

After God spun everything into motion at creation, he began to work through people in order to fulfill his will. There are several reasons why this would appear to have been a bad idea on the surface, not the least of which is our tendency to rebel against everything that is not our own idea. Indeed, it's a miracle God gets anything done. I wonder if he's not always thinking, well, I guess it's "Plan B," or Plan C, or D, or E. Nonetheless, God does work through us. This morning we're going to talk about what this looks like and what it means concerning our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

ACTS 8:26-39

An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.)²⁷ So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship,²⁸ and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah.²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot."³⁰ Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?"³¹ And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.³² Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:

**"HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER;
AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT,
SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH.
³³ "IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY;
WHO WILL RELATE HIS GENERATION?
FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH."**

³⁴ The eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please *tell me*, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?"³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.³⁶ As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?"³⁷ [...] ³⁸ And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him.³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him but went on his way rejoicing.

The principle character in our story this morning is Philip. Interestingly enough, he was not an apostle. Rather, he was one of the first deacons of the church. "Deacon" means "servant." Philip and his fellow servants were introduced two chapters before Philip's ministry to the eunuch in the Book of Acts. I'm going to read the account, and as I do so, listen for the qualifications of a deacon:

Acts 6:1-6: “...while the disciples were increasing *in number*, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic *Jews* against the *native* Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.² So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable for us to neglect the Word of God in order to serve tables.’³ Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.’⁵ The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.⁶ And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.”

The seven deacons were in charge of the social service arm of the church, such as overseeing the soup kitchen for widows, which sounds simple enough. But as we keep reading, we discover Stephen was such a powerful witness for the Gospel in the midst of his ministry, he was martyred.

After the story about Deacon Stephen, there’s the story about Deacon Philip and his ministry to the Ethiopian eunuch. We don’t know anything about the other five deacons, but we do know that they were **“men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (v.3)**.

In the church, we often divide responsibilities for the ministry a little too sharply between clergy and laity, as if the pastor carries all the responsibility for the spiritual integrity of the church, and lay people only need to worry about keeping the lights on and doing stuff like stocking the food pantry.

But from day one, as we see here in the selection of deacons, it’s more than that. Reputation, spiritual maturity, and wisdom are characteristics for everyone who works in the church.

These things capture the essence of what we should strive for in our lives, taking responsibility for the work God’s entrusted to us. Let’s keep it simple: Reputation is about transparency; we want to be honest about our experiences, never giving the world something to hold over our heads which would threaten message. Being “full of the Spirit” or spiritual maturity is about knowing God’s will and standing up for it when it is unpopular to do so. And wisdom might be as simple as being slow to anger and quick to listen.

We read, **“An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, ‘Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ ... ²⁷ So he got up and went” (Acts 8:26-27).** Philip was minding his own business when the Lord spoke to him. Perhaps he was preparing to serve the widows. But when he heard God’s voice, he snapped to attention and he did as he was told to do.

That’s how we need to be: Attentive to the voice of God. It’s easy enough to pray to God, asking him for things. But how often do we listen for his answer? Philip was attune to the movement of the Spirit in his own heart, and for this reason he was able to receive God’s call and answer it.

We read, **“there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah” (Acts 8:27-28).**

By Philip’s time, there had been Jews in Ethiopia for a thousand years. The Queen of Sheba had visited King Solomon for his wisdom, and she had taken his religion of Judaism back home with her.

As a sidebar, there is the legend that the Queen of Sheba had a son with Solomon who would eventually be the king of Ethiopia. Over the years, as Solomon saw that the kingdom of Israel would collapse after his death, so the legend goes, he entrusted the Ark of the Covenant with the Ten Commandments to his son, the king of Ethiopia. To this day, many believe the Ark of the Covenant is held in a vault in an ancient church in Ethiopia.

