

"Divine Appointments"
Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"

Acts 8:26-40

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Philip and the Ethiopian

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 Candace, 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 The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture:

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

³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

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

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

³⁶ As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?"^[c] ³⁸ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both 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 suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Footnotes:

- a. [Acts 8:27](#) That is, from the upper Nile region
- b. [Acts 8:33](#) Isaiah 53:7,8
- c. [Acts 8:36](#) Some late manuscripts *baptized?* ³⁷ Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." The eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

Introduction.

Have you ever had an occasion when you met someone and this chance encounter changed your life? It's only in hindsight you begin to realize God had your paths cross for a purpose, and you come to an awareness it was a divine appointment.

When I was a freshman at the University of Georgia, the day I moved into the dorm another student down the hall invited me to join him and his roommate to go to a Hardees's hamburger joint to grab something to eat. I jumped at the invitation because I was eager to meet new people. When we got there, the guy I met introduced me to another new student with whom he attended high school in Atlanta. His name was Robert Jackson.



That chance encounter with Robert would eventually change my life forever. Over the next few weeks during that freshman year, my conversations with Robert about Christianity and the Bible led to a renewal in my faith, and over the next 4 years I grew like a weed in a greenhouse in my commitment to Jesus Christ – all because of a chance encounter with a guy I met at a Hardees’s hamburger joint who just happened to be there. That meeting was a divine appointment.

This morning we read of two other people who experienced a divine appointment, and it would change their lives forever, too.

I. The Response of Philip to the Call of God.

Last week we learned of the way in which Philip the deacon became Philip the evangelist. He proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ in a city in Samaria, and many came to know the Lord. Peter and John went up from Jerusalem and put their apostolic stamp of approval on this cross-cultural work of God.

Soon after the departure of Peter and John, we are told that Philip was given another mission. He was instructed by an angel of the Lord to go south to the desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza. It was a road that stretched through the desert for about 60 miles. Gaza is the most southerly of the five formerly Philistine cities, and it is near the Mediterranean coast. We are told that as Philip walked along the road he met a eunuch from Ethiopia.

Philip responded to the call of God, and he was sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. But at first glance, in many ways it made no sense at all. Why leave such a great ministry in Samaria to go and be with one person? Why leave the city to go to the desert? Things were really hopping in Samaria. It was the first time the gospel had crossed cultural and racial barriers. Many were coming to faith in Christ, and miracles were happening right and left. Why leave now? But God’s call was unmistakable, so Philip responded in obedience, trusting that God would continue the work in Samaria through others. He left a large dynamic ministry to be with one person.

Harold Hughes was a distinguished senator from the state of Iowa in the latter half of the 20th century. He even ran for President in 1971. Harold served effectively in the senate for a number of years, and he was one of the key followers of Christ who began a Christian fellowship within and around Capitol Hill that continues to this day. However, in 1975 he chose not to run again for his seat in the senate, because he felt God was calling him to minister to one man who was struggling with alcoholism. You see, Harold Hughes was himself a recovering alcoholic, and he had experienced God's touch in his own life. The great senator announced, "I'm going to resign to be with this one man." Many people thought that this must be a very important person for Hughes to resign his position of influence to be with one individual. However, when he was asked about it, Harold replied, "No, he is really a political nobody, but I feel called to be with this one man."ⁱ

I also think of Henri Nouwen, the great Catholic theologian and writer who died in 1996. At the height of his academic popularity, Nouwen made a remarkable move. He went from being a professor at Harvard to serving a community for handicapped people in Toronto called Daybreak. Nouwen went from teaching the best and the brightest of the world to serving a small group of physically and mentally challenged people in Canada.

Henri gave a talk about it at Harvard a year or so after he had made the move to tell them what his experience had been like. At Daybreak he was called an “assistant” not “professor.” His only assignment was to help care for 6 handicapped people in his family unit. An epileptic young man named Adam was his special assignment. The priest bathed, shaved, dressed and cared for Adam’s needs.



After a seizure, Nouwen had to bathe and soothe Adam until the trauma passed. And in Adam, Nouwen said he saw God's unqualified love for a person who can neither produce nor perform.

