

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

Led by the Spirit

Are we paying attention to God's prodding?

Scripture: Acts 8:26-40

Rev. Steve Filyk

April 25, 2020

Fourth Sunday after Easter

Opening Hymn: Christ the Lord is risen today 247

Closing Hymn: Since Jesus came into my heart

Choruses: The River, Come, children, join to Sing 377

Have you ever had a dream

About meeting someone new.

And then you meet that person a week or even months later?

Have you ever felt you needed to check in on someone,

Or pray for them

And later you discover that at that very moment

They were in incredible danger?

Have you ever felt you needed to speak to someone

To say something to someone,

And they tell you that was exactly what they needed to hear?

These strange connections and encounters

Are considered by many to be divine interventions,

divine appointments.

We read about them in our bibles.

But they also show up in our discussions.

I was surprised to hear at our Bible study this past week,

Just how many people have had one of these experiences.

God it seems, arranges peoples' calendars

More often we often think.

PAUSE

Today we continue our journey through the Acts of the Apostles.

Last week we heard about Stephen,

Who was elected as one of the church's first deacons,

And then became the church's first martyr

After being stoned to death.

This we our story continues with Philip.

Philip was elected as deacon alongside Stephen.

Like Stephen he wasn't just an administrator,  
 But was also an evangelist,  
 who performed wonders and signs.

After Stephen's death, Philip, visited Samaria  
 Where he spoke to the people about Jesus.

His words and deeds had a powerful effect.  
 Many people believed the Good News  
 And were baptised.

But Philip doesn't linger to organise this new church plant.  
 After a visit from the Apostles, James and John,  
 An 'angel of the Lord' sends Philip south  
 To a road stretching from Jerusalem to Gaza.

Philip isn't allowed to bask in recent achievements.  
 Philip is sent to a mission at the edges of Israel;  
 God sends him down a desert road.

As he is out on the road, he is passed by a chariot.  
 And God tells him to chase after it.

Philip runs, and when he catches up to it  
 he hears a man in the chariot  
 Reading from the Isaiah scroll.

This is no ordinary man.

He is a eunuch, a court official from Ethiopia.  
 And not just any court official,  
 But the finance minister for the Queen.

He is a man of wealth, position, and power.

We don't know whether he was Jewish or a god-fearing Gentile,  
 But we know that he is devout.

He is on a 8000 km round-trip pilgrimage to worship at Jerusalem.  
 And on his way back he is reading from God's word.  
 (Keep in mind that in ancient times  
 People would read aloud, not quietly.)

When Philip hears those familiar words from Isaiah,  
 He asks the man if he understands what is being said.  
 Despite the eunuch's position and prominence,  
 He lacks the power to understand God's word:

“How can I”, he responds,  
 “unless someone explains it to me.”

He invites Philip up into the chariot  
 And together they look at the passage he was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,  
 and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,  
 so he did not open his mouth.

In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.  
 Who can speak of his descendants?  
 For his life was taken from the earth.”<sup>i</sup>

“Who is the prophet speaking about?” the man asks Philip.

This gives Philip the opportunity to begin a Bible study.  
 Philip tells him about Jesus  
 And how Israel’s prophets had written about him.

We don’t know how much time they spent on the road together.  
 We don’t know how many miles they made together  
 On that road to Ethiopia.

But somewhere along the way  
 This finance minister understands that Jesus is Lord  
 And he wants to be recognised as a follower.

“Look here’s some water” he points out to Philip.  
 “Is there any reason I can’t be baptised here?”

The chariot is stopped,  
 And together they go down into the water.

Philip dips him back into the water,  
 And when the eunuch comes back up,  
 Philip is whisked away by God’s spirit  
 to a town closer to where Philip started the journey.

That was the last the eunuch saw of Philip,  
 But he continued on his journey rejoicing.

PAUSE

Quite the story, isn’t it.  
 God sets us an encounter  
 So a man who is struggling to understand his Bible,

Can learn about Jesus  
And can see how God is fulfilling God's promises.

But what if Philip had been too busy that day  
To listen to God's direction?

What if he decided to go to Jerusalem to visit friends  
Or head home to Caesarea to see his wife and daughters?

What if Philip decided to linger in Samaria  
And spend more time with those Samaritans  
Who had just given their lives to Jesus.

He didn't.

Philip recognised when God's spirit was speaking.  
He paid attention and then followed directions.  
and made the most of an opportunity  
that was presented to him.

And God used him to help a seeker learn about Jesus.

We don't hear read more about that eunuch in our Bibles.  
The early church theologian Eusebius  
Said that "the Ethiopian who Philip baptised  
Returned home and became an evangelist..."<sup>ii</sup>

We don't know this for certain.

But we do know that Ethiopia was  
"one of the first regions in the world  
to officially adopt Christianity".

And we know that  
"the largest pre-colonial Christian church of Africa,  
the Ethiopian Church,  
has a membership of 32 to 36 million."<sup>iii</sup>

Keep in mind that by comparison  
our church, the Presbyterian Church in Canada  
Was founded as recent as 1875 and in the 2001 census  
Had less than half a million Canadians affiliating with it.<sup>iv</sup>

We don't know exactly how Christianity came to Ethiopia.  
But what this story suggests is that  
because Philip was willing to follow the Holy Spirit

There is now a church in Africa 60 times the size of the PCC.

Pretty incredible.

So what might happen...

What might happen...

“If we were to surrender control  
of our own travel plans for even an hour,  
where might the Spirit send us?”<sup>v</sup>

Who might we meet through one of these divine appointments?  
And in the course of that encounter  
What might God be doing?

Like Philip may we allow ourselves  
to be led by God’s Spirit,  
even if we never get to see the outcome.

Amen and amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Isaiah 53:7,8 quoted in Acts 8:32,33 NIV

<sup>ii</sup> William Willimon *Acts* 72

<sup>iii</sup> See “Christianity in Ethiopia” *Wikipedia*

<sup>iv</sup> See “Presbyterian Church in Canada” *Wikipedia*

<sup>v</sup> Taylor, B. B. (2008). Homiletical Perspective on Acts 8:26–40. In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B* (Vol. 2, p. 459). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.