

The encounter of Philip and the Ethiopian is a story with a “happy ending.” But beyond our first glance at it we discover not a few periods of drought and thirst. Lonely ways through the desert simply cannot be avoided by anyone.

Questioning and pleading is part of it...

a closed future and life denied...

riches and poverty in all their varieties...

longing and desire and a sense of being excluded...

And yet:

Searching for something and being found...

being wounded and being healed...

being broken and damaged, and then being made whole again in the waters of Baptism.

being disappointed and yet, finally, being able to go happily on one’s own way.

Much of this is hidden — as in our own lives, as well — hidden behind a name or some little word.

And it begins already in the scene: we are on a road that is wilderness! — a desert road!

This is more than just a location on a map; it is a hidden story of a whole nation and of their experience of the presence of God.

Forty years long the people of Israel had to journey through the wilderness before they arrived in their own country. Without the wilderness they would never have encountered God on Mount Sinai. Without the wilderness there would never have been an Elijah becoming refreshed again for a new beginning; without forty days in the wilderness there would have been no certainty for Jesus that he was, indeed, God’s son.

And so it may also be for us: without a wilderness experience, we would not have matured, become an adult, made progress in life.

A road which is wilderness: a place of loneliness, of deep tribulation and temptation, and at the same time in the Bible always a place for experiencing God — a place of silence and of listening, and of an encounter with an angel.

Wilderness — a place defined to give a title in code for what is coming and for the one who is coming.

And here is someone on his way home, an African, a Black man. Someone who has risen to be minister of the treasury of the Queen.

But this person also has a fate.

How often it is that people who seem bigger than life and unassailable carry other, hidden wounds within them.

The text does not keep it a secret. The Ethiopian is a eunuch, castrated. In Biblical terms, he is “one cut off.” He has reached the heights of power at the peak of life, but has been robbed of his ability to sire children, to create new life.

How it must have sapped his strength to bear such a fate. Has he become cynical?

How does our own fate change and affect us today?

In a little poem we read

we bear our wounds on the inside
shot at — all of us
in the midst of peace
in the middle of our hearts
the pain

thanks, i'm just fine
we live out our days
with open wounds
encounter one another
with open wounds

laughing and loving
with open wounds
thanks, i'm just fine
we carry our wounds on the inside
for fear of the truth

(angelika möller)

The Ethiopian breaks out of the tension of his life. He moves out on a new path.

There has to be something, which can heal my inner wounds, reconcile me with my fate — something to bring the wilderness within me to flower again.

He heads for Jerusalem — and is on his way home again in no time. What has happened in the meantime is easy enough to guess, even though our text tells us nothing about it. “No one deprived of his manhood will be allowed in the congregation of the Lord.” That’s the law! (Deuteronomy 23:1)

Arrived at his destination, he is met with disappointment: as a eunuch, he cannot enter the Temple. All he could get his hands on was a Greek translation of the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah — but it proves to be a book with seven seals; he cannot understand a thing.

I have to admire him. If he’d been a modern man or woman, he would have laid aside the scroll after his first unsuccessful efforts to read a few lines and grabbed the photo magazine from the fast food restaurant, which doesn’t require any effort to read.

Who takes the effort to work through a text, slowly figuring out what it means, to write its letters into the context of his own life? Who is still acquainted with the long path, which is necessary to approach a text and arrive at results?

But this eunuch wants to know, wants to learn, wants to live — reading and reading again, spelling out loud each letter he doesn’t understand — until suddenly there is this unexpected, dusty companion running alongside his chariot, who listens to him and finds exactly the right entry into his thoughts.

Philip — thank God no ordinary modern mortal.

He would have probably first asked back, “At noon there’s not going to be anyone on the road anyway; why should I be there?”

Just like us, as we often ask,

“Why do I have to work in this office, when it is so boring, with these people, who bore me to death?”

“Why do I have to live under the conditions in which I live, which don’t fit me any better than the noonday heat suited Philip in the wilderness?”

