

## **“Starting Point” Acts 8:26-40**

It seems like an odd encounter – like one that should probably have never occurred. On the one hand you have Philip, the apostle, but one of the “lesser known” disciples and the other, a prominent official in the Ethiopian government. And to be honest, if left solely up to either Philip or the Ethiopian it probably would never have happened. But on more than one occasion a third “person” is introduced to us – by no means a stranger but someone new all the same who brings these two unlikely people together. Our NRSV makes them two different people but in other translations it’s just one and the same – the Spirit of God.

Phillip was given directions much like the GPS on my dashboard tells me where to turn but even more gave compass directions. It appears Phillip was not going that way, whether Gaza then is as ominous as the Gaza today plus no one I know likes to travel “wilderness” roads because of the lack of scenery and lack of amenities. But again it seems like someone else was giving the directions. But let’s not make Phillip out to be a puppet on a string being controlled by some divine authority because Phillip “got up and went.” Have you ever had your day, your week, your life take an “unexpected” turn, down a road that at first seemed ominous, even the wrong way for a short or long period, but now seems like the “road less travelled” you were supposed to take, even “told” to take? Me too. Well then, you know or maybe will one day know exactly the way Phillip was feeling when he met our Ethiopian friend. We know less about him. And it’s rather dehumanizing, to be honest to be only known by your nationality and your “physical condition.” (Eunuch means “castrated male,” by the way.) But Luke does not want us to feel sorry for this man of prominence but even more one whom many call a “seeker.” He was, if you remember, coming from Jerusalem, the Holy City of Jerusalem after “worshipping.” So maybe some assumptions at this point would be somewhat appropriate. At one point in this man’s life he must have been introduced to Judaism or maybe grew up a Jew. He must have learned some of the principles of being a Hebrew like traveling to Jerusalem at certain times of the year for worship – as every “good” Jew did. And lastly, and not least important, he knew of God’s Holy Word, and the centrality of it to the believer’s life for in our lesson we see him reading from the book of Isaiah, reading out loud nonetheless. (But) “where did this man—a high official in a foreign court, I will grant you—lay his hands on a copy of sacred Scripture? You don’t suppose he stole the thing, do you? Or did he manage to use his wealth to buy it off some Roman occupier who had lifted it from a synagogue? But why would he do that? Was the Queen of Ethiopia a collector of rare manuscripts such that this particular courtier was thinking he’d curry favor with her Majesty by bringing back a new item for her collection? However it happened that he got a hold of this thing, it seems fair to say that his acquiring a copy of Isaiah was rare.

Probably it was not done for any spiritual or particularly noble purpose. Possibly it represents an odd—albeit perhaps not completely unheard of—collision of circumstances, the holy “coincidence,” writes Scott Hoezee, “of which is only enhanced when at just about precisely the exact correct moment, Philip finds this guy reading Isaiah’s words with a decidedly quizzical and confused look on his face” (and this is where our story really hits home.) (Source: Scott Hoezee)

We all of a sudden have a worshipper, a seeker even, but not a disciple – yet. But he knows where to begin, where to start. He reads Scripture, not because he understands it but because he knows it is the place we meet God. We sometimes forget that simple reality. We (or maybe I should say) us Pastor types put a lot of emphasis on seeing God in the world (which He is present) but God’s story or narrative, not so much. We ask people to read, because that’s what we have been told and “having a devotional time” is just one mark of a faithful disciple we believe. But the “seeker” in our story was not just reading but by his question he verbalizes what he was trying to understand. He wants to understand and it’s then that we understand why Phillip was placed on that road, talking to that man, on that day and so does Phillip. Our “seeker” was reading from the Book of Isaiah, a book, even at that time was ancient, and with no New Testament writings yet (other than oral traditions being shared around house churches, temple square, kitchen tables or campfires.) But it appears by his question to Phillip that maybe he had not been introduced to Jesus. For in reading from Isaiah a passage that although not all of us might know well we still understand the basic premise of prophesy and how Jesus was the fulfillment of numerous Old Testament prophecies, especially those that spoke of the long awaited Messiah. It’s like the children story that always seems to have the same answer: Jesus. But our friend wasn’t so sure. He knew the words of Isaiah spoke of a man of suffering, a man despised, humiliated and denied. It’s just that he didn’t know who the man was. And it was there and then that disciple Phillip became a disciple maker.

The key verse in this passage is a lesson for us in being a disciple and disciple maker. For what Phillip did, where Phillip began is where we should begin. We read, “Starting with this scripture (Phillip) proclaimed to (the Ethiopian Eunuch) the good news about Jesus” (8:35) Starting with the scriptures. Not starting with our own experiences of Jesus, because experiences are not always trustworthy. Not, starting with what my Pastor or my Church tells me about Jesus, because even Pastor and Churches get it wrong sometimes. Not starting with anything other than what Scripture says about Jesus. To do anything less risks Jesus becoming whom we make Jesus out to be. “Jesus would have.... or Jesus would never have ... many say. What we know about Jesus we find first in the story about Jesus. And secondly there is also a good assumption that can be made about starting with the Scriptures that lead to the good news about Jesus is that not only Old Testament prophecies about Jesus but “all” Scriptures can lead others to the good news about Jesus. It’s as if

Jesus is present in all of Scripture, which he is. Yes, all Scripture points to Jesus. Jesus is the culmination of God's plan all along. Jesus is fully revealed only in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. If you want to know Jesus, read Scripture. If you want to get to know Jesus better, read even more Scripture.

Our story concludes, as does all faith stories where people encounter Jesus. The seeker in our story became a disciple because the worshipper had moved to become a follower. He had encountered Jesus first in the words of Scripture and next in the words of Phillip. Now we are not told exactly what Phillip had told our friend. We're not sure what all the "good news" except about Jesus' death, foretold by Isaiah, and the mention of baptism because of the question asked of "What is preventing me from being baptized." (8:37) Good thing Phillip stopped speaking at this point and simply did because to be honest there was a lot "preventing" him from being baptized. He was only just starting his faith journey. Was he really ready? Shouldn't he have signed up for small group, selected a church family or even go to Bible College first? Maybe? But not according to Phillip.

What Phillip and what I think Jesus is most concerned with is our response. When we read Scripture we respond that we have encountered Christ. When we take this bread and this wine we respond with thanksgiving of the grace bestowed upon us. When we leave this place we respond and live as disciples and listen intently for the Spirit of God to send us into the lives of those who need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God.