



SUNDAY SERMON

Friends in Faith on a Wilderness Road

On Easter morning we shouted three times “Christ is Risen indeed, alleluia” and listened to the gospel account of the women’s world-changing discovery that Jesus’ tomb is empty. Our rector Ledlie began his sermon by asking “Now what? Now what happens?” as we turn to the question of what to do after this momentous event. How will the gift of Jesus’ life, ministry and resurrection be reflected in the lives we lead?

The Acts of the Apostles describes how Jesus’ earliest followers wrestled with the questions “Now what? Now what happens?” It is both a sprawling adventure story and a tender, inspiring account of how those touched by Jesus turned their belief into practice in order to build the kingdom of God.

The Christian movement is growing as Jesus ascends into heaven, telling his followers: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1: 8). The word “apostle” in Greek means “one who is sent off” and the Jesus community is now on a mission. Everyone will need to be ready to change job assignments and venture into unfamiliar territory when stirred to action by the Spirit.

And so this morning we join Philip, who is sent off on a wilderness road to meet a journeying pilgrim in an encounter that is transformative for them and for God’s church. This is not Philip the apostle but Philip the deacon. The 12 apostles have chosen Philip and six others to manage the charitable works of the increasingly diverse church, so that food is available to all those in need. These seven are known as the earliest deacons, and their job initially is “to wait on tables” (6: 2).

But soon Philip’s role shifts to evangelism. Powered by the Spirit, he is the first to spread the gospel to Samaria, and now he is sent south along the Mediterranean toward Gaza. And on this lonely, unfamiliar and perhaps dangerous road Philip meets an officer of the royal Ethiopian court, riding in a chariot. We’re not told his name or what led him to travel the vast distance to Jerusalem.

As treasurer to the queen, the Ethiopian is a person of high position in his home country. But as a eunuch, he has endured physical mutilation and perhaps lives a socially isolated life. He seems to be on a search to learn whether God’s love extends to all including him. Yet as a eunuch he is an outcast, prevented from full participation in temple worship.

These two differ in ways that would make many people wary of one another. In race, class, rank and homeland, they come from different worlds. Yet these differences do not prevent them from coming together at a moment when both are yearning to live into their identities as children of God.

Continued

DATE

Fifth Sunday of Easter
Sunday, Apr. 29, 2018

PREACHER

The Rev. David Griswold

VERSE

Acts 8:26-40

The Ethiopian is on his way home from Jerusalem, reading from Isaiah's prophecy about the suffering servant of God. With the Spirit's prompting, Philip catches up with the chariot, and they ride together. Philip's fervor and the Ethiopian's hospitality are aligned at just the right moment to make this a sacred encounter. Philip guides the Ethiopian to an insight about Jesus as the fulfillment of prophetic hopes for a messiah. And so when they come to some water, the Ethiopian asks, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

Imagine how excited, gratified and perhaps nervous Philip must be to hear this question, surely one of the most compelling any Christian can be asked: "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" The Ethiopian is ready to experience the saving power of Jesus and asks to join the family of believers. He and Philip are far from Jerusalem; there is no apostle for Philip to consult before responding to the question. But of course, none is needed, because this isn't a story about only two people. There is a third presence, the Holy Spirit, guiding the action that makes the improbable seem inevitable.

Both Philip and the Ethiopian go down into the baptismal water and come up together. I'm touched by the mutuality of their encounter—each needs the other in order to flourish as disciples in building the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus—a kingdom from which no one is excluded.

As the Ethiopian goes forth "rejoicing" we can be sure that he'll carry the good news back home, pushing out the boundaries of the Jesus movement toward what was then understood to be "the end of the earth." Both he and Philip have made a precious discovery about God's unconditional love, and are equipped to turn their belief into practice that will bear fruit.

If we could cross back over centuries to join this encounter, with our Books of Common Prayer in hand, I expect these disciples on a wilderness road would embrace the baptismal vows we make today. For baptism is not only about one person being "marked as Christ's own forever." It is a call to action for all of us to live as Jesus' own....to "proclaim the good news by word and example....to seek and serve Christ in all persons.... and to strive for justice and peace among all people...." and thus, turning our belief into practice.

Today's story suggests at least three ways for us to make this happen. First, don't allow fear of "the Other" to keep us from recognizing that God dwells within those who differ from us. Philip and the Ethiopian seem to have nothing in common and plenty of reasons to be cautious about one another given the cultural assumptions of the time.

Yet this doesn't prevent them from connecting, because embrace of the Other is at the heart of Jesus' message. Let us be people who continue our work of compassion and social justice to build a community where no one is an outsider.

Second, don't shy away from talking about faith. I feel blessed to have friends in faith with whom I can talk about the questions, doubts and discoveries that come up as part of our journey with God. Philip and the Ethiopian share a rapport of trust that makes their faith talk rewarding for both. Whether it's in a moving chariot or around a table sharing coffee, let us be people ready to open up to talk about life and faith.

And finally, don't settle too comfortably into a familiar routine when it comes to our faith life. The Ethiopian has traveled perhaps a thousand miles in order to gain a better understanding of how he relates to God. Philip is tasked with waiting on tables in Jerusalem but suddenly finds himself traveling on a wilderness road doing evangelism.

The gift of insight about how we can express our love for God may come to us not in our comfort zones but in the situations that stretch us. Let us be people not afraid to take an occasional detour onto a wilderness road in order to discover something new about our potential to live as bearers of Christ's light.

Amen.

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