



## **Easter 5: April 29, 2018 St. John's Port Moody**

### **Acts 8:26-40**

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, 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.

I want you to imagine a situation with me. Two men, call them Dan and Michael, meet one day at a neighborhood gathering. The two are about the same age but are as different as different can be. One rides a motorcycle and the other drives an expensive European car. One owns and works in a car repair shop and the other is an IT entrepreneur. They have just been introduced when they find out that one of them (Michael) lost his father to pancreatic cancer a year ago and the other (Dan) has just gotten the news that his own father has been diagnosed with the same fatal disease.

“It’s so odd,” Dan thinks to himself. “Here I am wondering how in the world I’m going to find my way through this, and I meet Michael, a person who has just been through it. Was this meant to be?” But then he stops himself. “No” he says to himself. “This was just random, just an accident. And besides, Michael and I have so little in common.”

At the very same time Michael is having thoughts of his own. “Isn’t it odd to meet someone whose father has been diagnosed with the very same disease that took my dad. I wonder if Dan would benefit from some of my experience.” But then he stops himself. “Nah—to offer this to him would be intrusive. And besides, he and I are so different!”

When we look at our story from the Book of Acts for today, we might be tempted to think to see it as a fanciful Biblical story full of preposterous coincidences that lead to a preposterous outcome. But if we look closer at this story, a story about the coming together of two people who were very, very different from one another, I believe we can learn something about how God works in the world and about how you and I work together with God to bring new life into being.

So just to recap our story from the Book of Acts:

An Angel of the Lord speaks to Philip, one of seven whom the Apostles recruited to administer the care of widows and orphans in the early Christian community, to take a trip down the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. He does as he’s told, and on that road he sees a high-ranking Ethiopian official also going down the road in a chariot reading aloud (which is how ancient people read things). He, Luke tells us, is reading from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Luke then tells us that the Spirit tells Philip to “join” the chariot, which Philip also does. He runs alongside the chariot and calls out this question to the man reading the scroll:

“Do you understand what you are reading?” he asks.

Amazingly, the man responds to him not with a growl or a “get away from my chariot” but with a response which he puts in the form of a question.

“How can I, unless someone guides me?” he says.

Then the high-ranking Ethiopian official invites Philip to get into the chariot and sit beside him. As it turns out, the portion of Isaiah that the Ethiopian official is reading is a passage that Christians had come to understand as speaking of Jesus, the innocent one who like a mute lamb went to the cross. Philip explains the passage as he understands it to his new acquaintance. And before we know it, the chariot has stopped by some water, and at the Ethiopian official’s request, Philip has baptized him.

Notice how this story works and what moves the action forward.

God does God's part in moving and nudging and knitting the two characters together who just so happen to be people of very different backgrounds and stations and needs. Luke says the "angel of the Lord" sends Philip down this road and that "the Spirit" tells him to join with the chariot. In other words, God is no abstraction in this story but is a force impelling, connecting, inviting and working to connect people.

But in the story it isn't God who brings to fruition what God works to set up. Instead, as Luke tells it, once the connection has been made, it is the two people, it is Philip and the Ethiopian official, who in their initiative towards one another and in their responses to one another, move things along and bring things to fruition.

For Philip, this has to do with his responsiveness to the Spirit's urging (he ran alongside a chariot!), his noticing what the Ethiopian was doing (he heard him read the book of Isaiah) and his willingness to ask the Ethiopian a rather impertinent question ("Do you understand what you are reading?")

In the case of the Ethiopian official, it is his openness to being engaged by another, his willingness to admit that he does not know everything and his willingness to be helped that make room for something life-transforming to happen.

And life-transforming it is for the both of them. For this is not only the story of the Ethiopian official's baptism and the resulting joy. It is also the story of Philip's big moment in which he expands what he can do from the administration of programs to the work of an Apostle, that is, bringing the Good News of God's acceptance and liberation of all people to someone who had never heard it.

And so this morning, I'd like to suggest that our lives are not as random and as accidental as we think. Perhaps God has so made the world that people are brought together and opportunities are offered to us all the time. Perhaps these opportunities are especially ripe in situations in which we encounter someone completely different from ourselves.

But perhaps these moments of coming together are just the set up for the big moments that we ourselves create by our willingness to get involved, by our willingness to say something, however awkwardly, and by our willingness to accept the involvement of others in the stuff of our lives. And so, my friends, it is our own agency or our own openness that become the key to seemingly random connections between people turning into the fulfillment of God's own life-giving purpose.

To return to Dan and Michael for a minute, I wonder what might happen if one or both of them actually trusted that they had been mysteriously brought together, not randomly, but by the creator of the universe who, out of love for us, continues to knit us to one another. And I also wonder what might happen if one of them could move beyond passivity or fear and ask a question like: "What you can you tell me about what it was like to lose your father? Or "What might I do to help you as deal with your father's illness?"

Today we are confirming four people into the Anglican Church of Canada and reaffirming the baptismal vows of four others. As a part of this, they will reaffirm their trust in God and will make important vows about working for justice, respecting the dignity of every human being and protecting the Earth itself. And, of course, these are noble, noble promises. But today as we hear about Stephen and the Ethiopian official, we must all remember that every noble effort, big or small, begins with an openness to a mysterious God who is forever putting people, utterly different from us, directly in our paths. And we must remember that we are given a choice—to walk on by or to risk reaching out with an awkward question or with a modest offer of help. We are given a choice. And though it may seem small, it is from these small choices that community overcomes estrangement and life springs forth anew.