

Life in the Spirit

Philip was one of the original seven deacons selected to serve the early Christian church in Jerusalem. One day an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza, a wilderness road." Philip was probably going about his daily obligations when this messenger from God came to him. Whatever it was he had planned, or whatever he had been doing, like the first disciples who left their nets on the seashore to follow Jesus, Philip said 'yes.' He simply got up and responded to the invitation. And there, as he was traveling on the road, he saw an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official. This person was returning home, seated in his chariot, and reading the scriptures. Once again, Philip was urged into action. The Spirit told him, "Go over to this chariot and join it." This person was a foreigner, a stranger. Yet, Philip followed the Spirit's prompting. He ran up to the chariot, so close he could hear this person reading from the prophet Isaiah.

Philip then took the next step. He asked the Ethiopian, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The official replied that he cannot unless someone guides him, and he asked Philip to come join him. Think about this: Philip, who had earlier been in Jerusalem going about his daily business, is now sitting with a court official in a chariot bound for Ethiopia. There in the chariot, Philip began to explain the scriptures, and proclaims to his new acquaintance the good news about Jesus.

The dialogue between them must have been so dynamic, and the movement of the Spirit so powerful, that as they were traveling and they came upon some water, the Ethiopian excitedly said, "Look, here is some water! Why shouldn't I be baptized, here and now?"

I have wondered what I would do in this situation. Imagine I am carpooling with someone on the way to St. George; he is a stranger, and not a Christian. And I begin to tell this person about Jesus. And at some point, while traveling we pass a river, or a maybe a small lake off to the side of the road, this person says to me, "Hey, look! Here is some water! Why shouldn't you baptize me right now?" I would probably hesitate. I might say, "Well, according to the canons of the church, and the rubrics found in the Book of Common Prayer..." Or I might suggest that when he is in his hometown, he should find an Episcopal parish, and then he could talk to the parish priest there.

But Philip's response is bold and without hesitation. The chariot is stopped, and Philip baptizes him. And no sooner did this take place, no sooner did they come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord literally snatches Philip away once more. He then finds himself in another region altogether, and as he travels there, he proclaims the good news to all those towns and ends up in Caesarea.

The story of Philip is about living in the Spirit. It is about being open to the Spirit, so that the most remarkable and unexpected things might take place. Go to the desert road, Philip, the Spirit calls, and he responds yes. Join the chariot, he is prompted, and Philip runs in obedience. Talk about the scriptures. Share the Good News of Jesus' love for us. Teach. Baptize. And then, at any moment, to be ready to journey on a different road, wherever the Spirit calls, so you can share the good news again. At one level, it is the story of the conversion of the Ethiopian: he was the one who was taught, and heard about Jesus, and was baptized. But there is also another transformation going on here, as Philip discovered the gospel was bigger and more surprising than he had realized.

What about you and me? In our baptism, we vow to proclaim the Good News of God's love in Christ in our words and our deeds. Do we honestly and intently pray, "Come, Holy Spirit" so that this might happen? How do we open ourselves so we might be led and inspired by the Spirit?

It starts by simply being aware. Every Christian is to live with eyes and heart open, ready to see the Spirit moving, in the world around them, and in their own life. Bible scholar William Barclay explains it this way: an astronomer will look at the sky and see more than the ordinary person. A botanist will look at a plant and see more than the rest of us. An experienced musician will listen to a symphony and hear more than those with no musical training. The same is to be true with those who have been given the Spirit that Jesus promised is given to all of us. If we follow Jesus, we are asked to be open to see the Spirit at work in the world around us. It means having an expectant faith, trusting that the Spirit of the living God is among us, ready to bring life and renew the face of the earth. It means being ready to follow where the Spirit leads.

We might think that we could never be like Philip, heading off on new paths at a moment's notice. But in our own way, and within our own story, we are called to the same mission as Philip and all the disciples were. We are called to be aware in

hearing God's call. We are asked to be just as willing to share God's love. The Spirit may not call us onto wilderness roads; we probably won't be invited onto a chariot heading for Ethiopia, but the Spirit just may call us from where we are, this day or any day, to new journeys, and new ways of proclaiming the gospel through our words and actions.

Where do we look for the Spirit to move in our lives? Where might we hear the voice of the Spirit calling us to something new? Thomas Merton once wrote, "The gate of heaven is everywhere." In other words, the ways of God, the Spirit of God, can enter our lives from anywhere. Jesus said, the Spirit will blow where it chooses. It will move according to its purpose, and its timetable. We cannot control the Spirit. We cannot ask the Spirit to show up at 8:00 and 10:30 on Sunday morning, and then leave us alone the rest of our week so things can go according to *our* expectation and plans. The Spirit is going to blow and move at unexpected times and places. It will show up in church, I trust. But the Spirit may also visit us at home, at work, when we are within this community, and when we are with family and friends. The gate of heaven is everywhere.

The voice and movement of the Spirit can come to us at any time, in ways ordinary or spectacular. The Spirit may call you to respond to a need that you see or hear about, perhaps across town, or across the world, or right in front of your eyes. The Spirit may whisper to us when we are in the middle of a busy day at home or work, when something inside tells us we ought to share some love and compassion with someone nearby. The Spirit may ask us to share our faith story with a friend, or like Philip, with a stranger. We do this not to convert them to become an Episcopalian – although that would be nice – but to share the good news of God's love that we have known, and let the Spirit take it from there.

Living in the Spirit will ask you to risk and be vulnerable. The Spirit may invite you to change, and grow, and give yourself to God and others more freely. That is exactly what love does: love in any relationship asks us to risk, and be vulnerable, and give of our whole self. That is what John was writing in his letter: to love God and to love one another is the have the Spirit of God.

Jesus has loved us completely, and Jesus has given us his Spirit. The Spirit that breathed inside Jesus, the Spirit that moved with flames among the disciples at Pentecost, the Spirit that prompted Philip on his adventures – that same Spirit has

been given to you and me. It is as close as our breath, and our next breath, and the next one. May we open ourselves to the Spirit; may we be open to live and share the love of Christ. Amen.

Trace Browning

5th Sunday of Easter – Year B

Acts 8:26-40 • Psalm 22:24-30 • 1 John 4:7-21 • John 15:1-8

Preached at All Saints Episcopal Church – Salt Lake City, Utah

28 April 2024