

## **“Rivers”**

**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

**Acts 8:26-40**

You can always pick out John the Baptist from a lineup of saints.

Among the dour, robed patriarchs, he’s the one with wild eyes and tangled hair, ribs protruding through sun-browned skin, hands cradling a cross-shaped staff or a scroll that reads, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”. Basically, he’s the guy you’d avoid bumping into in the Walmart parking lot.

The miracle child of Elizabeth and Zechariah, John likely watched his father perform ritual cleansings as a temple priest in first-century Jerusalem. Levitical law required Jews to cleanse themselves from impurities contracted through things like menstruation, skin disease, or contact with corpses, and many Jews made pilgrimages to the temple to be immersed in water in preparation for festivals and holy days. Friends and family probably expected John to follow in his father's footsteps and become a temple priest, But John didn’t stay at the temple. John left the city for the countryside and abandoned the ceremonial bathing pools for free-flowing rivers.

Subsisting on locusts and honey and calling people to a single, dramatic baptism to symbolize a reoriented heart, John embodied the prophet Isaiah’s imagery of a voice crying in the wilderness; declaring God was on the move and everything was about to change. John knew this God-movement would not be confined to the temple, but that "every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth and all-flesh shall see the salvation of God." (Luke -3:5-6 NRSV)..

“Prepare the way of the Lord," he told the people, “make his paths straight.”

(Mark1:NRSV)

The people didn't have to go to God anymore; God was coming to the people. And God, in God's relentless love, would allow no mountain or hill – no ideology or ritual or requirement or law – to obstruct the way. Temples could not contain a God who flattens mountains, or ceremonial baths a God who flows through rivers. Repentance, then, meant reorienting one's life around this reality. It meant repenting of the old ways of obstruction and joining in the great paving of the path, in the demolishing of every man-made impediment between God and God's people, and in the celebrating of God's wild, uninhibited presence filling every corner of the earth. It meant getting baptized in rivers and getting out of God's way. After all, with enough faith, a person can move a mountain . . . even a mountain of her own making.

“The kingdom isn't *up there*; it's *right here*,” John said. “Repent, for the kingdom is at hand. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.”

I wonder if these words ran through Philip's mind when he baptized one of the first gentile converts to Christianity: an Ethiopian eunuch.

As the story goes, after Jesus had risen from the dead and instructed his disciples to go and practice resurrection in the world, the evangelist Philip was sent by the Holy Spirit to the “wilderness road” from Jerusalem to Gaza. There Philip encountered a royal eunuch from the distant land of Ethiopia who was reading Hebrew Scripture from the back of his chariot (Acts 8:26-40).

As a eunuch, this man would have been strictly prohibited from even entering temple grounds, much less participating in its rituals (Leviticus 21:20; Deuteronomy 23:1).

He was a sexual and ethnic minority, and as such would have been totally excluded from the religious community in Jerusalem, even if he believed in Israel's God. Had he approached the temple for baptism, he would have been turned away.

Yet this religious outcast, this man who was thought to be in a state of perpetual uncleanness, had gotten his hands on a sacred scroll and found a passage from the prophet Isaiah that resonated profoundly with his own experience:

*He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,*

*And as a lamb before its shearer is silent,*

*So, he did not open his mouth.*

*In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.*

*Who can speak of his descendants?*

*For his life was taken from the earth. (Acts 8:32-33)*

When Philip heard the eunuch reading these words aloud, he approached the chariot and asked if the eunuch understood them.

“How can I unless someone guides me?” the eunuch replied.

Philip climbed into the chariot, and as it rumbled through the wilderness, told the eunuch about Jesus – about how when God became one of us, God suffered too.

Overcome, the eunuch looked out at the rugged landscape that surrounded them and shouted, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

We don't know how long that question, brimming with such childlike joy it wrenches the heart, hung vulnerable as a drop of water in the desert air.

At another time in his life, Philip might have pointed to the eunuch's ethnicity, or his anatomy, or his inability to gain access to the ceremonial baths that made a person clean. But instead, with no additional conversation between the travelers, the chariot lumbered to a halt and Philip baptized the eunuch in the first body of water the two could find. It might have been a river, or it might have been a puddle in the road.

Philip got out of God's way. He remembered that what makes the gospel offensive isn't who it keeps out, but who it lets in. Nothing could prevent the eunuch from being baptized, for the mountains of obstruction had been plowed down, the rocky hills had been made smooth, and God had cleared a path. There was holy water everywhere.

Two thousand years later, John's call remains a wilderness call, a cry from the margins. Because we religious types are really good at building walls and retreating to temples. We're good at making mountains out of our ideologies, obstructions out of our theologies, and hills out of our screwed-up notions of who's in and who's out, who's worthy and who's unworthy. We're good at getting in the way. Perhaps we're afraid that if we move, God might use people and methods we don't approve of, that rules will be broken, and theologies questioned. Perhaps we're afraid that if we get out of the way, this grace thing might get out of hand.

Well, guess what? It already has.

Grace got out of hand the moment the God of the universe hung on a Roman cross and with outstretched hands looked out upon those who had hung him there and declared, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Grace gets out of hand when instead of building walls and retreating to our church buildings, we tear down walls and go out to be with people. Grace gets out of hand when a Stephen minister visits an elderly person who no longer drives and rarely leaves her apartment.

Grace gets out of hand when an Afghan woman who has only used a sewing machine without electricity, sits next to JoAnn Worsencroft with a huge smile as JoAnn teaches her how to use an electric sewing machine donated by one of our members. It's amazing grace when Danette sits on the floor surrounded by Afghan girls eagerly trying on new shoes bought at Target with money donated by our members.

Grace gets out of hand when the Christmas presents pile up in our narthex for Redeemer Crisis Center children and Parma Park school families.

Grace gets out of hand when a young mother shows up outside my office on a Tuesday morning and I'm able to gift her with a bag of food from our Divinity food pantry and a \$25 gift card purchased by your contributions to our Hunger Fund.

Grace has been out of hand for more than two thousand years now. We best get used to it.

And so the call persists: *Repent. Reorient. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make clear the path.* God's tumbling through the world like white water on rock. There's nothing left but to surrender.

May the peace of God . . .

#455 – Crashing Waters at Creation