

Annotated Readings for Easter 5

April 28, 2024

Acts 8:26-40

An angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.”

The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Context. We’ve already seen how Acts is a story about God more than a history of the spread of the early Church. While the primary question we ask is always going to be “What is God doing here,” we can also rightly ask about the human response to God’s actions, and what that response has to teach us.

Questions for Consideration/Reflection

1. This story opens with the command from an angel. Have you ever felt “nudged” by a power or urge outside of yourself to do something you wouldn’t otherwise have thought of doing? Did you sense the presence of the Divine during or after whatever it is you were told to do?

2. The Church has rules about Baptism, including timing, preparation, and execution. Had the Ethiopian eunuch asked us today what was to prevent his Baptism, we would be able to come up with a thousand requirements. When, if ever, is it okay to skip the rules and allow the Spirit to take over control?

3. Luke tells us that when Philip and the eunuch came up out of the water “the Spirit snatched Philip away.” Have you ever had someone suddenly appear in your life as if randomly and then be “snatched away” after having done what he or she was there to do?

Psalm 22:24-30

Deus, Deus meus

- 24 My praise is of him in the great assembly; *
I will perform my vows in the presence of those who worship him.
- 25 The poor shall eat and be satisfied,
and those who seek the LORD shall praise him: *
"May your heart live for ever!"
- 26 All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, *
and all the families of the nations shall bow before him.
- 27 For kingship belongs to the LORD; *
he rules over the nations.
- 28 To him alone all who sleep in the earth bow down in worship; *
all who go down to the dust fall before him.
- 29 My soul shall live for him;
my descendants shall serve him; *
they shall be known as the LORD's for ever.
- 30 They shall come and make known to a people yet unborn *
the saving deeds that he has done.

Context. It's always tricky to identify a context when the larger context is the entire Psalm. You'd never know it from this passage, but Psalm 22 is actually a Psalm of Lament! In fact, it is the Psalm Jesus recited from the Cross: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me and are so far from My cry and from the words of My distress?" (22:1) Verses 1-20 comprise the lament and include great detail of the Psalmist's suffering. He or she turns a corner at verse 21 and vows to bless the Name of the Lord regardless, which leads to verses 22-30 serving as a hymn of praise to the God Who delivers us from death.

Questions for Consideration/Discussion

1. It is likely that Jesus prayed this entire Psalm from the Cross. How do we move from anxiety to peace, from supplication to thanksgiving, and from panic to joy?
2. If we had read the entire Psalm, we would have seen how the Psalmist moves from talking about himself or herself to talking about other people and then talking about God and then finally, about his or her descendants. Does this give us any clue about how our prayers might make the same movements?
3. Verse 29 says, "My soul shall live for [God]." Do you think that's true of your soul?

1 John 4:7-21

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Context. This is the final chapter of John's first letter. It is one of seven so-called "Catholic (universal) Epistles" because it was written to the entire Christian Church, not just a single location (e.g. Corinth, Philippi, etc.). At the same time, it speaks directly to the Johannine Community, the "Beloved Community," as it is apparently undergoing some growing pains and internal strife. The bickering, it would appear, is not confined to a single community. (!!)

Questions for Consideration/Discussion

1. The opening line, "Let us love one another" suggests that not everyone and not every church community is characterized by mutual love. Can love be legislated? Can we be told to love?
2. The second paragraph speaks of "abiding," which is a major theme of John's letters and also of John's Gospel, where "abiding" suggests a permanence, a stability. Speaking in purely human terms, are there people in your life who "abide" with you?
3. The third paragraph includes a remarkable statement: "As He is, so are we in this world." It can be interpreted in a couple of ways, but what strikes me is the interpretation that says, "As God is, so are we." Does that sound to you like John is telling us we are like God in this world? If so, what kinds of obligations does that likeness lay upon us?
4. John tells us that we cannot simultaneously hate our neighbor and love God. Would you agree with that statement?

John 15:1-8

Jesus said to his disciples, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

Context. This is part of the discourse that takes place immediately after the Last Supper while Jesus and His disciples are still in the upper room. In it, Jesus appears to anticipate the divisions among the disciples and early Church that are to come. It's interesting that the idea of "abiding" is so prominent here as well as in the text we looked at from 1 John.

Questions for Consideration/Discussion

1. Jesus tells us that entire branches of the vine are occasionally pruned. He then tells us that we are the branches. Is He warning us that individually, we will be cut off from the vine? Or do you think that maybe only parts of the branch will be pruned?
2. It would appear that Jesus expects every vine to bear fruit. What kind of fruit do you think He is looking for?
3. Jesus says that whoever does not abide in Him will be cut off and thrown into the fire. The text suggests (at least to me) that abiding in this sense involves a personal decision and commitment to continue to live in Christ. If that commitment wavers, do we face the prospect of an eternal furnace?
4. The conclusion of this passage includes the oft-repeated bodacious promise that if we ask for whatever we wish, it will be done for us. In your own experience, is that promise true or false?
5. Finally, the freebie of the day: the text of the hymn "Abide with Me," which we talked about last week, but which not everyone seemed to know:

And speaking of abiding, here's our freebie for the day: the text of the hymn "Abide with Me," which last week not everyone knew:

1. Abide with me, fast falls the eventide
The darkness deepens Lord, with me abide
When other helpers fail and comforts flee
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me

2. Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away
Change and decay in all around I see
O Thou who changest not, abide with me

3. I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness
Where is death's sting?
Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me

4. Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee
In life, in death, o Lord, abide with me
Abide with me, abide with me