

## **What Is To Prevent Me?**

Questions from Acts: Part 4 “What Is To Prevent Me?”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – April 28 2024

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

**Readings:** Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

**Reflection:** Psalm 16

**Greeting:** God is indeed my salvation; I will trust and won't be afraid. The Lord is my strength and my shield; He has become my salvation. Praise the Lord!

**Prayer:** Almighty God, we thank you for the gift of life that you have delivered to us, shown in the death of your Son. Help us to celebrate our Lord's resurrection as a sign of everlasting life. As we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ the Son, help us to share the gift of love we find in you our Heavenly Father, and guide us in the truth of your Holy Spirit. May we be one with each other as we are one in Christ Jesus. May we love you with our whole being, and may we share that love with one another. And may we be reminded of your redeeming grace and steadfast faithfulness all the days of our lives. Amen.

**Reflection:** Psalm 16

*Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.” As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble ones in whom is all my delight. Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips. The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage. I bless the Lord, who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Psalm 16 NRSV\*)*

We read the words of Psalm 16, and we hear of God's protection. We hear about the safety that we find with the security of the Lord. That we are given the guidance we need to follow in the path of life. What are you thankful for this week? What are the prayers that you give to show your thankfulness? Who can you reach out to this week to share the love of Christ with? How can you invite others to live a life of love in Christ? What are you discovering as you live out your life in Christ?

**Prayer:** O God, our grove, our lover, our well: In the resurrection of your Son you have brought us into your garden. Marry us for now and for ever, and give us to eat from the tree of life. We thank you for all you have already done and the great love that has been shown to us. We lift up our joys and our concerns, bringing all things before you. We share with you the worries that we have spoken aloud. We share the celebrations that we have voiced together. Help us to also share the silent pleadings from within. May we experience your grace in our laughter and our tears. May you strengthen us in sorrow and in rejoicing, knowing you are with us. And may you guide us in love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Alleluia.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

**Sermon:**

Our scripture readings for today come from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our first reading is from Acts chapter 8, verse 26 through 40.

*Then 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, the 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. (Acts 8:26-40 NRSV\*)*

Our next reading is from 1 John chapter 4, verse 7 through 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 abides 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 a brother or sister 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. (1 John 4:7-21 NRSV\*)*

Our final reading is from John chapter 10, verses 11 through 18.

*[Jesus said] "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." (John 15:1-8 NRSV\*)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This week our question is "what is to prevent me?" It once again comes from the Acts of the Apostles. This week we have Philip meeting an Ethiopian eunuch along the road. The Ethiopian eunuch is trying to understand the prophet Isaiah and so they begin talking. Philip begins explaining the scriptures and in doing so they begin to talk about Jesus. Philip shares the good news as they go. As they continue to ride along, they come to some water, and they stop. This is where our question comes in. The Ethiopian eunuch asks Philip "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" The question comes up because of matters of exclusion. They would have been excluded from being able to fully participate in the Jerusalem temple. Being a eunuch would have created a barrier from being fully accepted by the authorities in the temple. I mention this because understanding that exclusion helps us to understand why inclusion matters. This forces us to look at our readings for today with that idea of exclusion and inclusion and that question "what is to prevent me?" In 1 John we hear about inclusion because of God's love. That we are called to love one another. That anyone who is of God and knows God knows God's love. Because God is love. That God's love is revealed to us in Christ Jesus. And if God loves us, we should be able to love one another because of that love. We get the truth that there is no fear in love. That love teaches us to be inclusive because we are able to love one another just as Christ loves us. We understand love because of the love demonstrated in Christ. That perfect love casts out all fear, including fear of the unknown and

fear of others. As John says, “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate a brother or sister are liars.” If you hate a brother or sister that you have seen, how can you love a God you have not? And we are reminded again of that very central idea of Christianity: love God and love your neighbor as yourself. We have that same kind of idea echoed in John’s Gospel when we hear about Jesus being the true vine. We hear how we are called to bear fruit, and we bear fruit because we abide in Christ’s love. That if he is the vine, we are the branches. That through his love, we love one another, and we produce fruit, the goodness that we have because of Christ’s love for us. That we bear fruit when we do what Christ asks us to do. That we hear again that we should love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. That it is not an exclusive act but an inclusive one. That we are called to love one another because Christ has first loved us. That we are loved even with our flaws.

Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch are riding along and Philip has been proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ, teaching about his life, his death, and his resurrection. He is teaching about the love of Christ and part of that is this radical inclusion. So, when they see the water and they have talked about baptism, the Ethiopian eunuch asks, “what is to prevent me from being baptized?” And that question really is, “what would prevent me from being part of the body of Christ?” The answer is nothing. The answer is nothing because there is absolutely nothing that can prevent someone from being invited to share in Christ’s love. So, Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch. I highlight this account because I think it’s important for us to recognize the weight of this question. Because the question goes beyond what would prevent one person from being baptized. This becomes a question about all people everywhere. It makes us take a deeper look at what it means to be the body of Christ. Because it means that we have to look at what it means to invite others into this love. That we have to look at how that impacts the way that we live. Because we often will try to make up reasons to exclude others. We are very good at figuring out ways to label people as “other” and keep them outside the gates. One factor in that is that we can end up embracing fear instead of letting love drive it out. That we fear what we don’t understand. So, if somebody shows up that we don’t fully understand, it is easy to be afraid and it’s easy to let that fear take over. But that fear isn’t from Christ. That fear is not given to us by the Holy Spirit. That fear is not of our Heavenly Father. That fear is of us because we do not let love drive out the fear. Because if Christ is with me, what should I fear? If I do have a fear, it is that I’m afraid of letting my own prejudices keep me from embracing the love of Christ fully and completely. Because it is very easy to want to keep someone out because we don’t understand them. It is easy to want to keep someone out because they look different. It is easy to want to keep someone out because they sound different. It is easy to want to keep someone out because their lived experience does not match our own lived experience. The problem though is that Christ does not teach us exclusion. Christ teaches us to trust him, to trust his love. The reason that we are the branches and not the vine is because we abide in Christ. We need his support to lift us up and hold us up. We are not the vine grower we don’t prune the branches, thank God. It is our job to bear fruit through love in Christ’s name.

I'm reminded of that because I think that we are called with that purpose so that we understand what is and is not our job. It is not my job to decide who is in and who is out. Thank the Lord I don't have to make that call. It is not my job to pass final judgment on anyone. It is my job to love, because it is my job to love God and it is my job to love my neighbor as myself. And we see that with Phillip. Phillip sees somebody trying to understand scripture and doesn't have a litmus test for whether or not he should get in. It's just a question on if they understand what they are reading. And when they say they aren't, Philip volunteers to explain it. Philip wants to help as an act of kindness and love. So, Philip does get in and does explain. When the good news is explained to the Ethiopian eunuch, the question that arises is if he can be included. "What is to prevent me?" Philip doesn't present them with a set of creeds that have to be memorized. Philip doesn't have a questionnaire that must be filled out. For Philip it's enough that this person wants to be baptized. Because Philip is sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in his love. And it's the proper response. Because Philip doesn't care about keeping people out. Philip is there inviting people in, inviting people to experience the love of Christ in their lives. And it's an example that we can easily forget. Because division is all around us. Division pops up in every aspect of life these days. Division because of the color of your skin. Division because of the country that you come from. Division because of the language that you speak. Division because of how much money you have. Division because of the choices you have made in your life. Division because of the preconceptions that we bring to the table when we view someone new. Division not based on love but based on fear.

Philip lets Christ cast out that fear in perfect love. So, my message to you today is to embrace that love as well. Because I can't imagine anything that would keep me from the love of Christ. .Because of that, I can't imagine anything keeping anyone from the love of Christ. Because I understand it's love from a Savior who could forgive those who were putting him to death. The love of a Savior who sees all as worthy of love. A Savior who extends grace and love to all people. A Savior who inspires hope for the least and the last. When the question arises, "what is to prevent me from experiencing Christ's love?" we know the answer is nothing. Because I trust that Christ will be there to help every step of the way. I trust that our Heavenly Father will watch over us. That the Holy Spirit will guide us and lead us to where we need to be. That we don't need to fear the people around us because we are called to love them. That we don't need to fear the difference because we are strengthened in Christ when we embrace those differences. That we don't have to exclude anyone because Christ includes all in his love. So, let us proclaim on this day and every day that Christ's love is for all. Let us proclaim that all may love God, and all may love their neighbor as themselves. So that all may know love, and all may be loved. All in Jesus' name. Amen.

**Prayer of Confession and Pardon:** God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and

lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

**Offering:** If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

### **Lord's Prayer**

**Dismissal with Blessing:** May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## **Our Current Series – Questions from Acts**

Our Easter series explores questions that we will take from our readings from the Acts of the Apostles. Each week we will reflect on the early church and the lessons we learn from the questions that they press us to answer.

April 7th – Who Is In Need?

April 21st – By What Name?

May 5th – Can Anyone Withhold?

May 19th – What Does This Mean?

April 14th – Whose Power Is This?

April 28th – What Is to Prevent Me?

May 12th – Who Will Witness?

### **Prayer List**

Rev Angie Lee	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Eric Veach
Ed & Verna Titus	Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney
Tricia Adkins	Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart
Tom Finley	Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor	Chuck Hogan
Richard Durham	Kathy Hanks	Emily Blade	Tim Schnauz
Donna Carlen	Ernie Peters	Jess Shoot	Stanley Kiser
Corine Howard	Don Gilmore	Shirley Jester	Marsha Overton
Linda Carlen	Michael Nichols	Paul Cox	Taylor Waldorf
Harriet Tucker	Marlene Kincaid	Cara Dillier	Peggy Farley
Mandy Schumacher	Ann McMorris	Marci Cutts Smith	Jaydelyn Brassard
Pat Hayden Titus	Devona Dittamore	Nancy McElravy	Marie R.
Connie Brown	Thelma Ball	Stephanie Strewsbury	John Graves
Cathleen Carl	Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Leo Smith	Larry Thompson
Greg Williams	Jim & Kay Wells	Earl Sparks	

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