformed it into something new.  
He took bread, staple food of his land,  
blessed and broke it, and gave it to those around him saying,  
**"Take, eat, this is my body, broken for you.  
Whenever you do this, remember me."**  
After supper he took a cup of wine, common drink of his people,  
and gave it to them, saying,  
**"Drink this, all of you, this is the new covenant in my blood.  
Each time you do this, remember me."**  
By remembering Jesus in this way now,  
we claim our common heritage  
as we proclaim the mystery of faith:

**We remember Jesus' integrity unto death.  
We proclaim the Easter hope of resurrection.  
We await the full revelation of love incarnate.**

Send, O covenant God, your Holy Spirit  
upon us and what we do here,  
that we and these gifts, empowered by your Breath,  
may become signs of shalom  
to one another and to all peoples of the earth.

At this time, we also remember all those  
with whom you would have us share your feast.  
We pray for all who are in sorrow or in pain . . .  
all who are ill or alone . . .  
all who live with fear, oppression, or hunger . . .  
all whom the world counts as last and least . . . .  
for the nations as they strive for peace and justice . . .  
for the earth, and the fragile web of life we share . . .  
for our families and friends . . . .

**Blessed be the Ancient of Days!**

**Blessed be the Beloved!**

**Blessed be the Spirit!**

And so this is our prayer. So be it! Amen!

**Amen!**

We gather these and all our prayers,  
thankful that we may turn to you  
as to our Mother who loves us, as:

**Our Father, who art in heaven . . .**

The bread of tomorrow.

**The cup of new life.**

The gifts of God for the people of God.

Communion chant: VU 466 ***Eat This Bread, Drink this Cup***

Prayer After Communion:

**We give thanks that bread broken brings wholeness;  
that wine poured out replenishes;  
that time spent with the Risen Christ and one another  
is gift and grace.  
Amen.**

Intergenerational Theological Reflection Project

Ann Naylor

Hymn: VU 703 ***In the Bulb There is a Flower***