

“How Can I, Unless Someone Guides Me?”
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 14, 2014
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Holy Scriptures: Acts 8: 26-40

Philip and the Ethiopian

26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south[a] to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) 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 28 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.”

30 So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” 31 He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

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.

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

34 The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” 35 Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 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?”[b] 38 He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip[c] baptized him. 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.

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.

Footnotes:

Acts 8:26 Or go at noon

Acts 8:36 Other ancient authorities add all or most of verse 37, And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he replied, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”

Acts 8:38 Gk he

This month we are highlighting in worship and in Word
Christian education and spiritual formation.
You may have heard the story of the preacher
who poked her head in a Sunday school class.
The teacher wanted to show off her students' newfound knowledge.
She called on little Jordan and asked her, "Jordan, is there anything God can't do?"
"Yes, there is," she said.
"Ahem, maybe you didn't hear my question. Is there anything God cannot do?"
"Yes, there is," she said again.
By now the frustrated and embarrassed teacher
was not getting the only answer she wanted to hear, but she plowed on.
"Tell us, what is it that God cannot do?"
Jordan perked up, saying, "God can't please everybody!"

How can I, unless someone guides me?

In church day camps and Christian sleep away camps,
on church buses and vans and at youth group gatherings
we've raised the roof, singing,

*"Oh children, go where I send you!
How shall I send you?
I'm going to send you two by two,
two for Paul and Silas,
one for the little bitty Baby..."*

As many times as we've sung this
I've focused on increasing the volume,
yet neglected to meditate on the words.
Whose Word are we repeating? *The Lord's...*
Who are the children? *We are...*
Who is sending us? *God is...*
How is God sending us? *As a team, obedient and disciplined, faithful and playful...*

Our songs and Scriptures and faith traditions coalesce,
empowering God's children of all ages
to be sent in twos and threes and fours and congregations.
Just as God sent guides and guardians and Gospel bearers before us,
God sends us today to serve & teach, to listen & empower.
And just what is it we have to offer?
How about if we start with the Word of God?

How can I, unless someone guides me?

Throughout the Acts of the Apostles
the Biblical message is clear, consistent, and conscientious:
Be obedient.
Be willing.
Be available.
You may be sent to be a guide, to help another soul to become.

You may be sent to learn, to be guided and to grow.
Go where the Spirit sends you;
do there what the Lord commands.
Trust that the Holy Spirit will take care of the rest.
Isaiah prophesied that the Word of God does not return unfulfilled.

Across the pages and periscopes of Acts
we hear the Word in the stories of Philip and Peter, Ananias and Paul,
Lydia and Priscilla, Silas and Timothy
and so many, many more blessed souls who placed their lives
at God's disposal, use, and service.

In Acts 8, we encounter the apostle Philip channeling the spirit of the prophet Elijah.
Like Elijah, the power of the Holy Spirit plucks up Philip and plants him where it wills.
Like Elijah, he finds himself in situations where he has an opportunity to be a witness.
Like Elijah, even though Philip finds himself in a wilderness situation,
he is not alone; God is already there, and then along comes an Ethiopian.

God the Spirit, God the Guide knew that an Ethiopian
would be moving down this lonely stretch of road.
Surely one point of this encounter is to teach and remind the Church of Jesus Christ
that the doors and arms of the congregation are to remain open to everyone.
Another point is that the Spirit wills for the Word to be passed on.

How can I, unless someone guides me?

Philip encounters the Ethiopian reading from the scroll of Isaiah.

He is perplexed by the Word,
pondering in his heart the Suffering Servant passage in Isaiah 55.

30 So Philip...asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"
31 He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"
And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

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

34 The eunuch asked Philip,
"About whom may I ask you, does the prophet say this,
about himself or about someone else?"
35 Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture,
he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. -- Acts 8: 30a-35

Just as the Holy Spirit plucked up and planted Philip

to be precisely where God needed him to be,
so too does the Spirit guide Philip's teaching and interpretation.
While Philip's exact words are not recorded for posterity,
we know that he spoke about the life, ministry and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
He undoubtedly expanded his listener's mind and faith
by explaining how Jesus himself drew upon this passage from Isaiah.
As recorded in Mark 9: 12 and Luke 17: 25,
Jesus testified how Isaiah's Suffering Servant and the Son of God
were one and the same.
Jesus, the Son of God, was the Suffering Servant, incarnate.

This is the Word of God.
Thanks be to God!

How can I, unless someone guides me?

While Philip's exact teachings are not a part of the permanent record,
the results are.

The two men talked and read the scrolls as they rode in the chariot.
Clearly texting and driving were okay in that land.

So touched was the Ethiopian that as they went by a river he exclaimed,
"Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"
Just as the church is to have no barriers,
just as the Word of God is freely given, freely received,
so too is the rite of baptism open to one and all.

