

Follow where to Go
Acts 8:26-40

Brothers and sisters, back in the days before smart phones and tablets were invented we had to come up with creative ways to kill time on a weekend when we were bored with nothing to do.

So one of the things we did was to call up a friend who had their driver's license and access to a vehicle and we'd go for a drive... but our destination was determined by flipping a coin.

We'd start out at the driveway, heads we go right and tails we go left. So every time we were coming up to an intersection we'd flip the coin and see which way we were supposed to go.

And the key to making the "game" work was that you had to flip the coin and you had to follow where it told you to go – even if you didn't look interesting or exciting or you didn't want to, you had to follow... otherwise you weren't really truly playing the game and what was the point.

It certainly led to some very random trips – sometimes we'd wind up at a dead end, other times it led to something really interesting that we didn't know was there... if not for following the directions given by the random flip of a coin, we would have never gone down that particular road.

But, as I said the key was following the directions – being obedient you might say...

And in the scripture passage that we read this morning, all the amazing connections and teaching opportunities and sharing about Jesus, coming to faith in Christ and being baptized are really dependent upon Philip being obedient to the directions he is given about where he should go.

What if when the angel had said "*go south on the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza*" but Philip had responded by saying "*but I'd rather go north... it's a more scenic route*" or what if Philip had simply responded with "*why? That's all desert there – what's the point of that?*"

And let's imagine that the angel had decided to humor his disobedience and said *"well there is someone out there who needs to have the scriptures explained to him so that he understands and believes the truth about Jesus."*

To which Philip replies *"well why don't you go and appear to him and tell him to come here to Jerusalem! We have all the apostles are gathered here, the Holy Spirit was poured out here, and we have an amazing Christian community that is growing every day, and we get to worship together in the Temple and there are miracles and healings taking place – really he ought to come here to Jerusalem and just be a part of all the awesome things that God is doing here!"*

Now brothers and sisters – as we read this passage we probably noticed that the person whom the angel intends for Philip to encounter had in fact come to Jerusalem, he has just finished a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the purpose of coming to worship God.

Now all of the commentaries I read on this passage made a big deal about how this Ethiopian eunuch would not have been allowed to enter the temple at all because he had been castrated in order to serve in his position with the Queen of the Ethiopians and Deuteronomy 23:1 says *"No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the LORD."*

And we don't know if he knew this beforehand and decided that it was important for him to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem anyways - just to be in the same city as the Temple of the Living God... or if he had made that unfortunate discovery after having attempted to enter the Court of the Gentiles and was turned back, there is just no way to know.

In all likelihood I think he already knew but just wanted to come anyways – and that he was part of the influx of travelers that had come to Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover, just as it is recounted in Acts 2: 5-10 *"Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven... Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of*

Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs...”

But truth be told, I’m not really interested about what he knew beforehand but whether or not he took notice of what was happening in Jerusalem while he was there.

You see this man would have been in Jerusalem when all of the events of Pentecost occurred and three thousand people responded to Peter’s message to believe in Jesus Christ and the church was born.

And if he is returning home in chapter 8 of Acts then he would have been in the city when at the same time when the early church was growing and experiencing all the signs and wonders and miracles – it really would have been hard to miss.

As Acts 2:46-47 says *“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”*

So what I think is more important here is how the Ethiopian Eunuch could have been in Jerusalem during this period of time... and not responded to God was doing with the early church!

And I guess that is the first point that we need to take note of friends – there can be amazing things going on in our church, God can be pouring out the Holy Spirit, prayers are being answered, worship is awe-inspiring, the messages are dynamic, the fellowship is warm and accepting and there’s always lots of food and coffee...

But in spite of all that, for whatever reason, there will still be people who are missing out on what God is doing,

They might not have heard about it, they might think it's not for them because they weren't invited... or they may have even been in the midst of it all - but they are not connecting with it.

So, this Ethiopian eunuch had come and gone from Jerusalem in the midst of the most significant work of the Holy Spirit in ages and was unaffected by it.

