

"The Shared World"
Sermon by the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson
Acts 8:26-40
April 28, 2024 — Fifth Sunday of Easter

*Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal,
after learning my flight had been delayed four hours,
I heard an announcement ...¹*

So begins a poem called "Gate A-4" by Naomi Shihab Nye. In it the Palestinian-American poet tells a tale of a surprising encounter in a surprising place.

*Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal,
after learning my flight had been delayed four hours,
I heard an announcement:
 "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic,
 please come to the gate immediately."*

*Well—one pauses these days, she continues.
Gate A-4 was my own gate. I went there.
An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress,
 just like my grandma wore,
was crumpled to the floor, wailing.*

*"Help," said the flight agent. "Talk to her. What is her problem?
We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this."*

One pauses these days, the poet writes. And her words ring true. We pause, often, because we do not know what an encounter will bring. Especially when an encounter brings us face to face with someone we see as Other, with a capital O. We pause because the world has taught us to be wary of difference, even when the capital O-Other is a person not so different from ourselves. *Best not to get involved*, whispers the little voice in the back of our heads. *You never know where it will lead. Yes, best not get involved.*

One pauses these days, the poet writes. And though her words are specific to a particular time, a particular place, I dare say they would have rung true in other times, other places.

¹ Naomi Shihab Nye, "Gate A-4," poets.org.

Because wariness in the face of the Other is not a new response. The world has long had a way of separating us, and of seeding suspicion rooted in that separation.

So it's not hard to imagine a different story rooted in fear and suspicion unfolding on the wilderness road between Jerusalem and Gaza. It's especially easy to imagine because we know some of the stories that have played out along that road — a road that has borne witness to so much tumultuous and tragic history. And, nightly, we see reports of more of the same.

Yet, even apart from a history of harm, it is easy to imagine a very different story unfolding on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza. Because human wariness in the face of the Other is an age-old response, reflected even in the pages of Scripture. As old, even, as the stories of our *first* ancestors of the faith.

When the angel of the Lord drops Philip on that wilderness road, he stumbles upon an Ethiopian eunuch. The man — a court official of the queen — is traveling home, reading aloud from the prophet Isaiah as his chariot churns toward Ethiopia. *Go over to this chariot and join it*, the Spirit whispers.

Like a voice echoing across the public address system in an airport, the Spirit calls Philip to a surprising encounter in a surprising place. And its nudge prompts a moment of decision. Philip does not miss a beat before he runs up to the chariot. But what would have happened had Philip paused?

What would have happened had he taken time to consider the stranger sitting in that chariot? Maybe, in a moment of discernment, Philip would have recalled that ancient verse written in the Law of Moses that prevents eunuchs from participating in the assembly of the Lord (Deut 23:1). Perhaps Philip would have concluded that the man in the chariot had been “cut off” from the covenant community, so what good would it do to invite him into the community of Christ? Maybe, in the space between the Spirit’s call and the disciple’s response, Philip would have considered the great distance between the city where a fledgling church had formed and the city where this eunuch served in the queen’s court. In the first century, many people thought of “Ethiopians as people who lived on the fringes of the inhabited world.”² Perhaps, Philip would have wondered if it was really worth the effort to pursue this man from the margins.

What would have happened had Philip paused? Perhaps a moment of hesitation would have opened the door to fear; maybe suspicion of someone so very different would have crept in.

² Matt Skinner, “Commentary on Acts 8:26-40,” workingpreacher.org.

It's possible the little voice in the back of Philip's head would have drowned out the whisper of the Spirit: *Best not to get involved*, it would say. And he might have simply turned away and left the scene.

Yes, it is easy to imagine a very different story unfolding on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza. But, had this surprising encounter in a surprising place ended in a less surprising way, it wouldn't have been good news.

And it *is* good news. Thanks be to God, it is good news for us and for all the world.

Philip does not pause. Instead, in an act of great faith and faithfulness, he heeds the Spirit's call and runs up to the speeding chariot. And, with equal faith and faithfulness, the Ethiopian invites this stranger to sit down beside him. At the eunuch's request, Philip opens the Scriptures to this student, just as the Risen Christ had opened the Scriptures to disciples traveling along the Emmaus road. We don't know exactly what Philip says; the author of Acts saw no point in recording his sermon. But it seems he tells the story: How Jesus was like a sheep led to the slaughter, much like the suffering servant of whom Isaiah speaks. How he died and was buried. How God raised Jesus from the grave — swallowing up death forever — just as Isaiah prophesied. How, in the waters of baptism, God promises to raise us to new life, as well.

