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It was the summer of 2004. My son, Jonathan, and I traveled to Jan's ordination, a seminary student who had been serving as an intern in our congregation. She had worked with the youth group, so my son had spent time with her, and when Jan asked me to be part of her ordination in Iowa, Jonathan asked if he could go along. It as an opportunity for a father-son weekend, mixed with the joy of helping ordain one of our student ministers into her beginning years of ministry. It was a wonderful day, filled with celebration, but on the drive home, we found ourselves in the middle of nowhere.

We had missed a turn on the road from Iowa to Missouri. We checked the map, for this was before the luxury of GPS on our phones, and I discovered that an upcoming road was closer than turning around toward the road we had missed. We found the next road, which it was on the map, so it must be OK, right? It was paved. Had lines down the middle. Went in the right direction. What could go

wrong? Soon I saw a road sign indicating the road changed direction, and we turned onto...a dirt road. And then the dirt road split into two dirt roads—without any signs indicating the name of either road.

All our planning, the mapping out of our journey, following the road signs, and we still found ourselves lost, out in the middle of nowhere. Suddenly, several guys on four wheelers pulled up, pointed us in the right direction, and we soon found ourselves in Missouri, heading home on the correct road to Illinois.

Have you ever found yourself in the middle of nowhere? Maybe a family vacation? A wrong turn due to reluctance to ask for directions?

Even with tour guides, one may get lost, as was the case with a tourist who turned to his guide after wandering aimlessly for several hours and asked, "Are we lost?"

The guide paused and answered, "We're not lost. We're here. Trail's lost."¹

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Getting lost may be a bit less common these days due to GPS that provides turn-by-turn navigation, but sometimes roads can close due to accidents or other events, prompting us to wander in another direction toward the middle of nowhere.

That's where Philip found himself—in the middle of nowhere. Before traveling to this remote place in the desert, he had been elected as one of the seven deacons in the early church to help with food distribution to the widows. You may recall from last Sunday that Stephen was also one of those seven deacons, but when he began criticizing some of the religious leaders for killing Jesus, a crowd threw rocks at him until he died.

I wonder if that's what prompted Philip to leave Jerusalem, to find another place to serve Jesus? If so, it didn't appear he took the easy path, for he first traveled to Samaria, a town many considered filled with nonreligious and unholy people. Here Philip encountered Simon, a magician who wanted

to buy the power of the Holy Spirit for his own purposes.

And then God's Spirit nudged Philip to take a road in the middle of the desert toward the town of Gaza, located along the Mediterranean Sea, an area today known as the conflict-filled Gaza Strip.

And there, in the middle of nowhere, he encounters an Ethiopian, riding in a chariot, who served as the treasurer for the queen of Ethiopia. Philip encountered the unnamed man while he was reading the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. We sense from the story that this man has much power and wealth—he owns his own copy of a biblical scroll, he's riding in a chariot, and he's in charge of the queen's money. And yet, with all this power and prestige, we get a hint that he's cut off from any hope. First, the story tells us he's a eunuch, literally cut off from having any future children, cut off from a family.

Secondly, while he's reading the scroll, Philip asks if he understands what he's reading, and the

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man replied, “How can I without someone to guide me.” It sounds as though the Ethiopian is cut off from any community of faith, from a group of people who could study the scriptures together.

This man in the story is even without a name, cut off from any identity. Cut off from the hope of family. No community of faith to expand his understanding. On a road in the desert. The middle of nowhere.

Maybe you’ve found yourself in this place? Feeling as though you’re sitting in the middle of nowhere? Cut off from any hope?

- When someone you love betrays you and walks out of your life, you may find yourself nowhere, cut off from a relationship that you cherished.
- When the doctor says your prognosis does not look good, you may find yourself cut off from hope, your health stranded nowhere.
- A child who experiences abuse or neglect may feel cut off from love and family, feeling

there is nowhere to turn for safety, feeling cut off from childhood.

- As our politicians continue to debate health care, some people may fear they will be cut off from insurance, leaving them stranded nowhere the next time they face a medical emergency.
- Those who struggle to make sense of bad events in their lives may feel cut off from meaning, wondering why bad things happen to good people.

Two thousand years ago something amazing happened in the desert as Philip helped the Ethiopian understand how the suffering servant portrayed in the book of Isaiah reflected the suffering that Jesus endured:

*Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent
so he didn’t open his mouth.*

Maybe the Ethiopian identified with Jesus, who suffered and seemed cut off from life but then rose

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to new life, for suddenly this man cut off from future hope blurted out, “Look! Water! What would keep me from being baptized?”

If you look closely at your Bible, you may notice that the story jumps from verse 36 to 38. Some other Greek manuscripts of the Bible contain an additional verse, probably added later by those uncomfortable with the Ethiopian’s quick decision to be baptized: “Philip said to him, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you can be.’ The eunuch answered, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is God’s Son.’”

But I don’t find his quick decision unreasonable. He was cut off, feeling disconnected from family and future, feeling stuck in the middle of nowhere, and along comes someone who gives him hope and meaning. Through baptism he realizes he can become part of a larger family, a community that proclaims how God brings new life in the midst of despair. Why would one need the additional

requirement of saying what you believe? The Ethiopian responded with enthusiasm by entering the waters of baptism into a body of hope. Rather than cut off, he would become united in the body of Christ, rather than nowhere, he would be somewhere.

That’s the same message we have today, for those who feel cut off from hope are welcome here in this community of faith—even if they don’t say the same words we do or believe exactly like you and I do. God offers hope through this community of faith, through the body of Christ, through you and me. As the Ethiopian eunuch discovered, all are welcome—those without hope, those cut off from family, those who seek meaning, those who don’t understand. Those in the middle of nowhere can become part of somewhere, gathered here with you and me and the Spirit of God.

¹ Adapted from *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking*, Michael Hodgin, #564.