

Go South - As the Spirit Leads

May 2021

Acts 8:26-40 (ESV) Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. ²⁷ And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." ³⁰ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

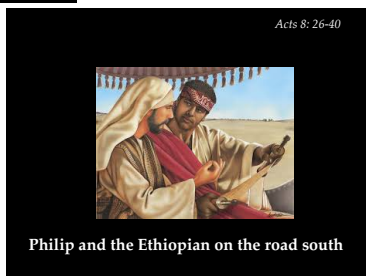
"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth."

³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Introduction:

Acts 8



Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch from Acts 8.

This is a story about being led by the Holy Spirit that has much to teach us.

It so happens that this passage is assigned by the lectionary as our first reading for today is one of special and timely interest for me so I'll begin with a declaration of personal interest.

For several years I have had a verse rattling in my head. In October last year it got loud to the point where I sensed God speaking to me. The NIV seems to come closest to the way it played in my mind

"Go south to the road--the desert road--that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

I had talked with Barbara about this and so in October last year when we sought God's lead about resettling in New Zealand it rang for both of us as "Go South!" which we took to mean the South Island. Even though we had thought to settle in the north. So we started looking south to quickly find a diocese with the strap line "Called South". We looked further and were drawn to look at St Matthews.

So this piece of scripture is important to us and the experience of Philip is teaching us much. I'd like to bring this out for us this morning:

Context

Acts chapter 8 begins in the immediate aftermath of the first martyrdom with the stoning of Stephen. Saul -the pre-Christian Paul- is described as ravaging the Jerusalem church as he worked to stamp out the

followers of Jesus. This first outbreak persecution had the positive effect of getting the faithful out of the city and moving outwards with the Gospel to Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth.

As part of this the apostle Philip heads north to Samaria to witness and preach to the related but disaffected Samaritans where Jesus himself had gone. In so doing Philip is in the Lord's declared strategy already heard in Act 1:8:

“...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

In Samaria there is a positive response to the Gospel and it takes hold all over that region.

Philip is an evangelist with a capital 'E'. He is a witness to the resurrection. He knows how to tell people about Jesus in a way they can receive. The Spirit empowers and leads him in that. He is in his element enjoying much fruit.

But now listen to how his next adventure starts from this context as heard today from v.26.



²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert place.

Somehow the voice of the Lord came to Philip ('by an angel') and gave him instruction to leave Samaria and head south to a lonely place even while he was in the middle of a fruitful evangelistic mission in Samaria. For the first time since Pentecost, a whole region and people group was being reached and accepting Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

Philip had the clarity of spiritual ear to hear the Spirit of God say, “Move on, head back south to the road between Jerusalem and Gaza.”

Can you relate to this? Being redirected counter intuitively when least expected?

I am so amazed at this and long for more of this in my life.

Those moments when we hear it in time and know what to do – even when our fears, those around us and notions of best practice say other.

Remember what Jesus said:

“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

So back to Philip. He heard the Spirit of the Lord tell him to leave a thriving move of God among the villages of an unreached people group to go to a lonely wilderness road where he might see a few travellers in a day.

Even though the standing on the road south is so simple and low cost let's imagine Philip had needed funding for this or official church approval. Let's imagine a committee had to first approve this re assignment to approve his sandal allowance?

I can imagine people saying, “Philip this does not make sense. You are doing good work here, see it through. Focus on villages and towns with communities and don't go to the middle of no-where.” Consolidate. That would be typical human thinking, sensible and well meant, but not Spirit lead.

“Your ways are not my ways says the Lord.” (Isa 55:8b)

Happily, we read that Philip rose and went south. The Samaritan mission would continue without him.

Days and nights passed until Philip arrived to stand on the Jerusalem–Gaza Wilderness Road. There was not much happening, but then came something you could not miss. Travelling at around 5 kilometers per hour came a four wheeled chariot of note.¹ What was this?

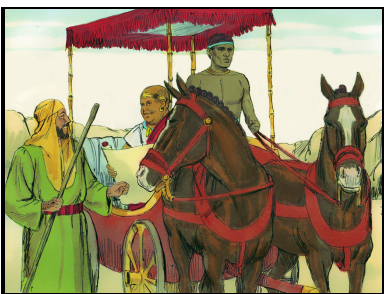


And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

This needs a bit of unpacking for us today. Whether Philip perceived all this as the carriage came by is uncertain but what we are told he saw someone who was:

1. Very dark skinned. A real African. This is what was meant by ‘Ethiopian’.
2. A man who was not masculine or seemingly interested in women, in today’s language: ‘gay’ or effeminate.²
3. A high-ranking royal treasury official from the land beyond Egypt in modern day Sudan.³ This Ethiopian kingdom was rich from smelting iron, mining gold and its central trading position in Northern Africa. To the Greco-Romans in Mediterranean Europe, this was the end of the world the way we here might consider Alaska, Tierra del Fuego or Finland.