And, then — as if orchestrated by the Spirit — apostle and student experience another surprising encounter in a surprising place. Philip and the eunuch stumble upon water in the wilderness — an oasis of grace for pilgrims on a desert road.

What is to prevent me from being baptized?, the eunuch wonders.

Had Philip paused, he may have been able to come up with a whole list of reasons why the Ethiopian eunuch should not be baptized. Later generations of Christians certainly could have supplied him with a few. But the answer this story offers — the answer the Gospel offers — is this: *"Absolutely nothing." There is nothing to prevent you from being baptized. There is nothing to prevent you from accepting this grace for yourself. There is nothing to prevent you from claiming your place in the great congregation, in the family of God.*

So, there — on the road that runs between Jerusalem and Gaza — Philip and the Ethiopian go down to the water. One man who'd been set apart as a servant of the Lord baptizes a eunuch who'd, simply, been set apart — marked as Other and cut off from community. And, by the power of the Spirit, the waters of baptism wash away any and every barrier to fellowship, and the two emerge as full siblings in Jesus Christ.

What is to prevent me from being baptized?, the Ethiopian eunuch wonders. And the answer is: Nothing. Nothing at all. Because nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. The good news is for *all* people, regardless of any label we humans would seek to impose, regardless of any barrier we humans would want to build.

After the Ethiopian eunuch rises from the water, he goes on his way, rejoicing. Acts tells us nothing more about his journey home. But we can imagine the excitement of the newly-baptized as he relates to others what happened on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza. I think we can assume he helps to carry the good news to the ends of the earth. And, through his story, the good news also comes to us — to those who are in the Easter faith baptized.

And this is the gospel news that passes to us, across the ages: God's grace is for us, regardless of any identifier that might set us apart, that might mark us as different. This is the inheritance of baptism: that we belong to God and one another. That we are siblings in Christ, united forever by love and grace. But that's not all. As this story teaches us, that belonging extends to others, too. God's grace embraces others, too, regardless of any label we humans would seek to impose, regardless of any barrier we humans would build.

It is a radical claim in a world that warns us to be wary of the Other. In a world that draws lines between ourselves and others, rather than drawing the welcome circle wider. And, still, the Spirit calls to the baptized. The Spirit nudges us toward surprising encounters, urging us to set aside fear and doubt, to tell the story of God's boundless love and gracious welcome.

In her poem, Naomi Shihab Nye goes on to describe what happened when she answered the flight agent's call and found an older Palestinian woman crumpled on the floor. Naomi put her arm around the woman and spoke to her in halting Arabic. The moment she heard familiar words, however poorly used, the woman stopped wailing. She thought the flight had been cancelled altogether, and she needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatments. Naomi assured her the flight would take off, just later.

Then, to pass the time, the pair started making phone calls. Naomi called the woman's sons to let them know she'd be late. Then Naomi called her dad, and let the woman speak to him in Arabic. Turns out they had ten mutual friends. By now, the older woman was laughing a lot.

Naomi continues her story:

*She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies—
little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—
from her bag—*

*and was offering them to all the women at the gate.
To my amazement, not a single woman declined one.
It was like a sacrament.
The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo—
we were all covered with the same powdered sugar.
And smiling.
There is no better cookie.*

*And then the airline broke out free apple juice from huge coolers
and two little girls from our flight ran around serving it
and they were covered with powdered sugar, too.
(And I noticed my new best friend—
by now we were holding hands—
had a potted plant poking out of her bag,
some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves.
Such an old country tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.)*

*And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and I thought,
This is the world I want to live in. The shared world.
Not a single person in that gate—
once the crying of confusion stopped—
seemed apprehensive about any other person.
They took the cookies.
I wanted to hug all those other women, too.
This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.*

This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Friends, this is the world we are called to live in. As those who have been raised to new life with Christ, we are called to create the shared world, through words of love and deeds of grace. After all, this is the inheritance of baptism: that we belong to God and one another. Even now, the Spirit nudges us toward surprising encounters, urging us to set aside fear and doubt, to tell the story of God's boundless love and gracious welcome. So, with great faith and faithfulness, let us draw the welcome circle wider. Let us follow the Spirit into the shared world.