

Title: BLESS – Share God’s Story

Last week I gave you a homework assignment to write down a story from your own life about God’s transforming power and to bring it with you this Sunday to share. After church someone said, “That was a good way to get people to skip church!” I hope that’s not the case, and even if that is the reason for lower attendance this morning then I’ll just blame the three day weekend.

We’ve been reflecting on what it means to BLESS people in the form of spiritual conversations.

B Be with people
L Learn their story
E Embody God’s Truth
S Share your story
S Share God’s story

This acronym describes how we can make ourselves available, to be part of God’s work in tugging at the hearts of others. We are re-imagining what it evangelism can look like – to see it not as a duty or obligation but truly as a blessing. When we participate in God’s work of drawing people in, we get blessed as we see how they are getting blessed!

We can think of these spiritual conversations as divine appointments. They are God-orchestrated events. We don’t have to create them, or force them, or gin them up. We can trust that, as we are open to them a la BLESS, they will be part of the natural flow of our lives. For disciples, who cultivate the gospel in our lives, divine appointments and spiritual conversations just happen!

Disciples know the good news story in their bones.

That’s why:

Disciples receive divine appointments!

There are so many amazing “divine appointment” stories in the Bible, and many of them (of course) are about spiritual conversations between Jesus and spiritually hungry, hurting people. Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well in John 4 is a great one. But here is one involving Philip, one of Jesus’ twelve apostles, from the book of Acts:

Text: Acts 8:26-40 NRSV

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.

There are certain things that inevitably happen with God’s story takes root and blossoms in someone’s heart. We can see them in this story. When the gospel is proclaimed:

Past Longings are explained
The Present Kingdom is proclaimed
An opportunity for Response is given

Past Longings are explained

This story shows how God was already at work in this influential Ethiopian’s life long before Philip comes along. Metanoia, mind-changing, is already happening. Otherwise he wouldn’t be reading and desiring to understand one of Israel’s prophets. God was already working on his heart. We know that this is how the Holy Spirit works. The longing is already there.

And that longing has always been there, and is evident throughout what we call the Old Testament. Any good explanation of the gospel always includes context, and that context is a long tradition of histories, prophets, and psalms that anticipated the coming Messiah. Jesus didn’t fall out of the sky. God’s revelation in the form of a person – a Messiah – was long anticipated. Israel had been longing for it. Indeed, the whole world had been waiting for it!

The Present Kingdom is proclaimed

When Jesus began his public ministry he began with these words: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matt 4:17, repeating John the Baptist’s words in Matt 3:2.) In other words: *Change your mind about things! Why? Because the Good Life of God is now available!*

The “Kingdom” was central to the message and ministry of Jesus. It is mentioned 123x in the gospels. Jesus used parables to correct wrong notions of the kingdom. Jesus’ kingdom was rejected by those who sought their own kingdoms. Jesus was enthroned on a cross for our sin, raised from the dead and ascended to the Father. He will return to claim his kingdom in fullness and defeat all evil, sin, sickness, sorrow & death.

When verse 35 says that “Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus,” it likely means that Philip picked up where Jesus did and then explained all this to the influential Ethiopian official. Philip told him how, in the person of Jesus, God’s Good Life is right in front of us, ready to be received and enjoyed right now.

An opportunity for Response is given

In the New Testament, when the gospel is proclaimed the response is immediate. “[T]he 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.”

This may seem really sudden to us. Again, clearly God had been working on this man’s heart for some time. When Philip got done explaining, it all clicked for this man. He was ready to enter into this new life immediately!

We need to be prepared for this. We need to be prepared for the possibility that the person with whom we are speaking is going to want – indeed, they are going to need! – to take action on the truth that has now blown their hearts wide open. We can help them say their first prayer. We can make a plan to meet and read the gospel of Mark together. We can bring them to church next Sunday. We can gather others around to celebrate what God has done.

Perhaps like me, you have longed to hear a story that captures how a person can BLESS others in this way. Yesterday I heard just the story! I heard a beautiful interview with David Sparks, a United States Air Force Chaplain who was preparing to retire after decades of service to military families. Stationed at Dover Air Force Base, it was a particular challenging week as him as he – along with the families of the 13 soldiers killed outside the Kabul airport – received the bodies of their fallen heroes. A Church of the Nazarene pastor, Chaplain Sparks spoke with NPR’s Scott Simon.

<https://www.npr.org/2021/09/04/1034281117/chaplain-david-sparks-has-comforted-military-families-for-decades-now-hes-retiri>

He was asked, “how do you know what to say to grieving families?”

We've learned that the best interactions happen when we ask them questions, and give them the privilege of sharing their stories.

Chaplain Sparks has learned to BE with people.

Then he was asked, "have you ever been asked a question that just stopped you cold?"

No, because when someone asks me a question – and sometimes it is a very hard question – I am not trying to process how to answer it. I am looking for the right creative question to ask in response.

We learned this as we thought about LEARNING people's stories, didn't we? Sparks continued:

Once a woman asked me if she thought her husband was in heaven. I said, "From that question, it sounds like you have a faith background. What does your faith tell you?" That was enough to trigger all of her thoughts and all of her background, and she was able to answer her own question about what she believed and where he was.

Finally Chaplain Sparks was asked, "Do you see hand of God at work in what you are doing?"

Absolutely, both in the lives of those I have touched over the years, and in my own.

Watch this: Chaplain Sparks is about to SHARE his own story!

Simons asked, "How would you describe that to us?"

I think that I am a better man and a better minister. My faith is much easier for me these days. I grew up in a kind of closed system, where everything had its right answer whether you understood it or believed it or not. I have come to a much easier and a much more open relationship certainly with religion and with people and with my God. My God smiles at me a lot, and sometimes laughs at me and that's okay! In the old days, if I did something really stupid, I was pretty sure that God was going to flick me off the face of the earth. That's not true anymore.

He concluded by saying,

We have a loving God, who accepts us as we are, with all our failures and foibles.

And there, for the millions of listeners tuning into Weekend Edition, Chaplain Sparks SHARED the God's Story, our gospel, in one sweet little sentence. It was a proclamation made credible and real to us by his lifetime of embodying God's truth alongside people experience the very worst moments of their entire lives.

Move to the Lord's Table