Look, here is water!
What is to prevent you from being baptized?

Look, here is the Bread and the Cup!
What is to prevent you from dining with Jesus Christ?

Look, here is the whole people of God!
What is to prevent you from yoking your life with a community of faith?

Look and laugh and rejoice as all the barriers and walls come tumbling down,
as the grace of God abounds,
as hatred and prejudice and violence are overcome by love,
as the Word takes root and a new life springs forth.

So enlightened was Philip's newfound friend and student
that after the Ethiopian emerged dripping wet from the water
he went forth engaged and eager to embody God's Word.

So excited was the Ethiopian to discover
that immediately after the Suffering Servant song in Isaiah 53:7
the grace of God's hospitality is extended in Isaiah 56: 3-5.
Here in the Word of God the prophet states
that the benefits of the Messiah

are extended to both “foreigners” and “eunuchs,”
for all souls are joyously welcomed into full membership with Israel.

So transformed was the new believer
that he went home rejoicing on the way.
When he got home he founded the first Christian Church in Ethiopia.

My wife Betty and I had a seminary classmate who hailed from Ethiopia.
His doctoral dissertation traced the lineage of his hometown congregation
back two thousand years to the conversion of this singular Ethiopian,
the same one whose mind and soul were opened
by the Spirit of God at work in Philip in the wilderness.

How can I, unless someone guides me?

We are witnesses of what happens
when we allow ourselves to be used by God for a divine purpose.

And what is a divine purpose but a dream of God come true?
Dare we say, dare we believe, dare we advocate
that the Word of God is the articulation of God’s dreams for creation?
Langston Hughes told us what happens to a dream unfulfilled;
it dries up, like a raisin in the sun.
What happens when a dream comes to fruition?

“The Reformation was nothing but the Scriptures going off all over the world.”
The Reformation began when Martin Luther experienced the Word of God
exploding in the Book of Romans.
John Calvin found the Word of God expanding in his own heart,
calling him forth and sending him to transform the church.
("Homiletics," Vol. 6, No. 2, Pg 20)

What happens when God’s Word is shared
and love becomes the Way, the Truth and the Life?

In 1858, a Sunday School teacher named Mr. Kimball
led a Boston shoe clerk to give his life to Christ.
The shoe clerk, Dwight L. Moody, became an evangelist.
In England in 1879, Dwight Moody awakened evangelistic zeal
in the heart of Frederick B. Meyer, the pastor of a small congregation.
Frederick B. Meyer, preaching to young people on an American college campus,
brought to Christ a student named J. Wilbur Chapman.

J. Wilbur Chapman, engaged in YMCA work,
employed a former baseball player named Billy Sunday to do evangelistic work.
Billy Sunday held a revival in Charlotte, North Carolina.
A group of local men and women were so enthusiastic afterward
that they planned another Christian campaign,
and brought to Charlotte a preacher named Mordecai Hamm.
During Mordecai Hamm’s revival,
a young man named Billy Graham heard the gospel of Jesus Christ
and gave his life to Jesus Christ.

What happens when we practice each-one-teach-one?
They say that “one plus one plus one equals a million.”
Well, one by one by one people of faith have touched millions of souls.
One by one by one people of faith have dared to take risks,
 to dream dreams and live out God’s vision,
 to share their faith in such a way that all they do and say points to God.
These relationships are our living legacies,
 and they are a divine dream, a divine purpose come true.

How can I, unless someone guides me?

A Middle Eastern Jew and an Ethiopian eunuch
 put aside what might divide or destroy or detract,
 and chose to delve deeply into God’s Word
 until it exploded in their hearts and minds and friendship,
 and the world hasn’t been the same since.

Delve deeply into God’s Word,
 a Word which is still speaking, still transforming,
 still being found in Scriptures and shared conversations,
 in holy sanctuaries, moving vehicles, and quiet moments of grace.

Emit and evoke the Word of God;
 embody and engage the next generation of voices.

In his inaugural address at Yale University in 1978,
 the new college president A. Bartlett Giamatti said:

“Everyone in this hall can recall certain voices,
 the voices of teachers who changed the way we live our lives.
I am concerned, at last, with the next generation of voices.
I wish them to be as strong and confident and effective
 in what they do as those who came before.
And they will be,
 if we recall our nature and our purpose
 and engage each other to fashion our future together.”

The Word of God that has the power to fashion our future together lives afresh.

You have been given this Word.

Now it lives and breathes in you,
 rich in meaning and hope,
 burning in your heart,
 aching to be given away,
 it’s there, on the tip of your tongue,
 at the core of the story of your life.

You are hereby sent, a beloved disciple of Christ,
 to be plucked up and planted where the Spirit wills.

Rejoice all the way home.

All power be given to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!