

# Where Might the Spirit Send Us?

Acts 8:36



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Swarthmore Presbyterian Church  
April 29, 2018

I returned this week from a trip to Israel. It was a trip to which I had been looking forward, and as it approached, I realized why my anticipation of this trip felt different than the way I have anticipated other trips. Unlike the times I have travelled to France or Italy, this was my first time traveling to a country that has been held in my prayers for so many years, prayers for a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

I travelled to Israel with a group consisting of twelve Jewish rabbis and twelve Christian pastors. We were run ragged by a rigorous itinerary of sites to see, speakers to hear, and serious perspectives to engage. We heard the different perspectives of Palestinians living in East Jerusalem, Nazareth and Bethlehem in the West Bank, Jerusalem proper, and at the border of Jewish settlements. We spoke with the owner of an Arab bookstore, trying to create a cultural space in an otherwise deteriorated society. We spoke with the Academic Dean of a Christian seminary that has the mission of training students to become peacemakers. We met with Lutheran liberation theologian and pastor of the Lutheran Church in Bethlehem and with the Minister of Technology for the Palestinian Authority, and with many young adults engaged in building people-to-people relationships between Palestinians and Jewish Israelis. We heard the wide-ranging perspectives of Jewish poets, journalists, human rights activists, the retired colonel responsible for designing and implementing the separation barrier between Israel and the West Bank, an Israeli executive of a high-tech company employing Palestinians living in Ramallah, and a Jewish teacher doing peace work with Palestinians in Gush Etzion, the bloody border between Palestinian villages and Jewish settlements. Saturated as we were with the narratives of all these persons, we nevertheless spent every moment on the bus, at meals, or on the way to the restroom processing with one another, asking questions, and wrestling aloud with the values competing within each person's heart and mind.

Interfaith in nature, the trip was designed to disorient us. The trip's co-directors, both of them religious scholars, one Jewish and the other Christian, and both of them life-long veterans in Jewish-Christian dialogue, told us from the outset that they intended to make us uncomfortable by exposing us to the multiplicity of narratives and approaches to peace. None of us would or could have planned for ourselves a trip quite so disorienting. For the rabbis, nearly all of whom had lived, at some time or another, in Jerusalem and who continued regular visits to Israel, the experience was disorienting, because on this trip, they were encountering even the sites and narratives already familiar to them for the first time through the strange eyes of their Christian clergy travel companions. For the pastors, like me, nearly all of whom had never been to Israel until now, we expected to be disoriented to some degree. We expected to be outsiders, even though we were going to the birthplace of Christianity. It soon became apparent, however, that, though we were seeing and hearing the same things, we were interpreting and approaching them sometimes through very different lenses. Not only did we see things through the lenses of our different personal and collective histories, but as religious clergy, we also saw things significantly through our different religious traditions. It soon became apparent that we could not make any assumptions about what we shared in common. So, we acted both as students and teachers to one another, vulnerably asking our questions that might be perceived as naïve and gently receiving questions without judgment. We wanted truly to understand what we hadn't understood before, to make sense of what hadn't made sense before. And over the course of nine intense days together, an incredible thing happened; we built trust.

Trust is, I think, a fruit of the Spirit, a fruit born when we go where the Spirit sends us to engage in conversation with people we might otherwise not likely engage, when we sit with them, ask and receive questions, when we risk sharing with them what matters most to us.

This is what we find in the story about Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. In this story from the book of *Acts*, it doesn't take nine days of intentional, careful interaction to build trust. The Spirit is so fully in charge that the building of trust seems to be fast-tracked. Trusting the Spirit fully, Philip does immediately, without question, what the Spirit directs. When the Spirit sends Philip south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, he gets up and goes. When the Spirit directs him to go over to a stranger's chariot and to engage in conversation with him, Philip immediately does so. The Spirit seems to be a guiding force as much for the Ethiopian eunuch as for Philip. So open is the eunuch to Philip's question: "Do you understand what you are reading?" that he immediately invites Philip to sit with him in the chariot and to explain to him the meaning of the passage of scripture he has been reading. So open is the eunuch that he admits to Philip, a stranger, that he needs help to understand the scriptures. The eunuch proceeds to ask further questions, vulnerably exposing his deep desire to understand what the prophet Isaiah proclaims.

