

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"Divine Appointments"

Scripture: Acts 8:26-39, Luke 24:44-47

Hymns: This joyful Eastertide 259/Now let the vault of heaven resound 255, I have decided to follow Jesus 570, Lift up your hearts/Sing Hallelujah 526, We know that Christ is raised and dies no more 522 Choruses: I desire Jesus

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Communion Sunday

May 7, 2017

Rev. Steve Filyk

New Testament scholar Tom Wright

tells the story about an unusual appointment:

"I was once visiting Cambridge... to do some lectures.

One afternoon I was working on the themes  
for the lectures still to come,

when I found to my surprise an urgent thought  
in my head:

Go to **Evensong** [that is a sung evening prayer service] at King's College.

Now I love Choral Evensong;

but I was going to be attending other services,  
I had lots of work to do,

and if I had been going to attend Evensong

I might have thought of going to St. John's college,  
whose choir was... more famous at that time.

But the thought wouldn't leave me alone.

**Back** and **back** it came:

Go to Evensong at King's.

So eventually, feeling rather foolish,

and not even sure what time the service was... I went.

I arrived just at the last minute,

as the choir was about to process in.

The massive chapel seemed to be absolutely full,  
most of Japanese tourists.

Glancing around I could only see one spare seat anywhere;

fortunately it was on the **end** of a row.

I hurried over and took the **seat** as the choir came in  
and the music began.

As I sat down, somewhat breathless,

I felt a **hand grip** my arm.

I looked round, and **saw** to my astonishment an old friend,

a New Testament scholar much older than myself,  
Bill Farmer from Dallas in Texas.

'Tom Wright!' he said 'What are **you** doing here?'

He had no idea I was going to be in Cambridge...

'Bill!' I replied. 'What are **you** doing here?' I

had no idea he was going to be in England,  
let alone in Cambridge,  
let alone in King's,  
and in that seat.

The music had begun and we **couldn't** continue our conversation.

Instead, he pulled out a small pocket diary.

In the space for that date,  
he had written three words,  
in block capitals:

CALL TOM WRIGHT.

We stared at it in amazement.

Bill... [Tom continues] was a man of faith and prayer.

He hadn't phoned.

But the call had got through anyways.<sup>i</sup>

Tom goes on to explain that Bill wanted to speak to Tom  
 About a conference Bill was organizing,  
 A conference that in retrospect  
 was a deeply formative experience for Tom.<sup>ii</sup>

It's quite the story.  
 It's interesting to consider  
 That if Tom had stayed focused on his work,  
 Work that was valuable,  
 He would have missed something **more**  
 important.

Have **you** ever had an **unusual** experience  
 of God's direction and leading?

Maybe in your personal life, your family life,  
 or the life of your church community?

Do you ever wonder if you might have missed a divine appointment,  
 An encounter that God has arranged?

In today's Gospel lesson we meet encounter two characters.

There's Philip.

Philip is mentioned earlier in the book of Acts  
 as one of a group of seven administrators,  
 who were "appointed to tend to the needs of others,  
 especially widows, in the Greek-speaking portion  
 of the Christian community."<sup>iii</sup>

Philip is what we might call a deacon.  
 But he is best remembered as an evangelist.

Earlier in the book of Acts,  
 Philips starts talking to Samaritans about Jesus  
 His seminar is so successful  
 That some apostles are brought in for support.

Shortly afterwards Philip has an important conversation  
 with a dignitary from Africa, an Ethiopian.

This man is also an administrator.  
 But not on the small scale of Philip and those deacon.  
 This man is in charge of the treasury of "The Candace",  
 He's the finance minister for the Ethiopian queen.

He is an important man.  
 He has his own chariot.

He is a wealthy man.  
 He has his own copy of an Isaiah scroll.

He is a devout man.  
 He's travelled all the way to Jerusalem to worship.

He's also a eunuch...  
 "not an unusual situation for [someone] whose life  
 is devoted to serving in the queen's court."<sup>iv</sup>

You've already heard of their encounter.  
 The Ethiopian is reading from his Isaiah scroll  
 (aloud as was the custom).

