

Pandemic: Phase Four

May 3, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches (*via video*)

Acts 8:26-39

Review of Pandemic Series

Wild spread of the good news of resurrection hope in an almost virus-like way.

- **Phase 1:** No human infection. Resurrection.
- **Phase 2:** A human infected. Emmaus Road.
- **Phase 3:** Community-wide infection. Choosing of the seven; stoning of Stephen. Organizing of life in community; growing pains; challenges; the challenge for us not to suppress the spirit of God moving in our midst when the discomfort that the Spirit can bring makes us want to move in a different direction.
- Today we move into **Phase 4:** Where we don't just have a good number of outbreaks in once community, but now *many* communities have been affected. And today we see this happening in the story of Philip meeting the Ethiopian eunuch on the road to Gaza.

Philip is one of the seven leaders chosen in last week's story, one of the seven whose job it was to manage the conflict between the Hebrew Jews and the Hellenized Jews, and to ensure fair treatment of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the community.

Last week we heard the story of Stephen, one of these seven leaders, who quickly showed us that his gifts and skills and passions were far beyond the ministry that he found himself in, but he also made a few too many enemies in the process, and in the end that is what got him killed. Stephen was basically an extrovert's extrovert. He liked to be right in the middle of the action. Proclaiming loudly, speaking first and thinking later. He loved crowds of people. He didn't mind being the center of attention – and he quickly found himself as the center of attention when he began to perform signs and wonders for all to see. No doubt God was working through him, but I like to think that God used Stephen's natural abilities and strengths to offer words of challenge and rebuke to the powers-that-be.

In contrast, we have here Philip, who seems to be a much quieter individual. Before our story starts we see Philip too proclaiming the word of God and performing "signs" and driving out unclean spirits, and baptizing people. Like Stephen, he clearly also had a call beyond simply keeping peace in the Hellenistic Jewish community. He seems to be less of a bull-in-a-china-shop, though – at the very least, we don't see him intentionally pushing the buttons of the religious leaders.

And then, when we get to our reading for today, we see a quieter side of Philip. In fact, Philip actually has very little to say at all. It's almost like Philip isn't the primary character in this story at all. It appears that it is actually the Angel of the Lord and the Spirit of God who are pulling all the strings and doing all the work. But nevertheless, Philip takes

direction well. He listens well. He appears to trust this voice of the angel, who asks him to do some pretty counterintuitive things, and because he listens deeply and trusts implicitly, he is led into a setting in which he can make an impact on a single individual in a profound way.

Verse 26: Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went.

As we begin to read, I get the immediate sense that although Philip may be a comparatively quiet guy, he is absolutely fearless.

First off, he is met by an *angel*. And when the angel appears to him, his response is interesting. He doesn't fall down in fear to hide his face like normal people do throughout the Bible; in so many places throughout the Bible when angels appear to people the first words out of their mouths are "do not fear" or "be not afraid." But this angel doesn't seem to have to say anything to calm Philip down. It's almost like getting visits from heavenly messengers was routine for Philip. The angel told Philip "get up and go," and so Philip got up and went. As simple as that.

But then there was the matter of *where* the angel asked Philip to go. *Go toward the south* (μεσημβρίαν) *to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza*. And then we are told in parentheses *This is a wilderness road*.

Another possible translation of this word μεσημβρίαν ("the south") is "noon" or "midday." So we have here this angel appearing out of nowhere and speaking to Philip, telling him to get up and go out, by himself in the desert at noontime or in the middle of the day – the hottest part of the day – and mind you, these are in the days before sunscreen and air conditioned vehicles. To go out in the blazing heat to a deserted wilderness road.

And let me tell you, as one who has spent most of my life living in the desert, when it is 115 degrees outside at a mile high elevation, you *just don't go outside*, unless you really like sunburns or heat stroke or the feeling of being dehydrated. And yet, when the angel said "go," without so much as even a sideways look, Philip got up and went.

And who should he find there on that hot deserted road in the middle of the day but one of the wealthiest people in all of Ethiopia. A court official of the queen, a man who was in charge of the entire treasury.

In other words, an outsider. A foreigner. And yet, to the people of Judea, a novelty. This was a man with different colored skin from most of the people in the area. A different ethnicity. Different clothing. Different traditions and customs. A *very* different social class. Scholars disagree somewhat about whether this man was a Jew or a Gentile, but even if he did happen to be Jewish and share a common religious background with Philip, that probably would have been one of the only things that they would have had in common. This was somebody you would not expect to see stopped here with his royal

chariots in this particular deserted place. And yet, here he was, in the unlikeliest of all places, at the unlikeliest of all times, met by the unlikeliest of all potential new friends.

