

SECOND READING: ACTS 8: 26-40

²⁶ Then 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.) 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?"[Ⓜ] ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip[Ⓜ] 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.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

SECOND READING: Deut. 6:1-8

These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, ² so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. ³ Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.[Ⓜ] ⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

“How Can I Understand”

“How can I understand?” “How can I understand what I am reading, unless someone guides me?” the Ethiopian traveler asked Philip. This African was a man on a journey, looking for direction. He was on his way home from Jerusalem, having been compelled by the Spirit to travel the long, long way from his country to worship there. He had his Scriptures open to Isaiah 53, what we know as the suffering servant passage. Now, if you or I were asked to explain the story of God, to tell the good news of Jesus, to someone who was asking to be directed towards it, I doubt very much that we’d think of starting with these stark and terrifying words...*Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer...In his humiliation justice was denied him.... his life is taken away from the earth.*

But the thing is this. This WAS indeed the place from where this Ethiopian needed to start. This was the message he needed to hear, a message foretelling a Savior who would come to be one with the likes of him. The message was so ancient in this holy book but felt contemporary to him, so close to *his* story.¹

His story...we don’t know a lot, but scholars tell us that because he was the treasurer of the queen’s haram, this man was one of some power, good education, and wealth. He was also a eunuch, and in all probability, was made that way from birth so as to not threaten the king and to guarantee the safety of the queen and other female royales. He was additionally a God-fearer, meaning a man of faith, but again, because of his physical condition, he could not be a full convert to Judaism. He was kept in a place of distance, since according to Jewish Law (Deut 23), eunuchs were not allowed to enter the Jewish Temple. All in all, his story is that he was a forever outsider, suffering the constant humiliating effects of society’s prejudices and injustices. His world was hard, difficult. And he was now travelling an unknown road through foreign territory, vulnerable and alone, yet feeling a tug inside of him to seek direction and understanding.

¹John Davies. *“How can I understand, unless someone guides me?”* <https://johndavies.typepad.com/blog/how-can-i-understand-unless-someone-guides-me.html>. (accessed 9-8-23).

Yes, he was feeling an inner tug. And this is where the apostle, Philip, came on the scene. He had been in Samaria, baptizing and converting Samaritans, people hated and despised by most of his fellow Jews. He had heard the voice of the Spirit guiding him to bring the good word to them because they were thirsting and hungering for it. Maybe it was because of this then, Philip's open mind and heart for the Other, that God chose him, that God chose him in particular, to go South to the road to Gaza, and there wait for his next assignment.

And indeed, Philip went. In fact, Scripture says that he RAN. I love that. I so love that. Phillip ran to him. I can see him running alongside the chariot. He was so eager to share and proclaim the gospel. It was THAT important. And at the Ethiopian's invitation, Philip joined him in his chariot and explained the text further. Phillip helped him understand how God came to earth to show how love can overcome evil. He certainly told him that Jesus' last days were filled with suffering, humiliation, and justice denied, but that in the end our Savior was resurrected, triumphing over death, victorious through his great love and forgiveness. Undoubtedly, the man recognized himself in Jesus' struggle, and wanted to share in his glory. In an instant he asked to be baptized, and his words have inspired one of the great African-American spirituals, "*Take me to the water*".²

Soooo, the takeaway lesson for us today? What do you think? What do you think the Spirit has for us today? Well, one lesson is no doubt that we need to be like Philip. We need respond to the urging of the Spirit and share the Faith with those who want to know, who need to know, who are thirsting and hungering for it. And we need run to do it. It's THAT important.

Maybe you've heard that "*God has no grandchildren.*" This means that we do not inherit faith like we inherit eye color or ethnicity. Faith comes through a personal decision, revealed to us by the Spirit, and THAT decision cannot happen without the Faith first being shared with us. We need to have someone care enough to teach us, and to guide us, saying, "*This is the Savior we follow. This is the Savior who wants to gather you to himself. He has come to let you know how very much he loves you. I'm here to walk with you.*"³

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns-take-me-to-the-water>

³ William Brosend. "Unless Someone Guides Me". <https://www.religion-online.org/article/unless-someone-guides-me-acts-826-40-1-john-47-21/>. (accessed 0=9-8-23)

Sooooo, the faith that you and I possess right now is a faith that was shared with us by fathers and grandfathers, by mothers and grandmothers, by husbands, by wives, aunts, uncles. They were the ones who did as Deuteronomy says, *“impressed God’s way upon us, talking about it when we sat at home, when we walked along the road, when we lied down and when we got up.”* We are grateful to these. Look around. Some of them are here with some of you. But my guess is that there are others too, ones that we all can all point to outside our immediate family, who influenced us spiritually....Sunday School teachers, youth directors and youth workers, pastors and simply mothers and fathers in the church. Maybe you’re thinking of them right now. I’m remembering Lilian Dietrich...my Sr. High Sunday School teacher...the one who first pushed me to consider how I might apply the scripture to my life. I was a teen with significant pressures and weights on my shoulders and she knew it. I recall her telling me that it all means nothing unless I lived it. Wise advise. Whoever your teachers were, say a quick prayer of thanks for them, for they invested in you without knowing what the outcome would be.

Now, it is us, who need to be like our teachers, like Philip, sharing the Faith with others who want to follow Jesus. And what’s more, we need do it as a community, as a church. The responsibility belongs to us, as a whole people, because our children, all of them belong to us. They’ve been entrusted to us, and we are commissioned as Jesus said to *“make disciples of them, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything he commanded of us.”* (Mt 28:18-20). It’s a sacred trust that we hold with each other. Disciples are made in the presence of other disciples.

A number of years ago, a Peace Corps worker wrote a children’s book based upon her experiences in Africa. It tells the story of a young girl named Yemi whose mother asked her to watch her baby brother, Kokou, on their trip to the market. Yemi was proud to be watching her brother all by herself. But soon after they got to the market, Yemi turned her head for a moment, and Kokou slipped away. Yemi frantically searched the market for her brother, worried that he was hungry, thirsty, or tired. But as it turned out, Kokou never had a chance to be hungry or thirsty or tired, because every adult he bumped into took care of him for a few

minutes, giving him something to eat and something to drink and a quiet place to take a rest.

When Yemi finally found her brother, he was happy, well-fed, and rested. She hurried him back to their mother and told her how she had lost Kokou for a while but all of the people of the village took care of him until she found him again. Yemi's mother wasn't surprised at all. She looked at her daughter and said: "What my mama told me, I will tell you. We don't raise our children by ourselves. It takes a village to raise a child."⁴

Yes, it takes a village to raise a child. It takes a church to make disciples , to make soldiers for Christ in this often so hard, so very difficult world. So today, as we kick off our Sunday School program and soon as we begin to get very serious about planning our FPC Youth Group, I invite you to seriously consider your part in it all. I urge you to assist. Assist as a co-teacher, as a student yourself, as an encourager of others who are feeling the tug to know the Savior who came for the likes of them, or assist as simply a strong supporter or/and advocate of the work being done. All of us need to better understand. All of us need to help others understand. All of us NEED to open ourselves to what the Spirit has for us.

"So Philip ran up to the chariot 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?"

Amen.

⁴ Quoted in Bryan Wilderson. "It Takes a Church". <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2006/december/generation1.html>. (accessed 9-8-2023).