



Weird Ways of the Spirit

Acts 8:26-40

April 29, 2018

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Think of something weird you have seen or experienced. By weird, I mean something out of the ordinary, something unusual, something uncanny. When I was very young, I remember the first time I experienced it raining while the sun was shining. I couldn't figure out how that could happen. How can the sun shine when it is raining? It was weird.

I remember the first time after moving here, watching a lizard doing pushups on my driveway. "Weird," I said. Or, seeing a javelina for the first time. To me, they look like a cross between a pig and an anteater. They are weird.

In the April Valley Voice, our newsletter, I wrote that sometimes our faith as Christians seems weird. There are a lot of unusual things in our faith: Virgin birth, Jesus – fully human, fully divine, incarnation, resurrection, Holy Spirit. We believe in some things that sound, well, weird to others.

Our scripture story today is weird. There is a lot of divine action over a man we never hear about again. Did you notice all that divine fuss or action in this story over that one man?

- An angel directs Phillip on a lonely road heading south
- The Holy Spirit tells Philip to speak with an Ethiopian stranger.
- HS has been working in the heart of the Ethiopian because he just happens to be reading Isaiah when Phillip approaches, and he wants to understand it.
- He happens to be reading a passage in Isaiah that points to Jesus
- They happen to come across some water so the Ethiopian can be baptized
- And then, the HS snatches Philip away at the end of the story.

Weird. And breathtaking. And worth looking closer at.

You have 3 main characters. There is Phillip, a deacon in the early church. Before our story, he is having a successful ministry in a big city to large numbers of people. Then, in the midst of all this success, God decides to move him. Phillip is instructed by an angel of God to go down a long dusty road in the desert. Notice that the angel does not explain anything; just says “do.” And Phillip does. He finds himself walking on a lonely road all by himself, perhaps wondering, “Did I hear that angel right?”

A weird request by the Spirit. To leave the many to go to the one. How often we in ministry look at numbers. We want lots of numbers. But God says in the Bible, one of my favorite passages in scripture– Do not despise the day of small things.

Then you have a man from Ethiopia. The man is a great official in his country to his queen, but did you notice his name is never given (compare that to Phillip’s name which is given 9 times). This man is identified in two ways: by his job...and his physical condition.

It is mentioned at least 5 times that he is a eunuch – a man who has been castrated so he is considered safe to serve around women. How would you like to be known only for your physical condition? “Oh, I don’t remember his name, but you know, the man with a leg missing? The women with the scarred face?”

The Eunuch was returning from worshipping in Jerusalem. This is interesting because It says in the Torah or Jewish scriptures or our OT (Deuteronomy 23:1) _“No one whose testicles are cut off...shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.” Anyone have that one as a memory verse growing up? Eunuchs (even Jewish ones) were not allowed to worship in the Jewish Temple.

But this man who was prohibited from entering, or cut off from, the Temple went to Jerusalem anyway to worship even though he was probably turned away by the religious establishment.

Weird.

The third character of our story is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is bringing Phillip and the Eunuch together. For you see, the HS found the Ethiopian long before Phillip arrived.

“Go talk to that man, “ the spirit says to Phillip.

One commentator said this: “If you were Philip, at that point, what would you have done? He was on a wilderness road talking to a foreign rich guy with no testicles about

complex Biblical exegesis. I surely would have done my best to avoid the conversation in the first place.”

Weird.

Let’s take a deeper look into this conversation that the Holy Spirit brought together. We are going to look at in two ways. One is an obvious way –talking with some one about your faith. But on a deeper level, what does this passage say about God?

All my life, I have been taught that this passage is about how to share my faith. It is a great example on how to do evangelism – that dreaded word of Presbyterians. We love to talk about growing our churches, but we have a hard time talking about our faith. But if we don’t talk about our faith, our churches won’t grow. Our mission statement as a church says we are to make Christ known in word and deed.

The Ethiopian eunuch needed a guide. He was seeking, and he had lots of questions.

In fact, questions guide their conversation.

Phillip: Do you understand what you are reading?

Eunuch: How can I, unless someone explains it to me?

The Eunuch shows him what he is reading. And asks a question: Who is the prophet speaking about?

So Phillip sits alongside the Eunuch. I love that picture. Sitting side by side. Phillip coming into the world of the Eunuch. We think sharing our faith is only inviting someone to church, but often it is just sitting side-by-side in the other person’s world, having a conversation about life’s deepest questions.

The conversation ends with another question...by the Eunuch. They just “happen” to come across some water...in the desert. We all know how rare that is! Another uncanny way of the Spirit. And the Eunuch sees the water and says, “Why shouldn’t I be baptized?”

And Phillip baptizes this man who has been “cut off” by the Jews. Which leads us to the deeper meaning of this passage. I started this message by asking why all the divine fuss or action over this one man we never hear about again? I mean, it took an angel, Phillip and the Holy Spirit working together.

Since the Eunuch was reading Isaiah, I wonder if Phillip read this passage to the Eunuch: Isaiah 56:4-5 (keeping in mind that the eunuch was not allowed in the temple to worship God). This is God speaking:

“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose what pleases me
and hold fast to my covenant—
⁵to them I will give within my temple and its walls
a memorial and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that will not be cut off.”

Notice the word “cut off.” How that would have jumped out to the Eunuch! The Jews were following the earlier command given by Moses to not allow Eunuchs into the Temple. But here God is opening wide the temple for God-seeking eunuchs.

The uncanny ways of the Spirit. All this divine fuss is making room for all people who seek God.

How do we see people whom God has placed in our path? Do we see them in terms of social, economic, racial, ethnic, gender, or other identity markers? Or do we see unique persons created in the image of God, in whom God’s Spirit is already at work? Do we see people who are seeking Christ and who have already been found by Christ — though they may not know it yet?

This story is a portrait of grace. This is the deeper meaning: God’s marvelous grace. To God, it was not too much effort to get all the pieces moving so as to make everything happen in just the right sequence to bring one person closer to God.

Uncanny. Out of the ordinary. Breathtaking.

Maybe you can look back at your life and see how God was/is working in your life and heart, bringing all the pieces together to draw you closer to God. To know Christ. Maybe coming here today is part of those pieces.

Maybe you know of someone who is asking questions and seeking. Look and see where the Spirit of God is already working in the hearts of people all around you. Join what the Spirit is already making possible. Be a Phillip to that person. Sit side-by-side. Answer

those questions. Share your faith, what God means to you in your life. Share the goodness of God as you have experienced it. Tell why you are a Christ follower.

I end by reading the end of this story in a quirky version of the Bible: The Message:

³⁶⁻³⁹ As they continued down the road, they came to a stream of water. The eunuch said, "Here's water. Why can't I be baptized?" He ordered the chariot to stop. They both went down to the water, and Philip baptized him on the spot. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of God suddenly took Philip off, and that was the last the eunuch saw of him. But he didn't mind. He had what he'd come for and went on down the road as happy as he could be."