

On His Way Rejoicing
Acts 8:26-40
May 2, 2021
Easter 5

The book of Acts was written by Luke, who was a physician and well educated. It was written as a companion piece to the gospel that bears his name, and it shows the rapid spread of Christianity throughout the known world and the growth of the church through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This morning's story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is a glimpse into how God uses ordinary people and situations to spread the gospel. Yet, we should not expect anything that happens in this story. It is a story that comes forth from the Spirit's own agenda, and not Philip.

Philip was a deacon in the very first church in Jerusalem. He waited on tables and distributed food to widows and the poor. But before Philip could really develop his Deacon's ministry, the persecutions against Christians started and the church disbanded for a time. Soldiers were going door-to-door, searching every house in Jerusalem for Christians, and dragging men and women off to jail. Those who were lucky got word in time and fled the city. Philip the deacon was one of those lucky ones. That's some of the background for our scripture reading from Acts this morning.

Philip escaped and went down to the city of Samaria and started preaching. He had just completed a very successful preaching mission in Samaria. As you may know, Samaria was a place the Jews avoided at all costs. There had been a heart-warming response to Philip's message in Samaria. Then, an angel of the Lord intervened and said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

There was nothing there . . . nothing on the map. How strange that the Lord would call Philip away from a successful ministry in Samaria and send him off to an uninhabited region in the desert. No human being in their right mind would do such a thing—which is our first clue that this is no ordinary errand.

In the Bible, God is often behind strange and far out ideas. Have you ever noticed? Like building an arc when there was not a cloud in sight, or telling Sarah that she was going to have a baby when she was well advanced in age, or telling a virgin she would bare God's son.

God's dreams and visions are so much bigger than our own. No one was more surprised than Philip, at what appears to be a demotion. He went from a thriving ministry to a barren desert. Philip had just converted an entire city in Samaria, But he listened to God, nevertheless, and headed south. God did not forget the single, isolated foreigner who was ripe to hear the Good News of the gospel. I

believe one of the most important persons in God's eyes is the one who is ready to have a holy encounter God.

As Philip was walking on this lonely dessert highway, scripture tells us that he encountered “. . .an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury.” Acts 8:27 He was a foreigner . . . a stranger from the farthest point on earth. “He had come to Jerusalem to worship.” (8:28).

Hmmm . . . that should raise a lot of questions, for you see, this Ethiopian man was a eunuch. That meant he could never enter the temple and praise God like the rest of them, for eunuchs were not allowed to enter the house of God. Scripture tells us in Lev. 21 – “The eunuch shall not have a place in the congregation of the family of God.”

He was returning from a trip to the temple in Jerusalem – a trip which must have been painful for him since eunuchs would have been denied entry into the temple. Imagine wanting to go to church and being turned away. The church was all about the family, and this eunuch would never have a family. He was different – considered a misfit.

“A dry tree,” they sometimes called him behind his back. “A dry tree on the desert road.” Yet, he was hoping against hope to be a part of temple life . . . he was hoping by some miracle that things would be different this time. Why would anybody who makes the effort to go to church be forced to stand outside? Why would they keep going to a place where they were not welcome?

Just picture him standing outside the service, peering in, trying to get a hint of the music or catch just a few words of the prayer. Just imagine this man standing on the outside, asking the people as they depart, “How was the service today? What did the rabbi say? What songs did they sing,” because he was not allowed to see and hear for himself. Something drew him to the temple anyway, even though he was treated so poorly.

That's when *“the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go up and join this chariot.’”*(Acts 8:29)
The man had been reading scripture. Philip asked the Ethiopian a question: “Do you understand what you are reading?” The Ethiopian replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?”

He invited Philip to get into the chariot, where they continued the conversation. The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” The conversation gave Philip the opportunity to talk about Jesus and share the Good News (8:35).

The Spirit continued to move. The Ethiopian took the message of Christ to heart, and as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said,

"See, 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. (Acts 8:36–38)

What a miracle. What a scene. Two men sitting in a chariot in the middle of a desert, reading the Word of God together. Two men realizing that nothing can separate us from the love of God. You never know where you're going to find God in the middle of the desert . . . in the middle of your life . . . in the places you live and travel every day. God works in the small details of everyday life.

The Ethiopian discovered that he was a part of a new and exciting family that day, and it all began when God directed Philip to approach a stranger and ask him a question. It was consummated with the water of new life when Philip baptized the Ethiopian in the middle of the desert.

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Much of my ministry has been about helping people who have been on the outside looking in, people who did not have a faith community or didn't know much about God. I've always had a heart for the lonely, for those running into hard luck, or in need of a few friends. I used to count myself among them.

A church community can be a place where people feel like they belong and are connected. When we started the new churches, we started from scratch. Before too long, we had a sizeable number – people who had had a bad experience in church, and some with no church background at all. Most of them were in their 20's and 30's. There were LOTS of children.

Some came feeling guilty or regretful about decisions they made in life. Some came because they had not felt welcome at other churches they had attended. Some came because they were looking for friends and community; some were looking for a place to raise their children; and some came because they walked by the building and were curious.

Sometimes people ask, "How does that all translate into growth for our church?" Although we live in an age with slick communications, church websites, Zoom services and Facebook among others, the basic reason hasn't changed – people come most of the time because they were invited. That's right. Somebody asks them. It could be a friend, a family member, a neighbor or a perfect stranger.

Growing churches cultivate a habit of inviting others. All of which brings me back to Philip and his friend. Philip was an inviter. He encounter the Ethiopian eunuch on a dry, dusty road. The man was probably lonely, feeling like he didn't belong. He was not even welcome at the temple, even though he wanted to attend.

It all began by Philip asking a question. He started a conversation, and he accepted the Ethiopian man for who he was – someone valued in the eyes of God. He became the newest member of the Christian community, and his life was changed.

Pray that you can be a Philip to someone else. Ask God to show you. We're told that when the two men came up out of the water from being baptized, "The Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but he went on his way rejoicing."

We are all on a journey. God goes with us on the way. Oftentimes God is with us through the presence of those who accompany us on the road, even if they are with us for just a little while. May we be open to what we can learn from one another, so that we might be present to the God who is always on the move. Amen

Acts 8:26-40

8:26 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.)

8:27 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

8:28 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

8:29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it."

8:30 So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

8:31 He replied, "*How can I, unless someone guides me?*" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

8:32 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.

8:33 In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."

8:34 The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?"

8:35 Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

8:36 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?*"

8:38 *He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.*

8:39 *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.*

8:40 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.