
The Fruit of the Wilderness Road

Acts 8:26-40

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, April 29, 2018,
by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

Acts is a book about living in the Spirit-filled wake of the resurrection. In Acts, we see what happens when the early followers of Jesus were filled by the Holy Spirit and went about proclaiming the life-altering, world-changing, new creation-making news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection to those near and far. Over the first 7 chapters of the book, the message of Jesus spread like fire. We are told that thousands upon thousands came to salvation in Christ and became part of the community of Jesus followers. Those who were baptized into the fellowship of the redeemed gave up their possessions and shared with one another, even as they prayed, ate, and worshiped together. The apostles traveled around Jerusalem healing people in Jesus' name, telling his story, and calling everyone they encountered to repentance and belief. Their proclamation and healing inspired persecution for them and for others who had joined Jesus. They were beaten, imprisoned, threatened, and even put to death. In spite of—or maybe because of—the persecution, the message spread and more people came to be baptized first in Jerusalem and then beyond.

Just as Jesus indicated before he ascended to the right hand of God, his followers were to “be [his] witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Surprisingly, the apostles to whom Jesus spoke this were not the first to take the message of Jesus beyond Jerusalem. Acts chapter 7 ends with Stephen being stoned to death, and chapter 8 begins with wide spread and severe persecution scattering “all except the apostles” throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. And Acts reports that the scattered followers of Jesus, “went from place to place, proclaiming the word.” One follower in particular, Philip, went to Samaria and proclaimed “the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (8:12). Ironically, Philip was one of the men who the apostles assigned to oversee the distribution of food to the widows because the apostles didn't want to “neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables.” Yet, Philip went out proclaiming the word to the world beyond Jerusalem.

God seems to have a sense of humor about who God sends to proclaim the message of Jesus. The A-team (the Apostles) can't be bothered by caring for the widows because they are supposed to be attending to the word, but God sent Philip, part of the widow-tending team, to spread the word. Isn't that like the resurrecting-God to work through the unexpected, the surprising, the lowly, and the unlikely to spread the good news? It seems to me a lesson we need to hear through Philip going to share about the Messiah is that proclaiming the message of Jesus is not reserved for those who get to stand in this pulpit, or teach in those classrooms across the sidewalk, or are professionally trained, or have advanced degrees—you know, the ones who might think they (or we) are the “A-team” Christians. Proclaiming the message of Jesus is for all who follow him. Proclaiming the message of Jesus is for all who in their baptism and by the grace of the Spirit committed to serve as Christ's representatives in the world. Sharing Jesus is for all who promised in their confirmation to proclaim in word and deed the good news. Being an evangelist—a good news sharer—is for you: it's for us all. God calls us all and sends any who will go to spread the message of Christ's redeeming love wherever we are. So will you go? Will you share?

Philip proclaimed the message of the Messiah in Samaria, and the fruit of the message was healing and freedom and new life and great joy. In Samaria an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” At this point in the story, Luke, the author of Acts, slips in a quick parenthetical statement. “This is a wilderness road.” The Lord sends Philip to a wilderness road, a road going away from the holy city, a road in-between, a liminal space, a desert place. There is no other word from God's messenger other than, “Get up and go.” And verse 27 says, “So he got up and went.” I have to wonder if the story gap between verses 26 and 27 really is greater than what Luke shares with us. How much did Philip really wrestle with this instruction? Did he want to go? “Now, Lord?” “There, Lord?” “For what purpose, Lord?” After all, Philip had so much success in Samaria. The fruit of his ministry there was great and evident. He even had someone trying to pay for

the power to do what he and other disciples had been doing. If I were Philip, I surely would have been giving the Lord a full list of reasons why going to the wilderness road was not that good of an idea.

I wonder if you know what it's like to be sent to a wilderness road, to be called to go when you're not sure why exactly you're being sent or to where precisely you're going? It seems like the Lord is all of the time sending people to desert and wilderness places and expecting them to trust they will encounter the Spirit once they've arrived. There's something faithful about going to places marked by their lack, their deprivation, their poverty, their scarcity, their deficiency and expecting to meet the Spirit of the living Christ there. Perhaps the prompting from the messenger of the Lord for you on this fifth Sunday of Easter is to go to the desert place, the wilderness road, and find out what the Spirit is doing there.

When the angel of the Lord prompted, Philip got up and went. And on the road, the Spirit worked to orchestrate hope and new life and joy. You see, there was another person traveling that wilderness road. Acts tells us an Ethiopian Eunuch, one of queen Candace's court officials who was in charge of her entire treasury, was returning home. The unnamed eunuch had been worshiping in Jerusalem. Though this eunuch was a high ranking official, according to the scriptural tradition of Leviticus and Deuteronomy the eunuch was "excluded from participation in Temple rituals and from full admittance, as [a proselyte], into Israel's community. As a eunuch he [was] ritually or religiously far off."¹ The eunuch was of high position yet was lowly and marginalized. Surely, we know from our experiences that a person can be materially secure, even in charge of the whole treasury, yet still be forced to the margins, stuck on the outside, and filled with poverty of the spirit. Though limited in his participation as a marginalized foreigner, this eunuch pursued worship in Jerusalem. And as he journeyed home on the wilderness road, he was reading from Isaiah when Philip saw him riding along in his chariot.

