

## Sermon: Get Up and Go

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, April 28, 2024)

“Get up and go!” That was what an angel of the Lord said to Philip. It was a command, an imperative that drove a young deacon of the early Church onto the road where he would meet an Ethiopian eunuch. It resulted in a wonderful encounter, that has profound implications to the missionary movement of the early Church, and to us as well.

I have to admit, this passage of Acts 8:26-40 has eluded me all these years that I have preached from the Lectionary text. Every time it comes up in the three-year Lectionary cycle, I’ve chosen to preach from a different text, the one in John 15, of the vine and the branches. The encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch seems like a poor cousin when considering our relationship to the Lord, where Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. However, the more I dive into this text in Acts 8, the more I become fascinated with the story. It really is a wonderful story, a kairos moment when the Good News of Jesus Christ is shared unexpectedly, and it spread like wildfire as kindled and orchestrated by the Spirit of God.

The early church was in somewhat of disarray at the time. After the Pentecost when the Spirit of God spoke powerfully through the Apostles, particularly through Peter, three thousands became believers on the first day, and the Lord added to their numbers daily. People from all walks of life came and lay down before the Apostles, their earthly possessions, to be distributed and shared so no one would have need. It was an idyllic community, faithful to the Gospel, and eagerly waiting with great anticipation the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But over time, with growth in numbers came the responsibility to manage. A complaint arose from the Hellenists against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. The Apostles, not wanting to be distracted from their all important calling of praying and preaching the words, wisely sought to appoint seven deacons, chosen by the people, to handle the task of ‘waiting on tables’.

Philip was one of the seven, but he pales in comparison to Stephen, the head of the pact; a man describes in the Scripture as ‘full of faith and the Holy Spirit’. For reason that is unexplained in the Bible, these newly appointed deacons did not seem to busy themselves with waiting on tables. Rather, we have passages in Acts 6 and 7 describing Stephen doing great

wonders and signs amongst the people, and speaking forcefully in defence of the Word, first before some detractors then eventually before accusers in front of the Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism. Stephen's powerful testimonial of Jesus, and his point-blank, no-holds-bar way of condemning the Jewish religious authority, earned him a stoning, the first to be martyred in the early church.

A young man, named Saul, who would eventually be called Paul, looked on at that stoning and was pleased. So a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. All except the apostles were scattered throughout the country side of Judea and Samaria.

I guess with no more tables to wait upon, Philip went down to Samaria, where he proclaimed the Messiah to them. He also cast out unclean spirits, healed the sick and performed miracles and signs. Many came to believe and there was great joy in that city. So effective was Philip's missionary work in Samaria, that the Apostles sent both Peter and John to investigate, whereby they also joined in the work of the Holy Spirit, and baptized many into faith.

It was at that point, Philip received the command from an angel of the Lord, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." The command was specific with regard to geography but vague as to why—for it was a less travelled road, a wilderness road. Nevertheless, this young deacon obeyed without delay. So he went and met an Ethiopian eunuch who happened to also travel on the same road. We are not informed of his name, but only his position—he was a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury.

Ethiopia, or the land of Kush in the Old Testament, has had a long association with the biblical Israel. According to the account in Genesis, it was founded by the great-grandson of Noah. In the account of 1 Kings 10, the famed Queen of Sheba of Ethiopia came to Solomon the King, paying homage, bringing vast quantity of spices and gold, praising the king's wisdom, and blessing the Lord God who loved Israel forever. Solomon in return, gave to the queen every desire that she expressed, a euphemism to most likely a romantic relationship, then sent her back to her own land with her servants. Israel's religion and influence stretched across that region since then. Even now, the Falasha Jews of Ethiopia are believed by some to be the direct descendants from Solomon's time. A long history binds Israel and this land together.

An eunuch, in the Ancient Near East, is someone who has been emasculated, that is deprived of their male identity. This can happen through abstinence or foregoing a marital relationship, but more often than not, it is done through the painful ritual of castration. In the context of a royal court, emasculation is sometimes needed to ensure trust and to command loyalty to the sovereign, particularly when a eunuch are put in charge to serve a royal household, or a king's harem.

In the view of the Torah, castration carries with it a certain degree of shame and offense. Ritual castration is seen as a detestable practice of Israel's pagan neighbours. The list of deformities that disqualified a man from serving as a priest included castration (Leviticus 21:20). Deuteronomy 23:1 prohibits any castrated man from entering the Israelite assembly. For these reasons, eunuchs were generally seen as outcasts in the Jewish community.

So this Ethiopian eunuch, we are told, came to Jerusalem to worship. He was a convert to Judaism, a God-fearing Gentile. He may have been accorded a certain degree of deference, based on his position as a foreign dignitary, but he was probably not welcomed into the worshipping assembly in Jerusalem. What we do know is that he left the city, somewhat unsatisfied. On the way home while seated in his chariot, this Ethiopian eunuch was reading from the prophet Isaiah. He came upon the passage in Isaiah 53:7-8, describing the Suffering Servant,

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.  
In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is taken away from the earth.”

With no one ever having to instruct him, and no one available for him to inquire, this lonely Ethiopian eunuch was understandably puzzled. Right at that moment, the Spirit of God led Philip to the eunuch, a wonderful kairos moment ensued. Philip was invited into the chariot, he in turn explained to the eunuch the good news about Jesus, his ministry, his crucifixion and resurrection. Continuing on this unexpected moment of faith, upon passing a body of water, the eunuch boldly asked to be baptized, Philip complied. When they came up out of the water, Philip was

then 'snatched away' by the Spirit of the Lord, to continue in his missionary journey elsewhere, and the eunuch went on his way home, rejoicing.

Surreal quality notwithstanding, this story has multiple implications for the missionary movement of early church and for us as well. Allow me to simply summarize and state what they are.

First, when the Spirit of God tells you to 'get up and go', you really ought to get up and go. One does not discern this alone, especially when one is a novice in faith. The community of faith is there to help you to be attentive to the prompting of the Spirit. But once you are certain of such discernment, once you are sure of the Spirit's calling, get up and go.

Second, meet those you are trying to reach at where they are. Philip went and met the eunuch, at the place where the eunuch is, not just in a chariot on a wilderness road, but in his puzzlement and his loneliness. So, meet the people and their needs, without discrimination, be with them and be vulnerable with them.

Third, God sets the agenda, not us. The Apostles clearly had in mind what and how Philip and the rest of the deacons ought to serve. But as is often the case, people propose but God disposes. That is not to say that the Church should have no plan, in where and how to share the Gospel. Just in so far as the good news of Jesus, we as individuals and as the church are simply the instrument of God's design, not knowing the full scope yet ready to serve.

Finally, do not fret but rejoice in the Spirit. It can't be easy for Philip. Everywhere he went, he did what was told of him by the Spirit. Those who were recipients of his message, all received with joy with hearts full of thanksgiving and praise. Lives were transformed, Kingdom of God was being built, but Philip was often not there to enjoy the fruits of his labour. Nevertheless, he never once complained. Philip simply went on his way, rejoicing also in how the Spirit is working through him.

So do likewise: get up and go; meet people at where they are; trust in God's agenda; rejoice in the Spirit. And as you seek to live out the Great Commission from the Lord (Matthew 28:19), that is: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that the Lord have commanded you." May the Lord be with you, and bless you, to the end of the age.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**