When I think about the willingness of Harold Hughes and Henri Nouwen to make these kinds of sacrifices, it pulls me up short. I have to ask myself, "Would I be willing to respond to God's call like that? Would I make that kind of sacrifice if God asked me to?" We are all drawn to the crowds. We like to be where the action is. We want high profile and influential jobs which give us significance and meaning. But then I read about Harold Hughes, or Henri Nouwen, or Philip the evangelist, or the shepherd who left the 99 to seek after the one lost sheep. God's math and His economy are very different from yours and mine, and each of us needs to develop a willingness to heed His call, whether it is to the multitudes in Samaria or the one on the road to Gaza.

Are you listening for God's voice? If He calls you to leave the limelight and go to the desert, if He sends you away from the multitudes to minister to the one, are you ready to make that sacrifice and respond to the call?

II. The Spiritual Hunger of the Ethiopian Eunuch.

As Philip traveled on that desert road, the Holy Spirit told him to go up to a particular chariot and stay near it. Philip ran up to the chariot, and when he did so he heard this eunuch from Ethiopia reading aloud from the book of Isaiah. It was the common practice in antiquity that whenever a person read, they read aloud. (It's actually a good practice. Try reading the Bible aloud the next time you have your devotions.) Philip asked the man, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

This is a great scene in Scripture. Philip is walking down the desert road not sure why the Lord has him out there. Then the Holy Spirit tells him to go up to the chariot in which the Ethiopian was riding and to stay near it. He runs up alongside the chariot, hears the man reading aloud from the book of Isaiah, and asks breathlessly, "So, whatcha readin'?" Try doing that the next time you run the Capital 10K!

Who was this man in the chariot, and why was he reading from the prophet Isaiah? The Bible tells us he was a eunuch from Ethiopia, an important official who was in charge of the treasury of Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians. Candace was actually a traditional title for the queen mother, and she was responsible for performing all the secular duties of the reigning king. Today we would probably call this man the Secretary of Treasury for Ethiopia. The text also tells us he had gone to Jerusalem to worship and was on his way back home. We are never given the man's name, so we are forced to see him only as Philip did – by categories. He was black, he was a foreigner, and he was a eunuch, a man who had been emasculated, for what reason we are not told. Even though he was an important official, the guy had three strikes against him from a Jewish point of view, and he wasn't someone with whom Phillip would naturally feel an instant rapport.

When Philip asked the man, "Do you understand what you are reading?" the eunuch replied, "How can I unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him in the chariot. The eunuch went on to ask Philip, "Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" The passage he read was from Isaiah 53 which speaks of the Suffering Servant where it says, "*He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendents? For his life was taken from the earth*" (53:7,8).

Now, why in the world do you think this eunuch would be so interested in this particular passage about one who was humiliated and without descendents? My friend Craig Barnesⁱⁱ points out that according to Deuteronomy 23, Hebrew law did not allow a eunuch to enter holy places. Remember, this



man had just come from the temple in Jerusalem. He went there to worship, but they wouldn't let him in. He traveled all that way to Jerusalem, but he was stuck outside because he wasn't good enough.

Imagine coming here to church one Sunday morning, only to discover that you aren't good enough to get inside. So you stand outside and ask the people as they leave what it was like because you are dying for a word from God.

I suspect that if you and I are honest with ourselves and if we realized just Whose house we have wandered into on this morning, we would all wonder, "What am I doing here?" None of us are clean enough, or good enough, or whole enough to be here. We all fall short. Perhaps you look around in this sanctuary and you think to yourself, "Well, she belongs here, but not me. I don't have a great family like they do over in that pew. I don't have anyone to love. I haven't for years. I'm not a eunuch, but I might as well be. How can I fit in here? I'm not even sure I believe all the things the church does. And I'm sure I can't make my life right, because I'm in too deep and I have made too many mistakes. If everyone knew the truth about me, they'd probably throw me out, too."

As Philip began to interpret Isaiah 53 to this man from Africa, he explained the prophet's description of Jesus Christ. Jesus was despised and rejected of men. He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was laid upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. Jesus Himself had no children, He had no descendents, but as our Messiah and Savior, He created a whole new family of faith with His Father in heaven where there is room for us all.

My friend, your name is written on the spiritual walls of this church, and we belong in the family of God. It has nothing to do with your limitations, your sins, or your hurts. It has nothing to do with the family you grew up in. It has everything to do with the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, where He was dying to make you a part of God's family.

