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"On the Road" The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (04/28/2024, The Fifth Sunday of Easter)

Let us pray.

How many God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight?

O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

I'm wondering if, like me, when you heard the words in our reading from Acts, Jerusalem and Gaza, you immediately flashed to scenes from the news, the road from Jerusalem to Gaza.

Both of those places, Jerusalem and Gaza are still important places, places of deep religious and cultural significance, places of joy and terror, of faith and suffering of pain and hopefully one day, peace.

Now, if you go to Google Maps and try to replicate Philip's journey from Jerusalem to Gaza, which is the sort of thing that I would do, you will get a message that says, sorry, we could not calculate driving directions from Jerusalem.

And the reason for that is, even before that current war, if you zoom in on the map, the roads from Gaza to Israel literally stop on the map.

They don't touch the gaps that you see there are between the end of the road and the border of Gaza, their security checkpoints.

It's only 52 miles, by the way, from Jerusalem to Gaza, but the way is blocked. There's nobody to get there from here. It's as close as Waco to Gatesville, but the way is blocked.

The road from Jerusalem to Gaza holds great tension now, great anger, great anxiety and great pain.

And by way of contrast, of course, for us, for Americans, generally, the road has represented freedom and independence and endless supply of new possibilities, new places, new lives even.

Road trip films, *Stelma* and *Louise*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Sideways*, almost famous, and of course, the classic road trip, film, national lampoon's vacation.

And almost every case, a road trip in an American book or film means something along the lines of how much the road has changed or will change a person, or it's brought a family closer together, or it's represented familial challenges and difficulties that are resolved or heightened by the road.

And then maybe you're thinking about Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel, *The Road* as well, that takes some of that naive American optimism and puts it into a very different kind of story.

Above all, I think it's fair to say that strange things happen on the

road. It's a liminal space. It's neither home nor the destination. It's a place of transformation and transition. It's an in-between place that's really no place at all.

Sometimes as parents, we find that the typical teenage blockage against talking about stuff can be overcome in the car for some reason.

For other things may happen. Unexpected things that cause us great consternation at the time, but become the source of inside jokes and laughter for the family later on, they even take on capital letter titles in certain families.

The flat tire incident. That time at Buckies. The time we brought home the puppy. We sing in the car in a way that we don't sing in our houses or places of work.

We let our hair down, we get lost, and we get found again.

The book of Acts is full of strange new things. In its first chapter, Jesus tells the disciples that he's returning to the Father.

But before he does, he says, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Then there are these stories about tongues of fire and the speaking of many languages and healings and the first sermons of the Christian church are preached.

The first deacons are named, the first martyr of the faith, and then we land on Philip, who goes to proclaim the message in Samaria.

Just as Jesus had commanded, Samaria, the land of the Samaritans.

The same place Jesus had encountered a woman at the well and offered her living water.

The same place that Jesus uses to make a bold, strange new statement in Luke's gospel about who counts and who belongs in the kingdom of God.

Because the strangest and the newest thing about everything that happens in the book of Acts is that it keeps expanding and expanding and expanding.

The book of Acts is like a balloon that the Holy Spirit keeps breathing more and more air into.

The kingdom of God keeps getting bigger and bigger because the vision of the kingdom that the people are catching keeps getting bigger and bigger.

The book of Acts is why all those maps are in the back of the Bible, the maps that kept me occupied during church when I was a kid.

It reminds me of that moment in a film where someone's going on a really long trip or an exploration and they sort of zoom in on the map and you sort of see the line going everywhere.

That's what the book of Acts is like. It allows us to glimpse the expanding kingdom in action.

And look, as we might have expected for a kingdom whose king was an itinerant carpenter, it doesn't expand by way of army and conquest, it doesn't expand by way of violence and war.

It doesn't even expand through the careful cultivation of the apostles' talents and abilities.

