

“Right Place, Right Time”

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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I John 4:16-21, Acts 8:26-40

This morning we hear again from the First Letter of John, which as I have said previously was written to a community of faith in need of both comfort and challenge. And really, what community of faith is not in need of both comfort and challenge from week to week and day to day. The author of the letter is like a broken record in telling his audience to love one another - to know and show love is to be born of and know and abide in God. Listen for how the letter says that love moves us beyond being dominated by fear, hatred, and prejudice. *Read I John here.*

Our second lesson comes from the book of the Acts of the Apostles, the eighth chapter, beginning with the 26th verse. Hear in it a demonstration of the sort of love the letter discusses, a love which moves people beyond fear. A word about its two main characters is in order. First we meet Philip, a Jewish Christian, who had earlier been chosen by the community in Jerusalem to be one of seven men in charge of taking care of those in the community of faith whose needs were being neglected. Sometimes that happens in churches - the squeaky wheel gets the grease, crises arise, outreach takes precedence over inreach, and people with legitimate needs don't get the attention they deserve. So Philip, with six others, had been charged with tending to them. This must have further sensitized him to the plight of the ignored and the outcast, because as the chapter I am about to read from begins, he is in Samaria. The Samaritans were regarded by his fellow Jews as outcasts, half-breeds who had the wrong idea about God. But Philip has come to understand that God's love embodied in Jesus is expansive, and he wants the Samaritans to know that, too.

It is on the heels of the success of that mission that Philip encounters the other main character in today's story, an Ethiopian eunuch who is an official in the court of the queen of his people. The eunuch is returning from going to Jerusalem to worship, which as someone has written would have created a "theological crisis" for him.¹ You see, being a eunuch, while it allowed him a position of power and trust in the court of the queen, would by Jewish law have excluded him from being able to enter the temple in Jerusalem. We can assume that the eunuch is fresh off of an experience of exclusion when he encounters Philip on the road. Listen now for God's word in the book of Acts. *Read Acts here.*

One of the hardest assignments I ever had in seminary came in my final semester. All of my fellow seniors and I were required to take a course on evangelism, taught by Dr. Ben Johnson, who was at that point considered to be one of our denomination's chief experts in the field. To be a chief expert on evangelism in the Presbyterian church is kind of like being Saudi Arabia's chief expert on snow and ice.

The assignment Ben gave us was to approach a stranger, someone we didn't know, and tell them the good news about Jesus. Then we were to write a paper about the encounter. I wasn't worried about writing the paper. I was worried about having the encounter.

Most of the rest of the class shared my trepidation. In fact, I know of more than one class member who dismissed the assignment as stupid and then just fabricated details of some imaginary encounter to provide content for their paper. I won't comment about what that says about the content of those individuals' character. Far be it from me to judge. But I will say that I am glad they are not my pastor.

As the due date for submitting our papers edged nearer, my buddy Sam, a fellow seminarian, and I developed a plan. Neither of us had yet talked to a stranger about Jesus. But we had tickets to go to the Atlanta Braves game. Here's what we were going to do. On our way to Fulton County stadium, we would each find a person on the Marta train and talk to them. About noon on the day of the ballgame, we boarded the train at the stop nearest the seminary. Ten stops later, Sam and I were still mustering up the courage to go talk to someone when the train pulled into the station nearest the ballpark. We decided we'd try again after the game.

A couple of stops into our journey back, I found my way over to a twenty-something African American guy, and slid into the seat across from him. "Umm. I was just wondering, do you ever go to church?" I asked. "Yeah, I went with my grandmother as a kid, but it's been a long time," he replied. "Well, do you think going to church is important?" I queried. "I don't know," he responded, "but I guess you do. Why do YOU think church is important?" He had put the ball back in my court, and I'm embarrassed to say I swung and missed. I fumbled around awkwardly. I think I said something about how much I appreciated being in a community of people who cared for me and about what was happening in the larger world, a community who actually tried to do something about it. Meanwhile, he looked at me a bit skeptically, probably decided to get off the train at the next stop whether that was his destination or not, scratched his head about that crazy white guy, and that was it.

I learned a few things from that encounter. One is that asking complete strangers about what they believe, without that conversation being in the context of any sort of relationship, is probably not the ideal way to go about sharing one's faith. Another is that when somebody asks you why you bother going to church, why you bother worshipping the God we know in Jesus Christ, you'd better have an answer. You'd better have a story, and you'd better be able to tell that story.

