

Sermon for 3/17/24
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Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

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 the wilderness road.) So Philip got up and went.

Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the 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 the court official — the eunuch from Ethiopia — reading the prophet Isaiah.

Philip 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 — from Isaiah — 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.

If you ask any pastor or church musician, the absolute worst time to talk about church business is right after worship. Sure, it's great to greet each other, maybe reflect on the worship service together, but in basketball terms, your worship leaders often leave it all on the court and need a few minutes to recover after a worship service.

Many years ago, that didn't stop my young friend, Jay, as he came running up the aisle after worship one Sunday. He had some questions. You see, as an eighth grader, he had just started Confirmation class, which means he had just received a new Bible. Taking this gift of a new Bible seriously, he immediately started reading it. On page one. Because none of us thought to explain that the Bible isn't a novel that needs be read from the beginning. He had made it about halfway through Genesis and was shocked by a few of the stories. Which led to some questions.

So I'm working the crowd as you do after a worship service and had a few families that were bunched up waiting to talk. Jay, being small for his age, managed to wiggle himself through the crowd — Bible in hand — to get his questions answered. Because he had started reading his Bible. On page one.

I then I did what any exhausted youth director would have done — I took Jay to the head of staff and enjoyed every moment of watching the head of staff's eyes pop open while Jay pummeled him with the tough, thoughtful questions that come from eighth graders.

That's what we read about in today's Scripture passage. The court official — the eunuch from Ethiopia — had some questions. This court official had wealth, education, status, and prestige, and yet was humble enough to know that he needed help understanding what he was reading. We read that he's returning from Jerusalem where he had gone to worship, but we also know that — due to his ethnicity and the fact that he was a eunuch — he would have had a problematic relationship with Jewish leaders of the time. This court official was riding in a chariot reading one of the suffering servant passages from Isaiah. (Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth.") AND HE HAD QUESTIONS.

That's when the Holy Spirit kicks into action. The Spirit not only tells Philip to find this chariot, but to join it. So Philip runs (not walks) up the chariot and strikes up a conversation by asking, "Do you understand what you're reading?" And the court official replies with a humble, honest answer: "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

When I hear this question, I think of my friend Jay, who started reading the bible from page one. How could Jay possibly have known how to read his Bible without someone guiding him? He started on page one, got some questions answered, and then, sadly, lost interest.

Jay and this court official are not alone in their struggles to read and understand the Bible. In the [Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study](#) from ten years ago,

- Only 30% of mainline protestants in the United States reported reading their Bibles at least once a week.
- 13% said that they read their Bibles once or twice a month . . .
- And 12% indicated reading several times a year.
- But, and here's where it gets problematic — 44% — of mainline protestants — said they read their Bibles seldom or never.

There are lots of reasons not to read our Bibles, right? We're busy people. We have family commitments, and jobs, and life stuff, errands to run, and things to do . . . and the list goes on. And, maybe on this list of reasons why we don't read our Bibles is that — like the court official and my young friend Jay — we need someone to guide us. It can be a tough read.

Thankfully, the Holy Spirit sent Philip to the court official from Ethiopia. The Holy Spirit sent Marc to me.

When my wife and I were in college, Marc was a bit older than the rest of us. He didn't take any classes. Instead, he walked around campus a lot. He could always be found in our dining hall during lunch. You see, we were at Austin College, a Presbyterian-related college, who saw fit to equip us with a seminary intern who was paid to hang out with students.

During those years — all those lunches — I grew more in my understanding of the Bible, theology, and faith, than any other time of my life with the exception of maybe my time in seminary.

As we sat around lunch tables together, the conversation often turned to politics, which often turned into theological conversations, which then turned into conversations about Scripture. You see, Marc carried a Bible in his back pocket. But that's not what mattered. What mattered is that Marc wasn't afraid to pull out his Bible and use it.

The Holy Spirit sent Philip to the court official from Ethiopia. The Holy Spirit sent Marc to me.

Who has the Holy Spirit sent to guide you in understanding Scripture and understanding the Good News of Jesus Christ?

The Holy Spirit sent Philip to the court official from Ethiopia. The Holy Spirit sent Marc to me. And, I'd like to think that the Holy Spirit sent me to Jay and to the other kids in the youth programs that I've been connected with over the years, including the youth of this congregation and especially the three young theologians who will be joining the church today. You see how it works?

