

Sermon Text for March 31, 2019

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Isaiah 53:7-9, Acts 8:26-40

“Do you believe in God or do you believe God?”

So we landed yesterday morning and got home from JFK around 4. We left Tel Aviv at 6pm EST but had woken up at our normal 6am time which was 11pm on Thursday evening. That means that our group was awake for 45 hours straight until last evening. I told the people in my group that if I'm showing up, you had better show up. No free passes this Sunday. What an amazing journey it was, and you will be hearing much more about it in the coming weeks and months, especially as we find ourselves right in the middle of Lent. There were a number of firsts, there were a number of lessons, Biblical lessons that I learned. Two days ago we were in the field where David gathered his stones from the dry river bed with Goliath not far ahead of him in the valley. A 12 year old David..., Mary a 13 year old girl, Jesus a 12 year old boy in the temple. God was able to use them to do amazing things. This youth Sunday we will have a 12 year old girls bring us the Word.

We have some firsts in Acts 8 today just as we saw last week with the Samaritans, that group of outcasts, coming to know Christ. Today we have a similar situation with Philip, our friend the one who in this entire chapter is following God's command that was given back in Acts 1:8. Who remembers this verse. This is the verse that kicked off our Acts journey. Jesus is talking to his disciples and he tells them, he commands them: you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Last week Philip started with the Samaritans and today he goes and reaches someone who is truly from the ends of the earth.

How is Philip able to be this type of witness and what is it that might spark each one of us to be a similar witness for each one of us to reach one for Christ? We began our journey in Jaffa and spoke about Jonah refusing God's command and our guide, a Jewish guide, that was a first for me, told us that it was our responsibility to go out into the world and spread the message that God wants us to spread and that God has placed on our hearts. There is a distinction between those who believe in God, and those who believe God and that those in the latter camp are much better equipped and ready to be witnesses who will go wherever and whenever God calls them to go. Let's learn from Philip and see what we can apply to our own lives.

READ SCRIPTURE

Would it surprise you if I told you that in a recent Gallup poll 94% of Americans say they believe in God. Alexis de Toqueville 1831 called America a nation of believers. That really hasn't changed. We live in a country where almost everyone believes in God. But how they live out their belief is a completely different matter. The same is true in the New Testament.

We once again went to Yad Vashem and saw the Holocaust Museum, that same museum that historically lays out the most vile event in modern human history, you know, that same event that white supremacists say didn't happen. Our guide as we walked among the trees in the forest of the righteous gentiles, trees planted for those who stood up against Nazi oppression, said: There were some of you who risked everything to protect us, but there weren't enough of you.

You know I think a lot of times there is a false understanding that our greatest battle is between doing good and doing evil. I usually find that our greatest battle is between doing good and doing nothing. When the doing nothing wins out it is much easier to not see it as evil or as harmful, when in fact that is exactly what it is. When you believe God that the righteous will win and you see things that are happening around us that are not righteous and do nothing, then we are each acting as Hitler would have acted. Mother Theresa once said that each of us have a little Hitler in all of us. Philip in this Acts verse could not imagine believing God and not being a faithful witness by reaching out to people with the love of Christ.

This week, for those of you who are used to sitting still, hopefully this sermon will speak to you, because it is about anything but sitting still like we heard two weeks ago. Philip was someone who was not used to sitting still. He was a go getter, but he also was a mature Christian and he knew when he needed to be still and let God do the talking and the working.

In the previous verses he had just brought the most difficult of people to Christ, the Samaritans. And now today we don't know what he is doing, I would think he was taking a well deserved rest, maybe even a nap, and the first verse that we hear is: Get up. Now I don't think it is the kind of get up that you would expect to hear because Philip has been doing anything but loafing around. I think Philip was trying to discern where exactly God was leading him next. Maybe he was praying and saying: God, how exciting

it has been here, I didn't know if I really wanted to go to the Samaritans, but boy, you sure have used me, look at all of the hundreds of people who have come to know and love you.

This get up and go in 26 is followed in 27 by he got up and went. Notice that he got up and went after an extraordinarily successful ministry, to go down a desert road. Trust me, this is not a fun road. It is completely bleak and isolated. There is nobody living along that territory, no one to evangelize. Just some Bedouin and their sheep. Why in the world would God call a highly successful missionary to a place where there is nobody for miles around? If we want to differentiate ourselves as Christians from those who merely believe in God and those who believe God and God's promises that will never fail, we have to start by being obedient to God and God's call.

