

26 An angel from the Lord spoke to Philip, "At noon, take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.) 27 So he did. Meanwhile, an Ethiopian man was on his way home from Jerusalem, where he had come to worship. He was a eunuch and an official responsible for the entire treasury of Candace. (Candace is the title given to the Ethiopian queen.) 28 He was reading the prophet Isaiah while sitting in his carriage. 29 The Spirit told Philip, "Approach this carriage and stay with it."

30 Running up to the carriage, Philip heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you really understand what you are reading?"

31 The man replied, "Without someone to guide me, how could I?" Then he invited Philip to climb up and sit with him. 32 This was the passage of scripture he was reading:

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter  
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent  
so he didn't open his mouth.

33 In his humiliation justice was taken away from him.  
Who can tell the story of his descendants  
because his life was taken from the earth?

34 The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this? Is he talking about himself or someone else?" 35 Starting with that passage, Philip proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him. 36 As they went down the road, they came to some water.

The eunuch said, "Look! Water! What would keep me from being baptized?" 38 He ordered that the carriage halt. Both Philip and the eunuch went down to the water, where Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Lord's Spirit suddenly took Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing. 40 Philip found himself in Azotus. He traveled through that area, preaching the good news in all the cities until he reached Caesarea. -Common English Bible

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When I am preparing a sermon, one of the first things I do is to sit with each verse of the passage on which I am planning to preach, each verse, one at a time, making notes about what I notice, what I wonder, what connections I make... I let the passage soak into me, one verse at a time, and see what emerges from me as the word soaks in. And so it was with this passage— I read "An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, 'At noon, take a road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a desert road.)" An angel of the Lord... hmm... in the flesh? In his mind? An angel is a messenger from God— what form did he/she/it take? We know the angel has a voice, the Bible says the angel spoke to Philip. So Philip hears marching orders. And they are weird orders — take a desert road at noon? Who would do that? If Philip were planning his itinerary

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he'd opt for an early morning departure, I'd imagine... Anything to avoid direct sunlight in the desert. I sat with these observations... and then I started remembering.

On a dismal night in late November in northern New York, I was just sitting down for supper with my husband when my phone rang. It was a man who was somewhat loosely related to the congregation I was serving. He was very concerned about a friend who was then in the hospital in our village. His friend, a hunting buddy, had almost died and was now trying to make sense of still being alive. The man who called me said "Sarah, you need to go see him. You need to talk to him. Please." I promised him I'd do my best to make a connection. And then returned to the dinner table for my supper. I was thinking I'd go the next day, not heading out into that dismal night, rather greeting this stranger with fresh energy in the bright light of day. I prayed with Kevin and then took three bites of supper and said, "I don't understand this, but I have to go now." Kevin, being the exceedingly gracious man that he is said, "Of course, go." So I did.

I threw on heavy winter boots and coat and scarf and drove the short distance to the hospital. I moved with haste, driven by a sense of urgency. Apparently I traipsed mud into his hospital room. He shared this detail with me years later; it tickled him that a pastor could be so earthy, even sloppy. I found a man in bed and a young woman at his side, the young woman being his only daughter who had a relationship with God through Christ. She said, "You're a pastor? I'll let you two have some time alone." And she left. And then I listened to what had happened, to this man's complicated history with the church and with Christians. I listened to him processing the word from his Jewish doctor, "God has let you live for some reason." He made it quite clear he had no interest in joining a father daughter softball team (I assured him we had no such team for him to join) nor cooking for a chicken barbecue (I told him none were scheduled through the long winter just beginning.) I made it quite clear that I needed nothing from him, that I was simply there to listen to him and pray with him if he'd like. But I also sensed a hunger in him, a yearning and so I invited him to come sit in the church sometime when no one else was there. It sounded like he needed quiet space for meditation— and an experience of church that leaves people

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out of it, at first. He was shocked at that invitation. “I could do that? Could I bring my wife?” “Of course,” I said, “Just give me a call and I’ll let you in. No strings attached.”

Some time after he was released from the hospital, I received a call from him asking me, rather skeptically, if I had meant what I had said, if he could really come sit in the sanctuary with his wife and no one else. “No offense, but I don’t want to talk with you. I just want to sit in quiet.” “None taken, come on over. I’ll let you in.” I let him in and then he went on to talk with me for well over an hour. Before he left I gave him a Bible.

Months passed and we connected again. He was extraordinarily frustrated. He had read the Bible and got NOTHING out of it. “Excuse me,” I replied, “You did what? You read the Bible? Like the whole thing?” “Yes, the whole thing! It’s a book. I read it. What else was I supposed to do with it?” “Good point. I’m just impressed. Not many people read the Bible cover to cover. I’m also not surprised you didn’t get anything out of it. That’s not really the best way to read the Bible. Now you’re ready for a Bible Study— we start this Wednesday. I know you don’t like to join things. But if you’ve read the whole Bible you’re seeking something. And I can’t think of a better next step. So why not try it?” And he became a steady participant in our Wednesday night class, and eventually a steady worshipper, and... long after I moved on... he joined the church. He sent me pictures and stories of that glorious day.