They don't have an apostles' retreat where they learn all the tips and

tricks that they'll need to be successful apostles. They're not constantly leveling up their spiritual gifts game, becoming holier and holier as they effortlessly spread the word of the risen Christ.

Most of the time, it's shipwrecks, prison, and being beaten senseless by the authorities.

No, the kingdom expands because the Holy Spirit breathes new life into ordinary people who have encounters, moments of meeting that are intimate, open, and honest.

It happens because the world has been set on fire by the spirit of the living God.

Philip, on the road, has participated already in this expansion of the kingdom in Samaria but then he gets sucked into something really strange.

Something new, something unexpected, something he didn't anticipate, the spirit is at work again, this time on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza.

Between civilization and the deserted places, between the center of religious life and the outskirts, between the high place and the low place, between the known and the unknown, and Philip himself will be transformed by this encounter.

The Ethiopian, too, is on the road. He is headed back home after what may or may not have been a beautiful and fulfilling experience in Jerusalem, because he is a unit he may not have been permitted to actually enter the temple.

But he does bring home a souvenir, a scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and he is struck by the description that he finds there.

It's not the description of a conquering king, it's not the description of someone wealthy and successful and good looking and put together.

It's not the description of someone whole and healthy and complete.

It's the description of Jesus, the one humiliated and broken and mutilated, tortured and killed on our behalf.

And so the Ethiopian, too, will be transformed by this encounter.

According to the great African-American theologian Willie Jennings, the unique asks the right question, one that is like a prayer that God will answer.

Who is this person in pain and suffering, humiliation and shame?

It's a question that demonstrates such a profound understanding of the gospel because it shows that Jesus identifies fully with us and with the Ethiopian.

In his pain and suffering and our humiliation and shame, all of us at times have asked this question, who am I, Jesus, when I am humiliated and shamed?

Am I somehow less of a person in those moments?

Am I, as it so often seems, less loved, less cared for? Am I a failure? Am I worthy of care, of love, of grace, of forgiveness?

Will I ever be put back together again once I am broken?

Will I ever know the healing power of God's Holy Spirit?

Then Philip began to speak and starting with this scripture, he

proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus, starting with this scripture from the book of Isaiah about the broken one. And so Philip starts in the place of brokenness. He starts in the place of pain. He starts in the place of humiliation. He starts in all the places of our lives that feel dead, lifeless, like nothing will ever grow there again in the desert, in the wasteland.

Starting there, there is now a companion on the road. Starting there, there is new life and new breath. Starting there, there is Jesus, the one who himself experienced and took upon himself all of our grief and shame, all of our failure and humiliation. And now he walks with us on this road, alongside us, even and especially when we are broken.

This Ethiopian eunuch was someone who either by choice or probably through a lack of his own consent had been made to feel less than whole, less than complete, less than a full human being. His own body and perhaps his spirit had been mutilated, humiliated, torn.

But an encounter with the risen one who himself had been made less than whole, less than complete, the one who had been treated as less than fully human, this changed his life and it sinned him on his way rejoicing.

The God comes for the eunuch, as Willie Jennings says, not in spite of his difference, not in spite of the complexities of his life, but precisely in his difference, and exactly in the complexities of his life.

What the Ethiopian realizes is that now he simply matters and he is being brought close. He will no longer be far from home.

Above all, of course, the road is a metaphor for life, this strange new thing that has a beginning and a middle and an ending.

With many surprises, many twists and turns, many detours and blockages, there are times the road seems to end, times when it is easy and fast, and times when it is slow and muddy and pulls us down. There are places to rest, places to backtrack, and always places to find our way again.

We give thanks for all the companions along the way, all the Phillips in our lives who are willing to stop and give us wise counsel and explanations, and we are supremely grateful for our companion, Jesus, the bruised and broken and humiliated one.

Now, risen and exalted, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit breathes new life expands our spiritual lungs and comes close to us as a companion, confident and a friend on each of our journeys.

Thanks be to God. Amen.