Even if God's call takes you away from something that is safe and secure and prosperous. Stacy and I have worked hard for that which is safe and secure and hopefully prosperous, and it scares me. I don't want to go anywhere, I love it here, I want to see what happens next in this ministry. In every place that I have served we have gone and done similar things to what is happening here, but never then stayed to see what happens next. I felt like it was a call from God to not just rely on the safe and the secure.

Sometimes, God's call doesn't make any sense in human terms. In those cases we may be likely to say no God, come back when you have a better offer. Would any of us be willing to trade some of our earthly security for following God's call and actually believing God that God's purposes will be realized?

This may not have been the call that Philip wanted, but we do not see him complain. He gets up and goes. Once he hears God's voice, he goes, and when he does he meets someone from the ends of the earth. Look at vs. 27 and see the description of the person that he meets. He was an Ethiopian, who had just come back from Jerusalem to worship God. Maybe he was a Jew, but probably not. He was someone that was even more different and even further removed from the Israelites and their customs and cultures than the Samaritans were.

He very well could have looked like this. **PICTURE OF ISRAELI ETHIOPIAN JEW.** He was black skinned, he was a eunuch. Now eunuch is used a lot in ancient literature to describe generally a person of power. It does not necessarily mean a literal eunuch. Now personally, if I was not really a eunuch I think I'd have come

up with a different word for myself: Lord High Chamberlain, Your Magnificence, but probably not eunuch. So maybe he was a literal eunuch after all. Often those trained for high positions in court were castrated to prevent any dalliance with royal wives in the harem.

We know that eunuchs had not part in God's kingdom as part of the Jewish law. In Deuteronomy 32:1 "No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord." Ouch. You don't hear that one as a theme verse for too many men's retreats. So in the eyes of a Jew he could worship, he could read Scripture, he could believe in God, but he could never be received fully into the Jewish faith. Truly to the ends of the earth Philip had gone to encounter this eunuch.

Notice how Philip approaches him and questions him in regards to his faith. You should be taking notes now on how to reach people for Christ. He asks him a question. If you ask questions then the other person gets to share with you their expertise. Don't come in there thinking you know it all and that the other person has nothing to offer at all. Philip asks: "Do you know what you are reading?" The eunuch responds: I have no clue. I need someone to help, and then he immediately invited Philip to read the Scripture.

Have you ever seen the Isaiah scroll that we are talking about now? This is no pocket Gideon Bible. It was the largest of scrolls and you can see Philip and the Eunuch reading it as they go on their way with it flapping in the breeze behind them. If you look at the verses that he was reading, I think he got lucky and by chance landed on them. I really think he wanted to get to Isaiah 56:3-8. These were probably his favorite verses in all of Scripture. After coming back from Jerusalem and worshipping God, but not really able to worship as he wanted because he knew he was an outsider. I can hear him say, oh boy, I can't wait until I get to that day.

But you know as you read the Bible and you are looking for a verse and you find yourself completely immersed in another verse and it grabs your attention and you are unable to get out of it because it is teaching you. Well, on his way to his favorite verse that would provide him assurance and comfort and a reminder that he could believe in God and get away with it all, he ran across Jesus in Isaiah 53. These verses are called the suffering servant verses that speak directly of Jesus Christ and what he did for us.

From that, Philip in vs. 35 is able to minister directly to the eunuch, he is brought to Christ, and then he says, what is to prevent me from being baptized. So what if I am black-skinned, so what if I am a eunuch, so what if I am a treasurer. I am tired of merely believing in God, I believe God that today is the day that he has reached out to me to change my life. And he does, he is baptized, Philip disappears, and he lived happily ever after.

Two weeks ago I encouraged you to be still and maybe those of you who merely believed in God wanted something more to do. But this week, we hear we need to get up and go, but not before we are able to believe God, truly believe God and the promises that we hear, and the vision of the kingdom that he lays out for each one of us. Philip believed God, moved on that belief, and changed an entire village, changed a single person. But do you know who he changed the most?

We don't hear from him again until the end of Acts in chapter 21. We hear that he is at home with four daughters, and every one of them was a Spirit-filled servant of God. When we believe God our very first priority, the most important people that we need to evangelize and witness to is our children. Maybe we should start the each one reach one campaign by focusing on bringing our children to church, and then the rest will follow.

Brothers and sisters, stop believing in God, because the demons believe in god and tremble. Rather, believe God that all things are possible and all things will become possible. Amen.