In any case, the eunuch, the treasurer for the queen of Ethiopia, was in Jerusalem to worship. His devotion was profound, for he had come a great distance. Perhaps it was a personal pilgrimage. While in the city he had bought a copy of the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. It couldn’t have been the whole scroll for that would’ve been unwieldy for a single man to try to read from in his chariot as it clattered down the cobblestone road. However, we do know that the eunuch’s scroll included Isaiah’s prophesy of the Passion of the Christ. Was this a coincidence, that he would be reading about Jesus when a disciple of Jesus was passing by? In God’s Kingdom, there’s no such thing as a coincidence.

It had been less than 3-years since Christ’s death and resurrection, and the Christian movement was still on everyone’s mind. The apostles had been preaching and teaching the fulfillment of the Old Testament since Pentecost in Jerusalem, and I wager that there

was an entrepreneurial scribe who was making a killing reproducing Isaiah's messianic prophecies for public consumption.

So the eunuch was reading Isaiah 53 out loud to himself as his chariot meandered down the road. Philip was in the right place at the right time because he had been alert to God's voice in his heart and he did as he was told to do. And we read, **“the Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.”** ³⁰**Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?”** ³¹**And he said, “Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:29-31)**

A couple weeks ago, a friend told me about an encounter he had with a Jewish man in an airport. He was an Hasidic Jew, which you would recognize by the curls, hat, and long coat. Very conservative. His name was Aaron. My friend said Aaron was at a bar waiting for a flight, drinking a beer. My friend pulled up next to him and bought a beer for himself. They got to talking about religion, and Aaron told my friend that he had always thought Christians hated Jews.

My friend told Aaron that in fact most Christians respect Jews as their predecessors, as fellow children of Almighty God. He told him about how we love the Hebrew Bible. And then he asked him if he believed that Isaiah 53 was about the Messiah. Aaron said yes, that the “suffering servant” in the Scripture is the Messiah and that they wait for him to come. My friend told Aaron, “That’s Christianity; your savior is our savior. But we believe he’s already come as the lamb slain. And now we’re both waiting for him to come in power and glory.”

My friend said that Aaron was kind of blown away by the idea that the only thing that separates Jews and Christians is whether or not the Messiah has already come. But, my friend said, “he was favorably disposed, and we amicably drank further beers.”

We never know how the Lord is going to use us. We find ourselves in situations we could never have planned or organized with opportunities we could never have imagined. It's on God to open doors. However, it's on us to keep our noses clean, to nurture our discipleship under Christ, and to grow in wisdom just as Philip did, who was a man of **“good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.”**

We read that after Philip **“preached Jesus to him,”** the Ethiopian exclaimed, **“Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?”** Baptism is a part of preaching Jesus, for it is a confirmation of one's commitment to the Lord, and it is how the Lord redeems (1st Peter 3:21), sanctifies (Ephesians 5:26), and renews us (Titus 3:5, Galatians 3:27).

So Philip baptized the eunuch, and we read, **“When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him but went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:39).**

God was in charge the whole time. The Holy Spirit moved Philip to go on a walk, and when he crossed paths with the eunuch the Spirit told him to join him. When Philip had fulfilled his duties to give witness to the Christ, God redirected him to another place. Brothers and sisters, God is always moving among us, and he just might call on us to do something which at first seems entirely random, but serves his purposes in ways which we will later say were a miracles.

Philip was always on. He appeared to be a mere deacon, a servant among God’s people, tending the tables of widows. But God used him to make a dent in the darkness of this world. Let’s be “on” too, always alert, always attentive to God’s hand working among us, even in our own hearts.

Philip preached Jesus: He didn’t let politics and preconceived assumptions get in the way of his ministry. The Ethiopian was probably as black as a moonless night, but our God is colorblind and so Philip was too.

But perhaps the most important take away from this story are the last few words: We read that the eunuch **“went on his way rejoicing.”** Later on, St. Paul wrote that **“the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).** Legend has it that it was the nameless eunuch to whom Philip ministered who brought Christianity to Ethiopia.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this week let us trust that God is in charge of our destiny as a church, but let us also be alert to his leading, and in doing so, let us be obedient to his call and do the work he’s given us.

This week let us rise up to the call of being servants of God’s people just as Philip and the other deacons were, people with good reputations, full of the Spirit, and abounding in wisdom.

And this week, with joy, let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.