To understand the eunuch's vulnerability, it is helpful to note a few things about him. The eunuch is not a Gentile, but he is not a full-fledged Jew either. He is an outsider wanting to be an insider. From the story we know that he has a strong affinity for Judaism. We know that he is returning from Jerusalem where he wanted to worship in the Temple. We know too that, as a castrated male, he could not have been circumcised, and therefore he would not have been allowed to worship in the Temple; the ritual purity laws of Judaism would have prohibited him from doing so. We know that he had even acquired a precious copy of the scriptures and was reading from it. And we know that he was not reading Deuteronomy or Leviticus. He was reading the book of Isaiah, who prophesies of a time when eunuchs and other marginalized persons - captives, the poor, the sick, the lame, and the outcast - would be welcome in the house of God and would receive "a name better than sons and daughters" (Isaiah 56:4-5). His only hope for relating to the God of the Israelites would have been stirred by such passages that spoke of one who understood the humiliation of being shorn. Rejected from the assembly and ruled out by Jewish law, the eunuch must have been confounded by what he found in *Isaiah*. He must have wondered, "Am I in, or am I out?" With so much at stake, the eunuch nevertheless opened himself up to a stranger.

The passage that Philip hears the eunuch reading aloud (Isaiah 53:7-8) must have been well-known to the earliest Jewish Christians. Clearly Philip knew it well enough to interpret it with confidence. It was likely a passage that he and other early Christians drew on to help them make sense of what had happened to Jesus, to make sense of Jesus' humiliation and suffering. So, when the eunuch asks, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or someone else?" Philip is immediately able to teach him about Jesus. And in turn, we can imagine, this news helped the eunuch to make sense not only of Jesus' humiliation and suffering, but also of his own. The next thing we know is that the eunuch is able to replace the question of "Am I in, or am I out?" with "What is to prevent me from being baptized right here, right now?"

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. On the spot, by water and the Spirit, he is baptized.

The story about the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch was told by Luke as a precursor to the conversions and baptisms of Gentiles. The mission to the Gentiles begins in chapter 10, and here in chapter 8 we have Philip, an evangelist appointed by the twelve apostles to make, at the Spirit's urging, a push in that missional direction. The story of the Ethiopian eunuch's baptism is a very personal story within the larger story of how the gospel spread to unlikely places and made its home in the hearts of unlikely people. In ancient times, Ethiopia was considered the edge of the world. It was regarded as one of "the corners of the earth" in the book of *Isaiah*. Who would have thought possible that here, by this Ethiopian eunuch, the good news would be taken to this particular end of the earth?

As disorienting as Jesus' missional direction and the Spirit's sending must have initially been for those who had felt at home in Jerusalem and Judea, eventually this sending out from the Pentecostal epicenter of Jerusalem, beyond Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth has oriented the church in the world. Each new trusting relationship, born of the Spirit, has the potential to reorient the world. I truly believe this.

Not every trusting relationship is born of the Spirit. Some are tribal. If we look carefully at the Spirit's activity in the story of Philip and the eunuch, at the Spirit's activity in growing the early church, we see that the Spirit sends us beyond our comfort zones to be in relationship with those who haven't been included or

haven't been treated as part of the human family, with those whom we once considered foreigners and enemies. The Spirit sends us across boundaries, across separation barriers. I pray today that the Spirit be present in the new relationship being formed between South and North Korean leaders Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un, and I pray for the people-to-people efforts to build up a shared society among Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. Only where there is some relationship can trust be born. And only where there is trust can peace be built.

Peace, trust, and relationships across borders and divides are vulnerable. We know from experience, that time and time again they can falter and fall apart. And yet even when they do, wherever a few are gathered, the Spirit can be present, doing its work. This is our humble and hopeful prayer.