Hearing him read the passage,  
 Philip asks if it is making sense.  
 The man admits that he doesn't really get it,  
 And he invites Philip to join him.

Philip hops in and beginning with the passage in question  
 explains to him the good news of Jesus Christ.

The Ethiopian is so drawn into this story of Jesus  
 That when they reach an oasis  
 He asks Philip if there is any good reason  
 for him not to be baptized.

Is there any reason? No.

And they get out of the chariot.  
And the Ethiopian is baptized, right there!

Tradition holds that the Ethiopian also becomes  
an evangelist, who bring the gospel to his own people.<sup>v</sup>

And that promise Jesus made in Luke holds true:  
“that repentance and forgiveness of sins  
is to be proclaimed... to all nations”.<sup>vi</sup>

It's a great story.  
But **my** retelling missed an important element.  
Did you notice?

I forgot an entire character.  
The one who made that story possible.

I mean, who sent Philip out to that road in the first place?  
And who whisked him away at the end of the story?

Who prodded Philip to start speaking to the Ethiopian?  
And who gave that rich court official  
an openness to be taught?

(Just think about it.  
How many men, how many wealthy men,  
will admit that they are 'lost'?)

Who did I miss?  
You've got it: the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit a crucial character in this story.  
The Holy Spirit sets up appointments  
And starts conversations.

No doubt it is the Holy Spirit who also closes the deal.

Scripture tell us elsewhere that the Spirit  
will “prove the world wrong  
about sin and righteousness and judgment”  
And will “guide you into all the truth”.<sup>vii</sup>

When you read through the book of Acts  
It is hard to miss the Spirit's activity.  
And I'm not just talking about Pentecost.

As one commentator notes:

“The Spirit personally directed each major advance of the church.  
He sent Philip into the desert to meet an Ethiopian,  
set apart missionaries in Antioch,  
guided the first big church council,  
and helped plan Paul's itinerary.”<sup>viii</sup>

But it's not just 'way back when' that the Spirit  
Directs the lives of individuals,  
The life of the church.

I mean you already heard that story from Tom Wright,  
A former bishop of the Church of England.

If we stopped and took a few minutes  
I'm sure that many of us could share interesting stories  
About God's guidance and direction.

And then there's other important stories  
from the life of our church community.

How about that recent journey you took in calling a new minister?

I recall the search committee  
saying that there was lots of prayer  
And that though the work was arduous,  
there was a strong sense  
of God's guidance and direction.

My family felt the same thing.

We too believe in the Holy Spirit.  
It's not just an empty confession in this church.

We will model the early church,  
when we are making big decisions:  
We will practice prayerful discernment.

We believe in the Holy Spirit.

But we sometimes forget about this important character,  
When it comes to our everyday living  
And the everyday operations of the church community.

We tend to ask God to bless our own agendas,  
Instead of paying attention  
To what the Spirit is suggesting.

I mean just think about it.  
What is the first thing you after your morning coffee?

Do you check your email?  
Do you make a to-do list?  
Or do you seek God's guidance in prayer?

If you or I were Philip  
Would we have heard the Spirit speaking?  
Would you be heading out to the desert,  
Or driving around town  
trying to knock off a few errands?

I wonder if, being reminded about the Spirit's presence,  
We need to be more intentional about following the Spirit's leading?

Maybe we need some prayer meetings alongside our work bees.  
Maybe we need to focus more on discernment  
Than on the efficiency of our meetings?

I'm not saying that any of us need something more to do.  
I'm just hoping we end up doing  
those things God wants us to be doing.

So don't miss any divine appointments.  
So we know the wonder of taking part in God's agenda  
Instead of just fulfilling our own.

May God continually guide us.  
And may we be open to that Spirit's leading. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> N.T. Wright *Acts for Everyone, Part 1* 132-133

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Paul W. Walaskay "Acts 8:26-40, Exegetical Perspective" *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> attributed to Irenaeus in "Ethiopian Eunuch" *Wikipedia*

<sup>vi</sup> Luke 24:47 NRSV

<sup>vii</sup> John 16:8, 13 NRSV

<sup>viii</sup> "Insight: The Secret to the Early Church" in *The Student Bible (NIV)* 959