

"On the Road"

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In a classic road story, the protagonist embarks on a journey. Sometimes it's to get away from somewhere or something, sometimes to get to someplace different and sometimes just by happenstance. But when the genre holds true, the journey creates a catalyst for transformation. We might see it as a pilgrimage, whether intentional or accidental.

The scripture that we heard today from Acts is a classic road story. As in many Biblical stories, a lot of transformation seems to happen while people are on the move. It's metaphorical as well as actual, the internal movement paralleling the external. It seems that there's something about the act of journeying that opens us to the Holy Spirit in a way that being stationary just doesn't.

I remember summers as a child when my family would spend long tracts of the summer travelling in our Ford pickup truck with the camper mounted on the back. The summer that we drove across Canada I was just about to turn twelve and my brother was 13. We were both in that transition time of adolescence where we were trying to figure out what it meant to be not quite a child but not yet even a teenager. We were trying to find our feet and our voices as we passed out of childhood. But in a lot of ways we were still kids.

This was the summer that we decided to become super heroes. Not like the super heroes that have special powers because of freak accident or having come, literally, from another world. But like Batman, Robin and Batgirl, regular folk who have trained themselves to be extraordinary, driven by a passion for justice in the world. At each place we stopped, we'd check the lay of the land for the best training opportunities—banks to dive from, trees to climb, caves to explore. Our varied Canadian landscape offered an infinite variety of tests for new skills.

Jumping over sand banks was intended to teach us not to hesitate, presumably in the face of danger either ahead or behind, how to land, and to cushion the landing with a rolling somersault, a showy as well as useful

skill. We practiced controlling a Frisbee precisely and learned how they curve, pick up the wind and bounce on different surfaces. What better than to knock a gun out of a criminal's hand with a deftly tossed Frisbee? Everything became a potential crime fighting tool.

This was the narrative that carried us across the country and helped us fill long days on the road. As we rode in the camper on those long stretches of driving, we read our Limited Collectors' Edition Special All-Villain Batman Issue over and over. The oversize comic book had a centre-fold section illustrating the equipment Batman and Robin carried. How I coveted Batman's utility belt with its two-way transistor radio buckle and little tubes filled with wonderful miniatures—an infrared flashlight, camera, wire recorder, laser torch and bat-rope with automatic reel. I still have the comic and still covet that belt.

That was a formational summer for us. We learned to work together, to help each other over tough spots, and to share authority and the leadership role. We were also, possibly for the last time, buddies. The next fall he was in junior high school and, suddenly, a teenager whose interests no longer included his little sister.

But for that summer, at least, we were invincible. We became faster, stronger and more daring as we crossed each province in our pilgrimage across the country and back, gaining something in each place to use in our fight for righteousness.

The trick to a good road trip is to be open to the possibilities that present themselves along the way. Road trips are spiritual practices if you engage them in the right way. Those long stretches of going somewhere, watching the world unfold around you while your mind, at times, wanders somewhere completely else. It takes a lot of mindfulness to be in the moment, to be in the place that you are right now, even if it seems that you are nowhere in particular. There's a point of tension between following the road, following your mind and being open to connections and possibility as you drive by.

This scripture about Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is the intersection of two separate journeys. It describes the sweet spot where all those tensions create the perfect catalytic moment for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The Ethiopian eunuch is on the road from Jerusalem heading toward Gaza. This is someone who is clearly looking for spiritual deepening, having been

in Jerusalem worshipping. As he travels, he's reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

Philip is a follower of the Way, a disciple of the resurrection Jesus. He is one of the people who had been chosen, along with Stephen (Acts 6:5), to ensure the care of the widows and the fair distribution of food to those who needed it.

Philip had been in Samaria proclaiming the Messiah and healing. It is said that "When crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed." (Acts 8.6-7) He also baptized men and women who believed as he "proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and name of Jesus Christ." (Acts 8.12)

The Spirit of God moves Philip. When the angel of the Lord tells Philip to "Go south to the road--the desert road--that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza," he goes immediately. When he sees the Ethiopian he *runs* to the chariot. But when he gets there he is faced with someone who is as much of a stranger to him as is perhaps even possible.

This stranger is from Ethiopia, so cut off from the land of Israel. He is a eunuch, a person considered to be in violation of the purity code from Deuteronomy which makes it plain that no one who is sexually mutilated "shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." (Deut. 23.1) He is a man with a royal job in a worldly court as someone in charge of the treasury of the Ethiopian queen and also, therefore, loyal to the wrong sovereign.¹

And yet he is reading from Isaiah, words that hold the potential for great hope. Isaiah announces that God will "recover the remnant that is left of his people . . . from Ethiopia" (Isa. 11:11); he also promises that "eunuchs who keep my sabbaths" will be welcome in the house of God and will receive "a name better than sons and daughters" (Isa. 56:4-5). He wants to know who to believe, Deuteronomy or Isaiah. He needs an interpreter. And then, suddenly, Philip appears.

The Ethiopian asks, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else"? In other words is what he speaks only for Isaiah himself and his situation, or is it for me too? "Is this a word from God only

1 Ideas in this section inspired by Thomas G Long. "Year B, Fifth Sunday of Easter, Pastoral Perspective" *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. [Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008] Electronic edition. 454-458.

for someone else, or is this God's word for *me, today?*"²

And Philip affirms the Good News, that "The biblical word is never merely about "back then." It is always a word to us, to this moment, to these circumstances."³ So yes, even an outcast like he, who has been held in contempt for his sexuality, who has been humiliated and oppressed, the Good News is also for him. And then Philip follows through on that promise. When the Ethiopian eunuch asks "What's to prevent me from being baptized?", Philip, hearing the Holy Spirit whisper in his ear, puts aside all potential roadblocks, from the man's wrong nation to his wrong job and wrong sexuality, and baptizes him immediately.

What transformation for the two of them. One, on his journey finds salvation, the release from the bonds of all that has been held against him. The other affirms in himself the gift and power of sharing the Good News, the love of God as embodied in Jesus and re-embodied in all of us, in each of us.

Like that long ago summer with my brother -- when we were transformed into superheros, when we learned to tap into the power that was gifted to us, when we were gifted with the salvation of loving and supporting each other -- it's truly a classic road story.

May we all be so blessed. Thanks be to God. Amen.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.