And if Philip had objected to being told to go out to that specific desert road leading down from Jerusalem towards Gaza, if didn't want to obey where he was being told to go... and if he thought it would be better for the Angel to appear to that Ethiopian Eunuch and tell him to come to Jerusalem... well that had already happened and something didn't connect.

But God wanted this Ethiopian Eunuch to hear the good news about Jesus Christ, first and foremost because God loved him, but he was also a very influential man who would no doubt influence his fellow Ethiopians with the good news of Jesus

Christ – so he was part of God's plan to fulfill the spread of the gospel.

Remember... before Jesus came to fulfill all God's covenant administrations, the direction of God's revealing Himself was always attractional.

God chooses a people for himself and gives them His law and teaches them how to live so they might be His priests and His presence can dwell among them in order that all the surrounding nations can look inward at Israel, and come to them, to come to know the one true God.

So there was always this tension between God's purpose in choosing Israel for this bigger purpose and the need to keep them Holy, separate, from the nations around them so that they could indeed properly be that priestly nation who reveals God – and that's why there were laws like Deuteronomy 23:1 about not allowing eunuch into the temple.

But now that distinction and separateness between those who belong to God and those who do not comes from those who have received the Holy Spirit from Jesus Christ, and the symbol for receiving the Holy Spirit is water baptism.

So there is a change going on at a fundamental level in the formal means by which you know you belong to God's covenant people now that Jesus has fulfilled the covenant on our behalf.

That's why the text starts out with Philip hearing his instructions in Jerusalem from an Angel – representing the Law and the Prophets and the old covenant...

But if you notice... the text shifts to saying it was the Holy Spirit that spoke next to Philip when he was out on the road and told him to go and stay next to the Ethiopian's chariot, representing that shift from the old to the new which has occurred here.

And the most significant part of that shift which concerns us this morning is a change in direction from coming **to** Jerusalem to going **away** from Jerusalem.

Remember in Acts 1:8 Jesus says to the disciples "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

So the Holy Spirit is poured out, things change and the direction is no longer come to Jerusalem but go out to Judea – the surrounding country, and Samaria – a little farther and also a bit scandalous because they are Samaritans... and then to the ends of the earth - way way farther and it's to nations that were godless gentiles!

So you can see the challenge in the right? Not only is it just difficult to make a change from the way things have always been, but that change means you have to put in some extra effort to go to people and places you really don't want to go to.

Now, most times when we think about the early church in the book of Acts we tend to idealize it for all the conversions and fellowship and commitment and working of the Holy Spirit that was going on in Jerusalem – but one thing is missing in the midst of all that...

If you read through the first eight chapters of Act you will notice there are no plans being put in place to make sure that Jesus' commission of going out to Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth is being fulfilled.

Nobody is going! Everyone is just enjoying staying around Jerusalem and experiencing all the wonderful fellowship and worship and the apostles' teaching and watching miracles happen- and I get it... who would want to leave that! Nobody...

So it's not until God allows persecution to break out and the Jerusalem church is forced to scatter that people start going – and then what was happening in Jerusalem starts to spread into Judea and into Samaria... and with Philip being told to

“go south on the desert road and go and stay near the Ethiopian's chariot” the gospel and the church begins to spread to the ends of the earth.

And then after Philip teaches the Ethiopian about Jesus Christ and baptizes him - the scriptures says *“When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.”* (vs. 39)

Now – let me ask you... if you were riding along in your chariot in the middle of a desolate road, with nobody else around... and suddenly you see a fellow running up to your chariot and he starts to walk alongside it, he just so happens to be able to answer your questions and tells you about Jesus – and then when he baptizes you suddenly he disappears – what are you going to think?

We'd be thinking *“that must have been an angel! That was a divine appointment that I needed in order to help me!”*

Now remember in Greek the word “aggelos” literally means a messenger, so now we see that through the power of the Holy Spirit Philip has taken the place of angels in God’s place and he is now the messenger whom God sends out beyond the borders of Judea and Samaria, and we read that *“Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.” (vs. 40)*

So God has divinely worked the circumstances in order to get His Church out of Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria and out towards the ends of the earth...