My guess is that all of you — or at least almost all of you — have also answered the Holy Spirit's call to guide others in understanding Scripture and the Good News of Jesus Christ. Here's one of my favorite examples.

Does anyone know what this is? If you've ever been on a youth trip with our young people, you'd know. You see, for each trip, an anonymous member of our congregation sends a goody bag for each kid to enjoy on the trip. And, even though the youth can tell you exactly what is in this bag, the contents are not important. What's important is that they have a bag filled with God's love traveling with them to youth conferences where they engage God's Word.

After thanking the person that makes these bags happen, I received this note. See if it rings true for you:

I love these kids so much and am so proud of you all. When these kids were baptized, I promised to support them in any way I could. This is just an extension of that promise.

If you're not familiar, when we baptize infants and young people in the Presbyterian Church, we make promises. In fact, in just a few minutes, you will make these promises to our young theologian, Catie, because like the court official in our Scripture story, she has asked to be baptized. You will be asked to promise that: You'll guide and nurture her by word and deed, and with love and prayer And you will be asked to promise that you'll encourage her to know and follow Jesus Christ.

Years ago, you made these baptismal promises to Will and Vivian, our other two young theologians joining the church today. Over the years, you've made these same promises over and over again.

But what about the children, youth, and adults who are not here and who have not heard the Good News of Jesus Christ? There are hundreds of families who live within walking distance of this church that we haven't yet connected with. Our playground is often packed with families who don't walk through our doors. Though the numbers in our youth program are strong, especially in light of all that's happened in the past couple of years, there are thousands of teenagers within driving distance and bus routes that aren't here. And, what about those who have been hurt by the church in general at some point in their lives? How might we share the Good News of Jesus Christ with them?

But for us to be true to these promises — to our young people and to others in the world who are in need of God's radical, outrageous, and wildly inclusive love — a couple of things need to happen.

The first is that, like Philip, we need to listen to the Holy Spirit and be ready to run (not walk) up to the person that the Holy Spirit calls us to help. We may not be running to catch up with a chariot, but it might be tiring for us to meet someone in a place that is new or uncomfortable for us. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, "If we were to surrender control of our own travel plans for even an hour, where might the Spirit send us?"

The second is that, once we reach that metaphorical chariot, we have to know what to say. And friends, the only way that we'll ever know what to say is to dig deeper and deeper into God's Word. What better time to do this than now, during this season of Lent. How might we avoid being in the 70% of mainline protestants who don't at least open their Bibles one or twice a week.

You see, we have to engage to engage to engage. We have to engage God's Word so that we can guide others to engage God's Word so together we can engage God's world.

This is where the rubber meets the road. As we've talked about in our Confirmation class this year, God offers us grace, but that's not the end of the story. God offers us grace and we respond with gratitude.

We engage God's Word so that we can guide others to engage God's Word so that can respond to God's transforming grace with gratitude. There is work to be done in the world and God needs us to roll up our sleeves and make it happen.

As our young theologian Vivian writes in her faith statement,
My belief in Jesus Christ shapes my purpose. Throughout my life, I hope to create impactful change by advocating for social justice and for a more equitable world. To me, this is God's work.

There are people in the world who need to hear what our young theologian Will says in his faith statement of the Good News of Jesus Christ. He writes,

I believe in a fully-human-fully-God Jesus Christ who understands the struggles and hardship of life. I know that life will bring its challenges, but through it all I know that God will never lead me astray because, as Jesus said, "with God, all things are possible."

And people need to hear what our young theologian Catie says about Jesus when she writes that

Jesus showed us how to believe and embody God but still be human. Jesus was human and divine and while we are human, we can still work to embody God like he did.

We — as disciples of Jesus Christ, serving in a broken world — can still work to embody God like Jesus did.

To do this, we have to engage God's Word so that we can guide others to engage God's Word so together we can engage God's world.

Our Scripture story today ends beautifully, doesn't it. The newly baptized court official went on his way rejoicing. Off to a new life. I'd like to think that he became a Philip for someone else. And Philip? Philip continued following the Holy Spirit, going off to other parts of the world connecting people with God's love.

As we continue our Lenten journeys, may we engage to engage to engage. May we engage God's Word so that we can guide others to engage God's Word, so together we can engage God's world.