As I look back on it, when that young African-American man put my question back to me, asking me why I thought people should go to church, that young man was giving me an opening. If I had that encounter to do over again, nearly twenty years later, I would be able to share firsthand accounts of how I've seen church people, in the name of and in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, visit the sick and feed the hungry, welcome the outcast and reach out to at risk kids within and beyond the walls of the church. I would be sure to say we aren't perfect and we don't always do it well, but I'd go on to talk about the mutual encouragement that happens in congregations, the manner in which being part of a community of faith can help us navigate grief and loss, the value of hearing the testimony of others as to how God is at work in their lives, and the way in which singing the songs of faith and learning the stories of scripture shapes us into more compassionate, more hospitable, more hopeful people.

Today's passage from Acts provides us with one of those stories. Like my encounter on the Marta train almost twenty years ago now, it is the tale of an encounter between two people from diverse backgrounds. It is also a story that points to the various ways God speaks to and through us, and what

God might be saying to us if we were really listening. And, yes, it is a story about how one might tell someone, a stranger or a friend, about Jesus, or at least about a church formed in his name. If that idea makes you uncomfortable, then focus on the other things.

Our passage from Acts begins with an angel of the Lord speaking to a man named Philip. I don't know about you, but I occasionally get a little jealous of people in the Bible who have encounters with angels, supernatural beings who tell them exactly what to do. It makes the process of discerning God's will a lot easier when you come face to face with an angel. Imagine. There you are, debating what college to attend, when an angel materializes. "Fear not, Kevin. The Lord on high has sent me to tell you that you are to go to Brown University." Or you are sitting in a committee meeting, trying to make wise financial decisions on behalf of the church, when some heavenly being in dazzling white appears, "Friends at Immanuel. Do not be afraid to go with that particular HVAC company. And if you are thinking about refinancing the mortgage, the way will be clear." This is not the way God typically speaks to us.

That's not to rule out the possibility that people have had or might have encounters with supernatural beings bearing messages from God. It's just that the encounters most of us have with God's spokespersons are a little less flashy, not quite as easy to discern. The angels we tend to encounter are wearing skin, not gossamer wings and halos. Like the little child who asks, "Daddy, its Mother's Day why don't you come to church with us? I think Mom would really like that." Or the friend who encourages you to eat right and get enough sleep, the one who sends a note or an email right when you need to see it... Or the man who is like a broken record in his passion for making a difference in the inner city... Or the woman who reminds you that you should never, never tire in working for justice.... Or the professor who says, "Go and speak to somebody you don't know about Jesus and why Jesus is important." You see, the word angel literally means messenger, and the messengers from God I've met have almost always been human beings like you and me.

By now most of you know that Darcy Cors, Allan and Darleen's daughter, died on Tuesday at the age of forty-four, after a short but courageous battle with cancer. When I met with her family on Wednesday to hear their stories about her and to begin planning for her memorial service, someone mentioned that they thought Darcy might be an angel now. Could be. I don't know about that. What I do know is that Darcy's life on earth brimmed over with compassion and an exuberant joy in living. Her way of approaching life with open-hearted gusto sent a message to people that life was for living and people and animals were for loving. So, in a sense, she was an angel among us while she was alive. A tank-driving, sky-diving, slope-skiing angel.

We don't know exactly what sort of angel appeared to give Philip the message to go down to the Wilderness Road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Maybe it WAS the supernatural kind. Maybe it was just a vision that came to him in a dream. Maybe it was simply a friend saying, "You know Philip, I've got this sense that you need to go south for a while, down to that Wilderness Road, you know the one that runs between here and Gaza." Whatever sort of angel came to Philip, he got up and went to the Wilderness Road.

More often than we want to admit, I think God's messengers tell us, "Go to the wilderness road." The Wilderness Road is not so much a place as it is a way, an approach to life. It is off the beaten path,

somewhere beyond our comfort zones and the way we've always done it. On the Wilderness Road, we might not be sure exactly what is coming next, but we have a heightened awareness to what is around us, a ramped up sensitivity to the people we meet. If you want to be on the Wilderness Road, you might try a mission trip. You'll experience it, in Peru, or West Virginia, or Pennsylvania. You'll find a Wilderness Road.

It was on the Wilderness Road that Philip encountered something he probably did not expect: an Ethiopian eunuch, a dark-skinned man of wealth, power, and complicated sexuality. This eunuch was bumping along in a chariot and reading Hebrew Scripture. I don't know how he kept from getting carsick. He was reading specifically, the book of Isaiah. But from a distance, Philip would not have been able to discern that.

So the Spirit tells Philip. "Go and join that chariot." Incidentally, that's a second way God speaks to us - not just through human or supernatural messengers, but through the Spirit within us. To be attentive to that Spirit is to be receptive to the sense that we should do or say something, that drive that leads us to engage others, to transcend boundaries that would keep us separate, to do the kind of thing Jesus would do. It is to go and join the chariot.