Philip gets up, goes out and becomes an angel to the stranger in the desert.

How does one person become an angel for another?

The Ethiopian asks and Philip is there, at his service.

Philip goes out in the noonday heat, sweating, running alongside, inviting questions, listening. He opens his mouth, speaking, telling, witnessing, explaining the scripture. He does not point out church rules that would require a profession of faith before a Baptism; he overcomes whatever barriers stood between him and this stranger, shows no fear of a person of another race, is attentive and open. He is able to share both the journey and the questions of another, as one who shares a conversation in a waiting room, or that long, oft repeated, oft repetitive, telephone call, the evening walk, or the confused letter ... he is able to tell, all the while, what Christ means to him.

And in the end, both of them climb into the water and the distinctions of nation and rank disappear; they stand together as equals before God.

The dark-skinned stranger and his angel.

And I, the estranged light-skinned man, whose angel may be dark. There is so much movement and change all because someone asked,

“Do you understand what you are reading?”

Literally it reads: “Do you recognize what you recognize in the letters?”

“How can you expect me to be able to do that?” the eunuch answered in his best school Greek — and we notice: Whether I understand something that touches my life has nothing to do with my intelligence — with my head — but it is a matter of the center of my being.

The stranger reads a short passage from Isaiah, reads a text about suffering, and reads his very own life story.

He reads about being humiliated, and finds his own humiliation, because he cannot pass on life to another.

He reads the question “his descendants — who will tell?” and senses his own pain that he won’t have any descendants either. He reads and reads the scripture and reads himself ... and then he pleads with Philip, “Who is that? Who are they talking about? How am I supposed to understand this scripture which is giving voice to my own wounds?”

And Philip takes this word as the point of connection which the eunuch has provided, and becomes his profound counsellor and brings the story of this man’s life and suffering together with the story of Christ’s own suffering. Thus he is for him and for us God’s witness:

“In your humiliation you are neither lost nor alone. Christ became like you. God is beside you, accepting you — you in all your devastation, in all your loneliness — accepting you into his fellowship and bringing to flower the desert within you!”

And I picture for myself the way Philip takes the scroll out of the Ethiopian’s hand, rolls it forward and reads out of chapter 56(v. 3-5): “Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, ‘The LORD will surely separate me from his people’; and do not let the eunuch say, ‘I am just a dry tree.’ For thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”

[Isaiah 56:3-5, NRSV]. And Philip rolls the scroll again and reads (from chapter 41:18b): “I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.” [Isaiah 41:18b, NRSV.]

And that which has now become the water of life to the eunuch suddenly becomes visible alongside the road: “Look! There’s water! What is to keep me from being baptised?”

He gets out and lets Philip baptise him.

And in the desert there is water. It begins to blossom and bloom. And in the eunuch life is bubbling and flowing with happiness. He goes on his way, a new person! In this deserted place, in this dried up life — a new man!

Could it happen again?

Yes, it could happen again. But we cannot make it happen.

The sticking points of this encounter tell us that:

The angel of God begins the story; the angel sends Philip, the Spirit of God directs him to the chariot on the lonesome road, and when water suddenly appears, it is, after all, the Spirit of God ending the story.

It isn't Philip who converts the Ethiopian, he does not undertake anything on his own or draft a plan of action that leads to success, and it is not we who make another person whole and new.

That a person can become new again, that in the desert of another's life streams can break forth and it can begin to bloom again — that lies beyond our control, and this fact protects us from spiritual arrogance and relieves us of the final responsibility for the life and the faith of another.

That is left up to the action of God.

But what is left to us is the Ethiopian and Philip: reading and hearing, being ready and going forth, even into the desert, sweating without giving in to the easy way, asking and answering and remaining attentive, listening to the stranger from a strange culture, understanding the stranger's questions and recognizing them as questions, and then, at the right moment, telling, not failing to offer our message of God's fellowship with us humans. That's left up to us.

And if the water of life begins to bubble up in the desert of our own life and the life of another human being, then we can happily go our way.

Amen