So, back to Acts, when we open up this ancient story there’s a lot about it that makes us scratch our heads— angel of the Lord? An Ethiopian eunuch? A carriage on a desert road? Water in the desert for a spontaneous baptism? This is a story from long ago and far away... and when we sit with it we realize how strange it is. Maybe something about it will grab us and speak to us. Maybe it is just too strange. This is true of a lot of scripture passages. On a straight reading of them, we understand the words, perhaps, but we don’t really understand. We can feel like the man I just told you about, frustrated because we read this book that’s supposed to be so important, but we don’t get anything out of it. Anyone relate? We can feel like the Ethiopian Eunuch, clearly a privileged man, an educated man, a literate man— able to read and so reading from the scriptures himself, but not really understanding without someone

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to guide him. I have studied the Bible enough, and sat in enough Bible studies with all kinds of Christians, to know that we all feel this way about the Bible sometimes, even, perhaps, a lot of the time.

This is why we have preachers and teachers. It's a funny thing to preach about preaching, it's like a play within a play, but you spend 20 or so minutes listening to preaching most weeks, why not think about what the heck this practice is. Let's take a closer look at our story from Acts— we can learn a lot about preaching from this story.

First of all, who is the primary actor in our story? We have two main characters— Philip and the Ethiopian... but Philip is acting on orders from whom? The Angel of the Lord, and then the Spirit... Philip is doing a lot. But everything he does, he does at the prompting of God— he seems to be a vessel for God's action. Remember, he likely never would have been on that road at that time if God had not told him to go there. He likely never would have approached a parked carriage if God had not told him to do so. He does with great energy everything God tells him to do, but none of it is his own idea. Similarly, when I act as a preacher or teacher of scripture, I do so at the prompting of God. I ask God's Spirit to bring light to the scriptures and to help me to speak the word that God needs me to speak. I am but an instrument of God, a vessel through whom God speaks. I hope. The founding father of our theological tradition, Jean Calvin, suggested that we cannot access God in all God's infinite glory and wisdom— God is too great for our minds to receive... God is totally beyond us... so God accommodates us, God meets us where we are by using common, everyday, ordinary objects and people to teach us who God is and what God desires for us. God uses water, bread, juice, and ordinary people— preachers— to do God's work on earth through the church. It's not about the water, the bread, the juice, the preacher— it's about God— the God we meet through water, bread, juice, and even through mediocre sermons delivered by preachers with muddy boots.

So here's another element in today's story to notice— scripture comes first. The Ethiopian is reading from the Prophet Isaiah. This is where it all begins. So, too, do we read scripture before preaching on it. I do not begin with an idea and then find scripture to shore it up... I let ideas come from scripture. Faithful preaching is an

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exposition of scripture, an unpacking of scripture, an effort to guide people in their reading of scripture so that it might speak today. It is about finding contemporary stories or metaphors... images and ideas... that shed light on ancient passages. The point is to let God speak through the scriptures in a way that can be heard and digested.

When Philip and the Ethiopian read the scriptures together, the Ethiopian asks excellent questions about the poetry they read— *“Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this? Is he talking about himself or someone else?”* These are actually questions people still ask today. And there are many different answers to this question— scholars in the past century would tell you that the prophet Isaiah, writing LONG before the birth of Jesus Christ, had to be talking about someone in his own time and place, and or about the whole nation of Israel. But for generations Christians have read passages about the suffering servant in Isaiah and have seen Jesus. We see in this description:

*Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter  
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent  
so he didn't open his mouth.*

*In his humiliation justice was taken away from him.*

*Who can tell the story of his descendants  
because his life was taken from the earth?*

... We see in this a poetic representation of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. And so did Philip. Starting with this passage, Philip tells the Ethiopian the good news about Jesus Christ, about his life, death, and resurrection... And this, also, is typically what we do in preaching. We start from a particular passage and let that speak to us, but we seek to deliver the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. That's the main message the church has to offer. And one way or another we seek to offer it every week. A 20th century theologian, Karl Barth, suggested that we can understand the Word of God in three ways— the scripture is the word— the word read. Preaching is the word— the word proclaimed. Jesus Christ is the Word— the word in flesh. Therefore, when we preach, by God's grace, we bear Jesus to the congregation. We are letting God take on flesh again.

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One last thing to point out: after Philip preaches in that carriage, the Ethiopian sees water and says, “What would keep me from being baptized?” The word preached evokes a response, a powerful and immediate response in the case of the Ethiopian. He is ready to commit his life to Christ, to begin a life as Christ’s disciple. By God’s Spirit, so it is yet today— sometimes more subtle responses are evoked, but when the word is faithfully preached, it evokes response— the beginning or the deepening of discipleship, of following Jesus. This is part of the act of preaching— preaching is not just what God does in and through the preacher, but it is also what God does in and through the listeners. We enact this by letting song, prayer, offering, and sacraments — baptism and communion— follow preaching in our worship services. But often the response comes in the days, weeks, or even months ahead.

Once the Ethiopian is baptized, Philip is whisked away by the Spirit— this is an effective way for God to make sure that the Ethiopian doesn’t put too much weight on Philip, God’s instrument and agent. The Ethiopian can focus instead on the God he has met in Jesus Christ through the guidance he has received from Philip and can joyfully go on his way to offer the same gift to others. And this is a good reminder to us— it’s not about the preacher... any preacher will tell you that often it is their worst sermons that evoke the most powerful responses— it is about what God does in you, through the scriptures and the preaching and teaching on them. That’s the point. And preaching doesn’t have to happen in a pulpit. It doesn’t just happen on Sunday morning. It happens on desert roads at noon and in hospital rooms after dark. It happens wherever the word takes on flesh again, in a way that people can hear and understand, and in a way that evokes a response of faithfulness. It’s not entertainment. It’s not even good public speaking. That’s not the point. It’s the Word of God speaking today... when God’s Spirit lets it be so. That’s what preaching is: The Word of God, speaking today, when God’s Spirit lets it be so.