Philip goes to join the chariot, and as he draws near, he hears the eunuch reading aloud from Isaiah. This would have confounded his expectations a bit. A black man reading Hebrew scripture. I remember being a little surprised to hear that Sammy Davis Jr. was Jewish. So this might have thrown him a bit. The fact that the man was a eunuch may or may not have been immediately apparent, but it would have been clear from his garb that he had a position of some authority. And what Philip would not have known right off, but would certainly have become clear in his conversation with the man was that the eunuch had been to Jerusalem to worship. That experience would have been disappointing to say the least. Because despite the eunuch's spiritual hunger and his wealth and position of power, he would have been turned away from the Temple... *No, I'm sorry, Sir, we don't take your kind here.*

And that might have been Philip's reaction to the eunuch, too, at least at one point in his life. But now he understands about the boundary-transcending love of Jesus - a love that reached out to Samaritan, and leper, and prostitute, and tax collector and Gentile - a love that is for the whole world, no exceptions. It's a love that sees the image of God in everyone, not just people who are like us.

One of my homiletical heroes told a story of how that love gets lived out in people's lives in a sermon he preached back in 2005. Tom Long said this in that remarkable sermon.

I was moved some years ago to read an article in The New York Times about Dr. Joyce Wilkins. She could have had a toney East Side medical practice and made a lot of money, but instead her medical practice was out of the back of a Ford Econoline van cruising through midtown Manhattan looking for prostitutes. She would strike up a relationship and win their trust, and then she would take them into the clinic and do blood tests and give them medical care and a word of encouragement and hope. The reporter interviewing her said, "Even though you give them medical care, many of them die. AIDS is an epidemic. You lose a lot of your patients. It must be very discouraging."

She said, "Well, that's one way to look at it, but that's not the way I look at it. My mother taught me to look at it another way. My mother was for all of her life a teacher of brain-damaged children, and she taught me that when you look at people you don't look at the damage. You look at the image. You don't look at the damage; you look at the image of God in them. I knew that most forcefully," she said, "one night when my mother had for parent's night her class do a performance of My Fair Lady. It never occurred to my mother not to let a brain-damaged girl in a wheelchair roll across the stage singing, "I could have danced all night, I could have danced all night."'"²

Philip understands about a love that dances. Because he understands about the love of God, he asks the eunuch, "Do you understand what you are reading?" After the eunuch says, "How can I without someone to help me?" he invites Philip into the chariot to assist him in interpreting what he is reading. And Philip climbs right aboard.

What the eunuch was doing was not just inviting him into his chariot; he was inviting him into his pain. That's why the eunuch asks Philip, "Who is this prophet speaking about when he writes, like a sheep he was led to slaughter, like a lamb silent before his 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." And Philip sees that question as an open door to tell the man about the love of God embodied in someone who could relate to being excluded and oppressed, cast aside and ignored, a man who was rejected by the religious authorities. He told the eunuch the story of someone who could relate to him in his pain, someone who would not let that pain be the last word. He told him the story of Jesus.

Last year at the Festival of Homiletics that I attend every year (last year it was in Minneapolis, this year it will be in Atlanta), I heard the Episcopal Bishop of North Carolina, an African-American man named Michael Curry, preach. During one of his sermons, he talked about the time he officiated at a funeral service for a young black man in his community. This young man was probably seventeen, eighteen. He had been gunned down in a drive-by shooting, gang-related.

Bishop Curry said he had his remarks all ready to go. Then he got up in the pulpit and he looked out and there was a sea of young African-American men all through that congregation. And he thought, "I can't use what I've got on the page here. These young men don't know the story. They need to hear the story."

So he started. "Once upon a time, long, long ago, an angel came to a young woman named Mary. Her baby boy grew up to eat with tax-collectors and sinners, and reach out to prostitutes and lepers. He worked miracles. But the most important thing he did was he loved. He loved even his enemies. They hung him on a cross and he died. And they thought that was the last of him. But death couldn't stop the power of that man and the God he served and came to show us."³

I don't know how many of those young African-American men came up to Bishop Curry after the service and pointed to the font and said, "Here is water. What is to prevent us from being baptized?" What I do know is that they learned about the love of God and how it gets fleshed out in human beings.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ Robert Wall, "Book of Acts" *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Vol. X* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), p. 143

² The text of Tom Long's sermon, preached at the Covenant Network Conference on November 3rd, 2005, can be found online at. <http://www.covenantnetwork.org/sermon&papers/long.htm>

³ This is based on my memory of hearing Bishop Curry preach in Minneapolis.