And he happened to be reading the book of Isaiah – evidently reading it aloud, sounding out the words and trying to figure out what it was saying.

And what does quiet, introverted, trusting-almost-to-a-fault Philip do? He quickly sizes up the absurdity of this situation, he recognizes immediately that this man is probably out of his element; he may be lost or confused or maybe even scared, and he fearlessly marches up to him and asks him, point-blank: *Do you understand what you are reading?*

“No,” said the man. “How could I, unless someone explains it to me?”

And so, Philip invites himself up into this wealthy outsider’s chariot and begins explaining the story of God’s people to him, beginning with the book of Isaiah and the story of the Babylonian exile, and continuing all the way through the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

And lo and behold, but what should they happen upon on this deserted desert road, but a body of water? Remember, we are in the desert. Water sources are few and far between. You don’t just see creeks or springs popping up in any old spot. Yet, on this unlikely road, at this unlikely time of day, in this unlikeliest of all meetings they happen upon the unlikeliest of all sightings – a body of water, and not just a tiny little trickle of a creek, either. There is enough water that Philip would be able to perform a full-immersion baptism. That’s a lot of water to find on this deserted road. To find that much water in the desert, you would think that the area would be settled by people. There would be a town there, because of such an abundant water source.

But nope, it feels almost like this source of water may have been created specifically for this one meeting of these two men, for the sole purpose that this Ethiopian court official might be baptized in it.

And then just like that, as quickly as Philip jumped up ready to follow the lead of the angel to this strange place, “the Spirit snatched Philip away.” “Philip found himself in Azotus,” almost as if he had no say whatsoever in where he went next. Poof! He’s somewhere else. God called to him again, and away he went, having no idea what might lie in store for him next – no idea whatsoever what unlikely people or strange situations he might encounter. He’s just eager and unafraid to go wherever God calls him to go; always willing and ready to meet the next new challenge head-on.

I don’t know about you, but I – for one – envy Philip’s faith. His blind trust. His unquestioning spirit.

- I am not somebody who lives fearlessly. I like the comfortable boxes that I fashion for myself, and in the times when I have to step outside of these boxes, altogether too often I have waves of anxiety that cause me to question and

second-guess every single move. And right now, in this real-live pandemic all of the old boxes, the comfortable routines and traditions and rhythms of life have been turned upside-down and every one of us has been forced into a new place, a new reality, a new way of interacting with the world and living in the world. We've basically all been uprooted from one very comfortable, very predictable place and then plopped down into a place that is unsettling, confusing, and new every day. And this new reality challenges our faith, calls us to trust that God knows where God is bringing us, even if it doesn't make any sense to us at the moment.

- I also overthink everything. I like to rationally explain things like signs and wonders and dreams and visions. And when I can't explain them, I am afraid that I am far too quick to dismiss them.
- I like to be intentional about the things I do. To know exactly why I am doing them. If somebody were to appear to me and tell me to go hiking in the desert in the middle of the day in the heat of the summer, I might go (because I like hiking) – but I would have to know why first, and the reason had better be good. It's not likely that I would take "Because God said so" as an acceptable answer.

But here's the thing: The Spirit of God does not always move in conventional, predictable ways. God does not neatly follow the scripts that we write for our own lives, and for people like me that can be aggravating and anxiety-provoking. Yet as frustrating as it can be, this is actually good news.

- We have a God who sees beyond our limitations.
- We have a God who moves and breathes and lives, even in those moments when we have a hard time seeing it and believing that God is here.
- We have a God who uses the different things that we *do* have to offer: God uses some of us (like the seven identified in last week's scripture) to organize and troubleshoot and manage conflict. God uses some of us (like Stephen) to *create* conflict; to push boundaries and push buttons and stretch the limits. And God uses others of us (like Philip) to listen deeply and to embrace the unexpected; to meet the confused traveler on the road and then to be snatched away to the next unexpected thing.
- And then we have a God who not only spreads like wildfire throughout communities and across the world, but also who sets our souls ablaze and stretches us beyond ourselves. Who spreads within each of our lives until every piece of who we are is infected, is transformed, is resurrected. A God who opens us each as individuals up into new ways of seeing, new ways of existing, new ways of living in the world and interacting with the world.

[Wrap it up!]