As Philip and the eunuch traveled along the road, they came to some water, and the man asked Philip to baptize him. He was ready to make a commitment to Christ right there on the spot. So the chariot was stopped, Philip and the eunuch waded into the water, and the evangelist baptized this new believer. When they came out, a black man and a white man became brothers, and a little more hope entered the world. Would that all of us had the spiritual hunger of this eunuch from Ethiopia.

III. Lessons We Can Learn For Our Lives Today.

What can we learn from this passage? There are several things we can learn from this story as we think about our own discipleship in Christ. *First, this story reminds us to be flexible in our schedules.* God has unexpected blessings for us whenever we are open to His leading, and we need to learn that an interruption may actually be a divine appointment. Hold your days loosely, and give the Holy Spirit some wiggle room as you make your plans for the future. This is something I need to learn. I've got my lists, I've got my calendar, and I don't want to get thrown schedule. But I need to slow down and take time and learn to be more flexible. Maybe you do, too.

Second, this story also reminds us that we need to take the initiative in talking to people about Jesus. Philip had to run alongside the chariot and ask the eunuch a question. He had to take the initiative. Many Christians hope that their lives will show their love for Christ and that words aren't necessary to tell people about the Lord. They keep waiting for their friends to bring up the subject, but it doesn't happen. Many times we've got to take the initiative and break the "sound barrier," as I call it, and ask the leading question.

Third, this story portrays the value of a person coming alongside a seeker. Philip entered the eunuch's world, and he got up into his chariot. As fishers of men and women, if you and I want to catch fish, we've got to go to where the fish are. We can't wait for them to come to us. And we must learn to



come alongside people and meet them where they are in our attempt to lead them to Christ. Last year Jim McBride, Fred Wilder, and Roger Berry led a “pub crawl” with folks outside the church where they went to a bar and talked about theology. That is what incarnational ministry is all about. It is coming alongside people on their terms and on their turf.

Finally, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian reminds us we need to learn to ask good questions. All too often in our efforts to share the gospel with people who don’t know the Lord, we do most of the talking and try to cram in too much information. We need to learn to listen, and we need to become better at asking good questions.

I’ll never forget the time when I was in college and my father asked me why I thought I had become passionate in my faith whereas my brothers at that time had not. I wasn’t sure where my father stood with Christ, so I saw this as my one opportunity to win him to the Lord. I proceeded to back up the dump truck of the gospel and unloaded my whole spiel regarding who Jesus was, why He came to die for our sins, and so on. A few minutes into my diatribe, my father interrupted me and quietly said, “You didn’t really answer my question, son.” It was clear the conversation was over. I missed my opportunity to come alongside my father and share my faith in a way he could understand. In my zeal I was insensitive, and today I still have regret over this.

Look the example of Philip as you seek to share your faith with others. Let’s be flexible in our schedules, willing to take the initiative, be incarnational in our witness, and effective in the questions we ask. God wants to use us to plant seeds of faith in others, just like He did with Philip the deacon.

Conclusion.

Two different men from different faiths, different cultures, and different races were traveling in different directions. But God had a different idea. He brought them together for a divine appointment, and the world would never be the same. When the Ethiopian eunuch returned home, he started a family. Oh, not a biological family, but a spiritual one. You see, the Christian church in Ethiopia grew and grew until in the 4th century Christianity became the official religion of the nation, and Ethiopia has been the longest standing continuously Christian nation in the history of the world until 1974 with the fall of Emperor Haillie Sellassie.

Even today, African Christianity is the most dynamic and fastest growing church in the world, and I believe it all started with a conversation one day between two men in the middle of the desert on the road to Gaza. If you believe in divine appointments, then there are no ordinary conversations. There are no ordinary people, and there no ordinary days. You may be talking to a co-worker, or a classmate, or a stranger in the grocery store. Maybe you take a wrong turn and get off schedule and you run into someone unexpectedly. All of a sudden, God’s presence fills the moment. Put away your iPhone. Lay down your To Do list. Get ready for a divine appointment. God has something wonderful in store for you. Amen.

ⁱCited in *“Scattered, But Not Shattered,”* Jim Singleton, p.5.

ⁱⁱ Craig Barnes, in his sermon “Water Thicker than Blood,” preached at the National Presbyterian Church on January 30, 2000.