So what is the message in all of this for us?

Well I think that it’s pretty simple really and that is for all the amazing stuff that God is doing in the midst of our church when we gather here in this facility on Sunday for worship – and it really is amazing to see how it has been revitalized and transformed in the past ten years...

For all that amazing stuff there are still people who are missing out on it, who for whatever reason have not connected with it and for as much as we might want to say “well bring’em here, get ‘em in here on a Sunday!”

That may have happened and they have come and gone without connecting to what God is doing here – but God still wants to connect with them and we need to be willing to GO OUT to them instead of expect them to come here to us.

Do we understand that? Because that’s what Jesus did for us? That’s what the incarnation and the birth of our Lord is all about – God stepped out of heaven to bring Himself to us, to become one of us in order to become the faithful covenant keeper on our behalf.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit brothers and sisters, that is the message we carry and our means of delivering that message needs to match the message.

So, will be we obedient to the Holy Spirit's nudge to go... to get out into our surrounding community to have the Holy Spirit tell us – go sit next to that person... go stand in line at checkout #7, go this this restaurant, go to that store and so on in order to connect with someone who has a spiritual thirst and needs to hear the story of how Jesus met our spiritual thirst.

Because our Lord Jesus wants to take what happens when we are together here... and bring it out there – but... like that driving game I used to play with my friends, this requires us to listen to and follow whatever instructions the Holy Spirit gives us about where we need to go.

Now it is true that under the old covenant and the Law of Moses the priests had something called the Umin and the Thumin which they used in a way that was kind of like flipping a coin, to help them determine God's will.

But as we've seen the covenantal shift occur in the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, we don't need to flip a coin

to determine God's will – we have the Holy Spirit who speaks to us.

I think this would be the ultimate way in which Jesus fulfills another passage from Isaiah 30:21 *“Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.”*

So brothers and sisters are we expecting to hear from the Holy Spirit, are we listening for what He is saying to us.

I think that we need to cultivate the expectation that He will speak to us – in fact the truth is that God wants to communicate with us! Hearing from God is not something that is reserved for whatever we might think the “super-spiritual” people do”

If Jesus has gone to the Father in order to pour out the Holy Spirit upon us, and as Jesus promised us that *“when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears,*

and he will tell you what is yet to come." (John 16:13) then it's quite plain that the Holy Spirit wants to speak to us – we just need to learn to listen and discover what His voice sounds like.

Sometimes it's an inner nudge, a compulsion, a conviction, a thought, other times it comes out as something we hear... like Philip did; *"Go up to that chariot and stay beside it!"*

And we need to obey the Holy Spirit's voice; we need to follow the nudge.

So brothers and sisters, why not try starting off your day tomorrow as you open your day with prayer, or at least as you are praying over your breakfast – say *"Holy Spirit – where do I go today?"*

Now, I'm not saying that you should be asking the Holy Spirit on Monday morning for permission to go back to bed and sleep in when you need to be on your way to work... we all

have our responsibilities that we need to keep as part of honoring God.

But think about where are the flexible parts of your daily routine are – and say Holy Spirit where do I go?

Do I take a different route to work? Do I sit at the back of the bus instead of up at the front? Where might I sit for lunch? Where should I go for lunch – if you have that option... you get the picture.

In our day to day routines we are very much creatures of habit and asking the Holy Spirit to give us direction on where to go when we have some flexibility will line up some divine appointments with people whom you might not have otherwise come across if it were not for the Holy Spirit saying "sit down over by the table at the window" and you willingly obey.

And they will need to hear about something that you can share with them – and once you are listening to them, you will

hear what that is... and you will see how your story about Jesus will be the message that the Holy Spirit wants them to hear.

But that all depends on our willingness to obey... to follow... where the Holy Spirit tells us to go.

Amen.