

Sermon May 6, 2012

Scripture Lesson ~ Acts 8: 26-40

Sermon *Baptism Along the Interstate*

Some of you who are buffs about Broadway will remember some years ago a Broadway play that carried the title “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.” Well, almost two thousand years ago, a governmental official could have easily said, “A funny thing happened to me on the way to Ethiopia.” It was not really funny, but it certainly was a fantastic thing that happened on the way to Ethiopia. God shows an unusual place to come to an unusual command. It is a story that makes for very lively reading as you heard, which is reported in the eighth chapter of the book of Acts.

The account begins in this way, ‘And then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, who is one of the disciples of Jesus, “Get up and go to the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”’

Now those of you, who are truck drivers, like Roger and others, know what it is like to drive on the lonely difficult roads. The place with which God was sending Philip seemed very unpromising. The road that went toward the south from Jerusalem to Gaza was a difficult but heavily trafficked road.

Now Philip must have wondered about the strange request, as I spoke to the boys and girls about a little bit earlier. He could have offered half a dozen excuses as to why he shouldn’t go. He could have asked God for more particulars about that strange command. But he didn’t do any of those things, strangely enough, like most of us would have done. But instead, Acts says, Philip got up and he went.

God got an immediately reaction from Philip. There he went trudging down that weird interstate wondering what was going to come of all of this. And down the road, his eye caught sight of a special traveler. The Bible describes him in this way. “There was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of (Kandi) I mean Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home. He was seated in his chariot and he was reading, of all things, the Prophet Isaiah.

Now I know some of you try to read while driving a car, but he wasn’t driving. He was being driven, so he was safe. Because he served the queen so closely he was made what was called a eunuch, as was customary in those days.

Apparently he was not Jewish, but he was a proselyte who had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was returning home after that pilgrimage.

While the driver managed the horses, that official was reading from the scrolls from the prophet Isaiah. Although this road could have been called an interstate in those days, the bumps must have made the reading quite a trial indeed. But this wasn't the man's only problem, as we will soon find out.

As Philip spotted this unique traveler, he received a second message from God. Acts says, 'Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to that chariot and join that chariot.'" Philip couldn't walk; the chariot was running down the road, so he ran. The first time he responded to God's command, he got up and went, and the second time Philip ran.

The Ethiopian official must have had a deep spiritual hunger in his heart to be reading from the roll of Isaiah aloud as he was traveling down the interstate. And when Philip caught up with him and heard him reading, he asked the question, "Do you understand the things you are reading?" The question must have hit a bull's eye because the Ethiopian asked, "How in the world, can I unless someone explains it all to me?"

Next the official invited Philip to get into the chariot and sit beside him, and the Ethiopian official gave the nod to the driver, and down the interstate they went. This must have made quite a sight. And now we are told what Bible passage the official was reading in Isaiah. It was part of that famous suffering servant psalm from the 53rd chapter of the book of Isaiah.

Could it have been just a coincidence that this Ethiopian was reading this particular passage, which so easily points us to Jesus? The Ethiopian asked Philip, "Whom my I ask, is the prophet speaking about? Is he saying these things about himself, or is he saying these things about somebody else?"

And there Philip saw the question from the Ethiopian as a door to be opened from God, for Philip to share his faith with the man. Acts says then Philip started to teach, and starting with this Scripture he proclaimed to him the Good News about Jesus Christ. Wouldn't it have been interesting to have been the chariot driver in that situation and to have listened to the Good News about Jesus Christ as proclaimed by Philip on that day?

Philip must have made God so central in telling the story of Jesus to this official that the message burned its way into the man's heart, because something snapped in his heart that day and he felt the call to follow Jesus Christ.

The story in the Bible continued as they go along down the road. And the eunuch said, "Look here's water." And that strange question, "What is to prevent

me from being baptized on this day?" Acts says about the Ethiopian that he commanded the chariot to stop and both of them, Philip and Eunuch, right there beside the road went down into the water and Philip baptized him.

We don't know who else might have been going along the road that day who would have witnessed that strange event. The descriptions of these events then end in the Bible with these strange words. "When they came out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away and the Eunuch saw him no more, and he went on his way rejoicing." We hear no more about that cabinet official. Did he go back to his country and himself become a sort of example of his faith in Jesus Christ? There is one tradition that says the Queen of Ethiopia herself was baptized as a Christian not long after that it must have been through that faithful witness of her secretary of the treasury that day.

But the question remains. Are you or I *Philip* to those around us? Are we able to share our faith with others wherever we are? Not necessarily in words, but the way you live your life. In the way you treat other people that you work with, or within your family, or you spend fun times with in your life? Do you do it in any setting, even when it is strange as in this ancient interstate road? Have you ever heard in your heart God's command, "Get up and go," and do something that you really don't know what God wanted you to do, but you did it anyway.

In those days when Holy Ghost was used instead of Holy Spirit as the way to think about the Spirit there was a four year old son of a pastor who was so impressed by watching a baptism in church that Sunday morning that he had to sort of practice it himself. So that afternoon while his father was reading the Sunday paper at home, the little boy got a bowl of water in the kitchen and sprinkled water three time on his father and said, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Go," and that was the best that he could do with the Holy Ghost.

In a sense I think everyone of us as Christians has been baptized in the name of the Holy Go. "Get up and go," God told Philip. And later on he said, "Go over to that chariot.

And to you he may give another message. He may say, "Go over to your neighbor who is in the hospital!" Would you go and visit your cousin who needs comfort right now in her time of loss? Would you go over to your friend and help him cope with the loss of his job? But go!

Our words and our lives are daily witnesses working with God's Holy Spirit. God's Holy Go in our Christian walk. We are encouraged today not to miss the many opportunities that God sends our way each day to show others the

differences that Jesus has made in our lives. It is not a message of words to ourselves; it is a message to share with those around us.

Together we say AMEN