

Explaining
August 6, 2023
West Valley Presbyterian Church



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Acts 8:26-40

1. Two weeks ago we looked at Stephen and Philip, and how God brought growth to the church even though Stephen was killed and the church was scattered. Today we're going to follow up with Philip. When we last saw him, he was in Samaria, talking to people in their villages and performing miracles; and many people came to faith in Jesus because of him. In today's passage he is told to go and talk with just one person, which also had a substantial impact. Hear now the reading of God's word from Acts, chapter 8, vv 26-40.

SLIDES 2-8

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian^[a] eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

³¹ "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

³² This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

³³In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth.”^[b]

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

³⁶As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” ^{[37] [c]} ³⁸And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing ⁴⁰Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Here ends the reading of God’s holy word. Thanks be to God.

There is so much we can learn in this passage about how to share faith with people!

The thing that I notice first of all, is that talking with people about Jesus does not have to be scary. We don’t have to preach to a crowd; we just have to be aware of the people around us that God has placed in our path. Talking about Jesus does not have to be obnoxious, and indeed it shouldn’t be; obnoxious doesn’t work. All we have to do is be able to answer questions when asked.

So here’s a question: If someone were to ask you why you believe that Jesus rose from the dead, what would you say? If there’s someone sitting next to you, tell them what you’d say. If there isn’t someone sitting next to you, then write down on the bulletin what you’d say. The question is, “why do you believe Jesus rose from the dead?”

How did that go? Let’s look more closely at this passage to get some pointers about answering questions about Jesus.

SLIDE 9

Philip didn’t know that an important official from the government of Ethiopia was going to be passing through; and furthermore, he didn’t know that this very important person was either Jewish (which would have been unusual, since he was a eunuch), or, more likely, that he was strongly interested in Judaism. The official had come all the way from Ethiopia to worship at the temple; and since we’re talking about traveling by chariot and boat, we’re talking about a lot of time off of work as well as a lot of distance. Philip didn’t know any of that. But when God prompted him to be on a certain road at a certain time, he obeyed.

And because Philip obeyed, he met the man who was truly interested in God and truly puzzled about what he read about God in Scriptures – and who also had tremendous influence in Ethiopia. Our text mentions that he worked for the Ethiopian queen. That may not sound like much; but in fact it was. Ethiopia was different from a lot of other countries at the time, because it was ruled by the emperor's mother. She was the head of state. And that's because the emperor was regarded as being too sacred to get involved in the messy business of actually running an empire. So since this eunuch worked for the queen mother and had her confidence, and was in charge of the whole empire's treasury, he had a lot of power.

And, as busy people often do, this Ethiopian was multitasking. A long chariot ride to the coast? Great! What a wonderful time to read this Isaiah scroll that he has just purchased! And as everyone did back then, he was reading out loud. Everyone read out loud because texts were written in capital letters with no breaks between words, and no punctuation. Like this:

SLIDE 10

LIKEASHEEPHEWASLEDTO THE SLAUGHTERANDLIKEALAMB
BEFOREITSSHEARERSISSILENT

Try reading that silently. Now try reading out loud. It's at least a little easier, isn't it?

So of course Philip could tell what the Ethiopian was reading as he came alongside the chariot. And it just so happened that the verses he was reading were critically important in understanding why Jesus died a shameful death and yet is the Messiah. I don't think that was a coincidence, do you?

Philip made the first contact. He was familiar with the passage; he knew he could be of service; so he asked. "Hey, do you understand what you're reading?" And of course the Ethiopian says, "No. How can I unless someone explains it? I'm not clear about who Isaiah is talking about here. Is he talking about himself, or is he referring to somebody else?" And he invites Philip to sit in the chariot with him, and explain the passage.

SLIDE 11 (Acts 8:31b and 34-35)

Philip starts out by climbing into the chariot. He is willing to give the Ethiopian as much time as he needs. Then the second thing Philip does, is to answer the question: "beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus." Philip doesn't start at Genesis and work his way through to Isaiah. He starts with Isaiah 53: 7-8 because that's what the question was about. He explains why the verses refer to Jesus, and that therefore Jesus is the expected Messiah, and about Jesus' resurrection and how we are saved by responding to Jesus' call on our lives by repenting and being baptized.

SLIDE 12 (Acts 8: 36, 38)

The third thing Philip does is to baptize the Ethiopian when he asks. "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" They climb down; Philip baptizes the Ethiopian, and then...

the Spirit of the Lord takes Philip away, northward, to Azotus. His task on the Gaza road is done, and now it's the Ethiopian's job to bring the faith back to the queen mother's court. Which, church tradition says, is what he did.

Granted, our situation is not exactly the same as Philip's! When God sends us to divine appointments, it's more likely to be with someone whom we meet as we're going about our daily lives, the same as usual. But the way in which he talked with the Ethiopian official, is close to the same way that we are called to talk with the people whom God puts in our paths.

SLIDE 13 Meet people where they are.

1. Meet people where they are; don't expect them to come to you. Philip went to the Ethiopian; he didn't expect the Ethiopian to come find him. The church planters are proposing to do that very thing. They plan to meet people, make friends, listen to them, and invite them to Alpha groups, which are set up for adults to learn about faith and ask lots of questions. We too can meet people, make friends. We too can invite them – though in our case, it might be for a Service Service or a Christmas Eve service. We too can pray about the people that you ask us to meet.

SLIDE 14 Make sure it's a good time to talk.

2. Pay attention to what's going on with the person, and make sure it's a good time for THEM to talk about faith. Ask, don't assume. If they are busy with other things, pray for them on your own time, not on theirs. For example, suppose you are visiting someone in the hospital. You probably would talk about God with the person you're visiting, and you'd probably pray with them. They are expecting a faith conversation and prayer. But what about the nurse who comes in to provide care for the person you're visiting? Would you also talk with her about Jesus? I wouldn't recommend it, unless she asks you a faith question. And the reason why you wouldn't share faith with her unless she asks, is because she's really busy. She has a zillion details to keep track of, and more tasks to get done than she can manage during her shift. She probably doesn't have the bandwidth at that moment.

SLIDE 15 Answer the questions they have, not the questions they don't have.

3. Answer the questions that they have, as directly as you can; don't start at the beginning of Christian theology and work your way through 2000 years of tradition in order to answer. Do use Scripture to support your answer if you can; but briefly. If they have more questions, good!

SLIDE 16 Trust the Holy Spirit.

4. The Holy Spirit sent Philip where he was needed; and then sent him onward to talk with other people who needed him. And the Holy Spirit can do the same with you. He can send you to people here who need to hear what you have to say, and then send you to others who also need to hear what you have to say. So, trust him! Trust that the Holy Spirit can work in you and through you, wherever you are, whoever you're with. God can work in any situation. Amen?

Remember the question we practiced at the beginning of this sermon? Which was, what would you say if someone asked you why you believe Jesus rose from the dead? We've looked at Philip's example; so let's try that, one more time. Yes, people are right here; yes, it's a good time to talk; so, how would you answer the question that they have, and trust in the Holy Spirit? Let's try that again.//

Please join me in prayer.