Let's pause for a moment here to remember that this is no typical scenario. The orchestration of the Spirit is all over this scene. Not only does Philip encounter the eunuch on a desert road, the eunuch has a scroll of Isaiah and is reading on the way. It's easy to forget this was before the printing press and before scriptures were limitlessly available on handheld devices. So clearly, the Spirit is setting the stage for something transformational. This preparing work of the Spirit is sometimes called "prevenient grace;" it's the grace that prepares the way for salvation and transformation by going to people and working before they even know what that grace is. It's like a seed planted and prepared that someday will become the fruit of faith. Maybe Philip's confidence to "get up and go" came from his trust that the Spirit would go before him to prepare the way for what needed to come.

Maybe our confidence to "get up and go" can come from the same trust in the Spirit. You see, the Spirit is already at work way before we ever arrive on the scene. So when you are being prompted or called or pressed or invited to move in the direction of the Spirit's leading, you can go in full confidence that you are not going alone or without all you need to do or to be just what you are called to. Let me challenge and encourage you to attend to the Spirit's calling and to take comfort that it does not come without the Spirit's empowering or without the grace that has been at work long before you ever came on the scene.

Seeing the chariot, Philip was prompted by the Spirit to go over and join it. Philip again followed the Spirit's direction. As he ran up to the chariot, he heard the eunuch reading Isaiah. I can just imagine Philip running to catch up and then jogging alongside as he heard something familiar coming from the carriage. The scene is almost comic. Can't you hear the panting Philip, gasping out the question as he tried to maintain pace, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And the eunuch said, "How can I without someone to guide me? Get in and sit beside me." If all of this was not enough, what happened next must have been the confirmation for Philip that the Spirit was working. The eunuch read from Isaiah 53, and then he asked, "About whom does the prophet say this? About himself or someone else?" Who is it that was led like a sheep to the slaughter? Who is it that had justice denied him and his life taken away from him? Who is this about?

¹ Mitzi J. Smith, *The Working Preacher*

The eunuch was searching for answers, and Philip used this opportunity to tell him about Jesus. The Spirit set the stage, and all Philip had to do was be obedient and not get in the way. Philip proclaimed the good news. He evangelized. He told the eunuch about Jesus—the one who God’s Spirit had anointed “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.” Philip shared how the prophecy of Isaiah 53 pointed to Jesus. Philip proclaimed to him that a new day had come where the promise of Isaiah 56 was being fulfilled—the promise that said:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,
“the Lord will surely separate me from his people”;
And do not let the eunuch say,
“I am just a dry tree.”
For thus says the Lord:
To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off. (Isaiah 56: 3-5)

Philip used what the Spirit placed before him to shine light on the light of the world, to tell of the one through whom death was put to death and by whom captivity was taken captive, to share about the crucified/resurrected messiah—Jesus—through whom everyone is invited into the kingdom of God’s love.

Surely Philip’s experience of the Spirit creating the opportunity to tell about Jesus is not unique to him. I believe the Spirit still works like this. Folks all around are looking for answers to questions for which Jesus is the answer. And sometimes all it requires of us is to be obedient to the Spirit, come alongside others, join them where they are, and when the opportunity presents itself, share the good news. Perhaps you’re being invited to this today. Perhaps the Spirit has been setting the stage for good news sharing for you.

Something resonated deep within the eunuch. The good news Philip proclaimed inspired the eunuch to faith. Something about Jesus—God’s Messiah—identifying with the humiliated and those who suffer, with the outsider and the outcast, with the unclean and the uncommon, with the misfits and the marginalized, with the those who’ve had justice denied and community withheld, something about Jesus identifying with these must have connected with the eunuch. There’s something particularly good about Jesus when you count yourself among the last and the least and the left behind. There’s something particularly hopeful and joyful and freeing about Jesus when you’re marked among the hopeless and despairing and imprisoned. Perhaps this is why the Spirit has called and continues to call followers of Jesus to go precisely to folks like these to witness the movement of the Spirit and proclaim God’s kingdom. You see, the good news of Jesus means welcome into the community of God’s redeemed. The good news of Jesus means knowing and experiencing God’s love without needing to be good enough or perfect enough or whole enough for it.

The good news of Jesus means the pains and pitfalls of the past do not have ultimate power over the future. The good news of Jesus means welcome at the table and freedom to worship in body, and spirit, and truth just as we are. The good news of Jesus means having freedom and hope and new life. The good news means all of this for the eunuch, and it means this for us and for all to whom the Spirit goes.

In what can only be described as a miracle, Philip and the eunuch came upon some water in the desert. The eunuch’s surprise and excitement overflowed. “Look, here is water!” Whatever Philip had said to him on that wilderness road, it must have been clear to the eunuch that there was an open invitation offered to him to join God’s people through

baptism. And now that water had appeared in a desert place, the eunuch asked, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” The obvious answer is nothing! Nothing was to prevent the eunuch from receiving this grace. Nothing was to stop the fruit of faith from ripening on that wilderness road—not church order or ensuring orthodox belief or full indoctrination through catechism or any of the other barriers we construct, as useful as they may be—nothing. No, none of these things would get in the way of the Spirit’s work. So Philip and the eunuch entered the water, and Philip baptized him. And as they came up, Philip was carried away, and the eunuch was free in Christ to joyfully share his story. So he went on his way with Spirit-filled rejoicing.

Rejoicing is the fruit of the wilderness road. Joy that overflows is what comes when the Spirit sends the people of Jesus beyond the familiar and even to the desert place and there creates a Spirit-designed encounter. Joy is what comes when those who are on the outside realize that because of Jesus the boundary wall has been removed and there nothing to stop them from joining in. So joy is the invitation for each of us today. Will you join the Spirit and experience the joy? I will. Amen.