I think Philip was looking at someone very different from himself as the Spirit spoke again:



²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” ³⁰ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet.

Standing in the right place at the right time the Spirit of the Lord told him what to do next.

People in ancient times read aloud. Apparently that’s a better way to process strings of letters without punctuation or spacing. Unlike modern chariots these were open like Asian Tok-Toks but without noisy motors.

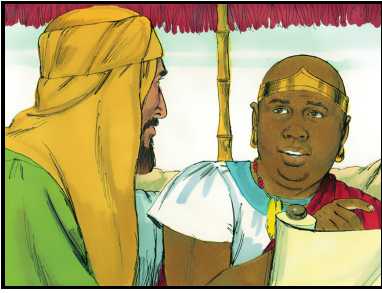
¹ The chariot is probably a four-wheeled covered vehicle, like a covered oxcart, large enough to accommodate the eunuch, his driver, Philip and possibly another servant (who would be reading the manuscript aloud if the official is not doing so himself). The carriage is moving slowly enough to allow for reading and for Philip to approach it on foot.

Ref <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/Acts/Philip-Ethiopian-Eunuch>

² Eunuch meant man born intact but with no desire for women as opposed to surgically altered thus possibly ‘gay’. Sourced from: <http://www.gaychristian101.com/Ethiopian-Eunuch.html> This article however limits what God does with people and assumes birth as determinative where as there are many instances of gays changing as part of their spiritual transformation.

³ Although *Ethiopian* was used generally for anyone with these physical characteristics, here it refers to an inhabitant of the ancient kingdom of Meroe, which covered what is now Northern Sudan, south of Aswan to Khartoum. <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/Acts/Philip-Ethiopian-Eunuch>

Once Philip heard the Prophet Isaiah being read it was game on! He knew what to do; ask a question:



He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?”³¹ And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

The Ethiopian Eunuch was probably reading from a version of Isaiah 53 which talks about the Suffering Servant which gave Philip an easy entry to present Jesus as the one prophesied to suffer for us to reconcile humanity to God.

The ‘gay’ African royal treasurer was probably a convert to Jewish monotheism and ethics, a ‘God fearer’ as was not uncommon among people disillusioned with paganism in those days. He received Philip’s gospel presentation with joy and sought baptism in the next pool of water they encountered.

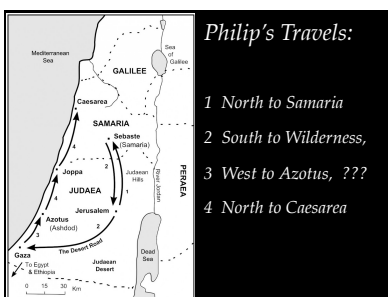
I am telling this story to focus on the way great things happen when people are led by the Spirit of God and do things in his time as he leads.

If I were to commend or ‘sell’ this way of life the story gives a beautiful selling point in the rich imagination of God. God did two awesome things through someone who was spiritually leadable.

1. He took him somewhere he would never have thought of to do something small and significant that people would never have thought of. Who would do outreach on a desert highway?
2. He had Philip go to someone who was so different to himself. The gay-African treasury official is someone he would probably never meet! God arranged this for his glory to bring this seeking soul to Jesus. Our awesome God seeks the lost and his Spirit leads those who it can lead to reach all and overcome every apparent obstacle whether social, racial or geographical. Jesus will build his church through those who can be lead by the Spirit of God.

Impressive? There is more as we read:

This man from Africa was so ready to believe that when he saw water he asked to be baptised and so it happened.



³⁹ And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

This is an intriguing story. The Spirit who had lead him, then carried him away and he next appeared over 50 km away at modern day Ashdod in Gaza. How did this happen, slowly or in an instant? I do not know but from here Philip preached his way north to Caesarea on the coast.

Application

1. Aspire to be Spirit-led in the moments to talk about faith in God.
2. Tell others about your adventures.



Application:

Out of all this I want to commend two things to you today:

1. Aspire to be a Spirit-led Christian stepping out in God's lead. Believe that the Lord is your shepherd.
2. Tell people about your adventures in being led by the Spirit.

Travelling puts us in places where the Spirit may lead us and have appointments arranged. I talk to more people about Jesus when I am travelling than anywhere else. The Spirit leads me to connection and the conversations flow. So many great things in the Book of Acts happen on roads so the Holy Spirit is active on roads. I would add planes to that as well, especially shorter flights.

After a journey its natural to come back with stories about the weather, the food, the hotels etc. That is all nice but let me confess something to you. Those stories are often boring! What would excite me more is hearing people come back and tell stories about being led by the Spirit of God to do things that you could never do yourself; stuff that was not on the schedule such as having a conversation with someone about Jesus or faith in God who you would normally have never met. That is normal Spirit-led experience when travelling when the Holy Spirit provides a connection, an opening and it happens!

When we practice living that life and telling those stories everything about church will change. Those are the stories to live and tell.