

May 2, 2021
The Fifth Sunday of Easter
Year B
Acts 8:26-40
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship During the Coronavirus Pandemic
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

“Look, here is water!”

When I was a little girl, one of my favorite stories was Cinderella. I had a little record, a 45, on what would now be called of the Cinderella story. It wasn't the Disney version, but a recording of someone telling the story with some songs to go along with it. My grandparents told me that I used to curl up next to their speakers, which were probably about the same height that I was at the time, while they played the record on their record player. They said that I would cry and cry when the stepmother and the stepsisters were being mean to Cinderella, bossing her around, making her do all of the housework, and telling her that she couldn't go to the ball.

I remember loving the Disney movie and being equally heartbroken about Cinderella's treatment in that version of the story. Now, a case could be made that my distress about Cinderella was based on my aversion to cleaning, but that's certainly not what it was. My issue with Cinderella's treatment was not that she had to do housework. It was that she was being treated so unfairly and that she was left out. The people who should have loved her, who should have been her family, rejected her and ostracized her. The heartbreak of her story was that she was unloved and unwelcomed, not included in the family's joys and not acknowledged in her family for her sorrows.

So, of course, what made Cinderella's story wonderful to me was that moment, when she found out that she was loved, that she was being watched over, that someone cared about her, that someone heard the cry of her heart. The fairy Godmother's presence in her life and the magical gifts that would enable her to

follow her dreams, that was the was the wonderful part of the story for me. I liked the rest of the story, the ball, the midnight deadline, the prince, the slipper, and the search, but I what I really loved was the part when Cinderella learned that she had a community; when she discovered that she was not alone.

Just the other day Cyrus asked me, what it was like to read the Harry Potter books when I was a kid and not hear the iconic Harry Potter music from the movies playing in my head. Of course, I had to tell him the truth. I was not a kid when the Harry Potter movies came out. I was 23 years old when the first Harry Potter was published in 1998 and 25 before I read my first one, after a friend recommended them to me.

But I did love the Harry Potter books. After I read my first one, I became one of those people who would buy the next one as soon as it was published and read it in a day, or sometimes a night, because Britton was waiting for his turn with the book.

I remember holding the first book in the series for the first time. I had no idea what it was about. There was a strange picture of a boy on a broomstick chasing a little golden ball. I don't even remember reading the synopsis on the cover before I dove into the book.

I do remember having the same kind of reaction, though, to the first part of the Harry Potter stories that I had to Cinderella's story. There it was again. A child, rejected by the family where he should have experienced love and kindness. A child, unloved, uncared for, mocked and ostracized; a child with no future and no hope.

And then, oh, wonder of wonders, he got the same kind of news that Cinderella received from her fairy Godmother. Of course, Harry received his good news from a half-giant man named Hagrid, not from a fairy Godmother, and Harry's good news bringer brought him, not a ball gown, but a smashed birthday cake that he had carried in one of his coat pockets, but still the effect of the news was the similar. All of a sudden Harry learned that he was not alone. He had a

community, and, orphan though he was, he had a family. He had a place in the world where he was wanted, accepted, loved.

Of course, for him, as for Cinderella, life after that good news would still have its challenges, still have its ups and its downs. He would still have his good days and his bad days, but from the moment that Hagrid came to him and told him the truth about his life, Harry had what he had never had before. People on his side. And hope.

It's been one of my favorite stories in the Bible for a long time, but it was only this time around when I read it in preparation for this Fifth Sunday of Easter 2021, that I saw the connection between it and other stories that I have loved, other stories that have been my favorites over the years. It's the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch from the books of Acts, that is our first reading for today.

The Ethiopian eunuch held high rank in the court of the queen of Ethiopia. He was the court official in charge of her treasury. He had his own chariot and chariot driver. He had the freedom to come and go as he pleased which is how he ended up being in Jerusalem to worship. From what little we can know about him from the story, he was a wealthy man; an independent man.

And yet, he could never have a family, never have a wife, never have children, and he could never be a part of the covenant people of Israel. He was barred from that by his mutilation. The story doesn't tell us much about the Ethiopian eunuch, but, since he is not celebrated as the first non-Jewish convert to Christianity, it is likely that he had Jewish parents. But because he was a eunuch, he could never have been fully accepted and received into the Jewish religion. A law found in the 23rd chapter of Deuteronomy prohibits eunuchs from entering into the "assembly of the Lord."

There was something missing in his life, something that he never thought that he could have. A relationship with God, the God of his ancestors, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, a place in God's household as a beloved son.

So, he went, and he worshiped, but he always stood on the outside looking in.

So, he studied the scriptures, but he didn't know what they meant. Who is this man who was humiliated, who suffered injustice in silence, who had his life taken away from the earth? The eunuch had no one to teach him.

I wonder if he thought about it a lot, the missing piece in his life, or if he only thought about it at those times of worship and pilgrimage, when by birth, he should have been welcome to celebrate with his people in the Temple of the Lord, but by the reality of his life, he was always shut out?

Then Philip entered the story. Philip seems like he might be a main character in this story, but in reality, he's just a vessel for the Spirit's work.

The angel of the Lord plopped Philip in the middle of the wilderness road and the Spirit told him to talk to the eunuch. The eunuch, inspired and confused by scripture invited him into his chariot. The eunuch needed a teacher, so God sent him Philip. And God gave Philip the words to say to explain how God was at work in Jesus Christ.

Then, suddenly, there was water in the desert, where water shouldn't be. The eunuch said, "Look, here is water, what is to prevent me to be baptized?" And the answer was nothing. So, the chariot was stopped and the eunuch was baptized.

After the baptism, Philip didn't have time to hang around and chat. Philip vanished. The Holy Spirit had work for him elsewhere.

And the eunuch went on his way rejoicing.

Everything that had been true about him was still true. He was still a eunuch. He was still an important court official in a queen's court. He still had his wealth and his authority. But all of that took second place to the joy of the Lord that filled his heart. He was one of God's people. He had something he never thought that he would have, a place in the covenant community. He was one of God's beloved,

sought out and chosen by God. He had the promise of a life that could never be taken away from him.

Look, here is water!

Those are some of my favorite words in the Bible. They are lifechanging words. They are a miracle. Water in the wilderness, water in the desert, water where water should not be, so that a man, who thought he was alone, who thought there was no place for him, who thought that he was rejected and excluded, could learn that he was wanted, welcomed, included, loved, chosen. God was calling him, was claiming him, as one of God's beloved children, and nothing, not his physical mutilation, not his race or nation, not the wilderness his life has been, rich in material things, but still empty of the essential things, could keep him from the love of God in Christ Jesus. There was water in the wilderness for him. God's call and God's welcome. God's gift to him. God saying, "You are my beloved child."

A gift better than a ballgown. News better than the amazing news that Harry received, "You're a wizard, Harry."

And sure, the Ethiopian eunuch, after his baptism, after he went on his way rejoicing, would still have difficult times, would still have hard days, would still have moments when he was not understood and not accepted. But in spite of all of it, the good days and the bad, he had the most important good news that anyone could ever have. He had the news that he was loved by God. Loved with an everlasting love. Love with a love that would sustain him throughout his life, and carry him through death and into eternal life, where he would find God's eternal welcome, God's eternal acceptance, God's eternal love, and a community where he sings and celebrates God's love and God's presence forever.

And we, who are gathered here, have received that same welcome, that same acceptance. The water has been there in the wilderness for us as well. We are welcomed, we are loved, we have a family and community, and God is with us forever. Thanks be to God! Amen.