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Isaiah 56; Acts 8:26-40

THE HOLY SPIRIT'S WAY OF NAVIGATION

How in the world did we ever get anywhere before those Global Positioning Systems; that GPS that reliably and efficiently takes us from Point A to Point B? Some of us remember the good old days of Map Quest (Confession-sometimes I still use it). What about the good old days even before Map Quest when we would unfold road maps, spread them across kitchen tables, and plan our trips. We usually spread them out again, this time across car dashboards during the trip, or if we needed to find another route. Some of you have no idea what I am talking about for all you have known, and relied upon is that voice speaking to you telling you that in point 2 miles, you will need to turn right, and in 600 feet, your destination will be on the left.

GPS is not perfect. There are stories of occasions when it didn't do its job. For example, there was a woman who drove straight through a cornfield because her GPS directed her there. Then, there's the story about the four fishermen on their annual trip. They found themselves on a boat ramp, stopping just in time before driving their car into the lake because the GPS told them to go straight. Once, a Swiss traveler's GPS led him up a remote mountain footpath, where he had to be rescued by helicopter. You can't make these things up. Maybe not as dramatic, but we all have stories of GPS mishaps.

In our family, my husband is the trusting one who follows that voice coming from the dashboard or his phone, doing just as directed, step by step. I am the one in our family that selects the option called "details" where you can look at the route ahead to see exactly where it's going to take you. I want to know where I am headed.

As I prepared this morning's sermon, I questioned why Philip didn't ask that angel for more details of his trip, and what was ahead.

"An angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza (This is a wilderness road). So Philip got up and went.'"

I would have had to press the "detail" option. Not Philip. He seems to be in tune with the Holy's Spirit's way of navigation, and goes where he's told.

Our faith professes the Spirit of a living Lord who is active in sanctifying us according to God's ways and purposes. According to "The Brief Statement of Faith" in our Book of Confessions this Holy Spirit stays busy giving us directions:

"For courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries, and to count those voices long silenced, and to work for justice, freedom and peace."

This Holy Spirit seems to have a navigation system that directs us. But it does not always give the details of the journey. We have to trust, and listen.

Philip ends up settling in Caesarea, which is northwest of his work in Samaria, but the angel sends Philip in the opposite direction, and a wilderness road, no less. The Holy Spirit has some strange ways of navigation, certainly not always efficient for getting from Point A to Point B, but often enlightening.... when hearts and minds are open to receive direction from the Spirit.

Philip comes on the scene following Pentecost. The twelve disciples have already added to their ranks, but there are still not enough of them to do the work. They are hearing a lot of complaints that there are not enough disciples to care for the widows, and distribute food. So, they appoint seven from their ranks for this specific task. Philip is one of the seven. Stephen is also one of the seven. The people are coming in droves, and asking for the stories of Jesus. There are tensions and dangers in Jerusalem for some in the synagogue do not like the message the disciples are spreading, and are even more upset with the peoples' response. Stephen is accused and convicted, through false witnesses, of blasphemy, and stoned to death. After this event, some disciples remain in Jerusalem, but many of them scatter. They continued to tell the stories of Jesus. Philip goes to Samaria, and the crowds are eager to listen. There is great joy and many are baptized. Peter and John come from Jerusalem, and stay for a time to help Philip.

Things are going so well. It would be a good place to stay for a time. But Philip is told to leave, and go south towards Gaza. And he's on his way with few details of the journey.

He meets an Ethiopian eunuch sitting in a chariot. Philip could have bypassed this chariot except that the next direction in the Holy Spirit's system of navigation was "Go over to this chariot and join it." Time arrival to final destination delayed.

The Holy Spirit's way of navigation is often more interested in the journey than the destination.

We are given details about this Ethiopian eunuch.

- He is from far away from his homeland.
- He is the Secretary of the Treasury in the queen's court; a very high-ranking official.
- He is traveling by chariot, an indicator of his status.
- He has a scroll that he is reading from which attests to his wealth. Scrolls were not in the hands of most people. Also, he could read.
- He is a eunuch, a castrated male. That was often the requirement for those who served royalty, but still it was a condition that would not have allowed him access to the temple. The Law in Deuteronomy makes it very clear that eunuchs are excluded from any assembly of worship. So, he goes all the way to Jerusalem to worship knowing he will be left out.

It's important to understand that at the time this story would have taken place, we are still a few hundred years from Christianity being known as a world religion. At this point, those Jews who were followers of Jesus are considered to be a sect of Judaism. There are also those outside of Judaism; Gentiles, who showed an interest in the Jewish faith, but especially in this particular sect

of Jesus' followers. These Gentiles were known as God-fearers. They are not allowed in the temple, but there is a special place for them where they can gather known as the court of Gentiles. The Ethiopian eunuch was likely a God-fearer, outside the temple worship, but in the court of Gentiles. ¹

Philip hears what the Ethiopian is reading aloud, and recognizes it as the prophet, Isaiah's writing about the suffering servant. The eunuch may have identified with the suffering servant because with all his intelligence, his wealth, and his status, he knows that there are places he is not welcomed, humiliations he must endure, and justices that he will never be granted.

"Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip says

"How can I, unless someone guides me?" says the Ethiopian eunuch, and he invites Philip to join him. Philip tells him about Jesus who also knew humiliation and injustice. The Reverend Tom Long writes that the living Gospel gathers under the wings of God's mercy more and more of those whom society has lost and pushed away or forgotten. This is the message God in Jesus Christ brings to the world. No one is outside the realm of God's grace and mercy.

Philip's guidance would have pointed to this in Isaiah's prophecy. The prophet, Isaiah, was often embraced by those whom society marginalized and excluded because it promises that God will gather all people, and anyone joined to the Lord will not be cut off and unwelcomed. ²

This is incredible, amazing and good news for this Ethiopian eunuch.

So, the next direction on the GPS of the Holy Spirit was to a place where they looked down and saw water, probably a mud puddle. The Ethiopian eunuch asks just to be certain that he has heard Philip's message "Is there anything about me that would keep me from being baptized?" "Absolutely nothing!" And Philip baptizes him.

This Holy Spirit's way of navigation is not very efficient when our only concern is getting from Point A to Point B. But as the Reverend Barbara Brown Taylor has noted, if we can be present to the journey itself, we learn that many of our chance encounters are really divine appointments.

The Holy Spirit takes us places, and puts us in front of one other, and tells us to join in. We are not told who or what we might meet along the way. And yes, these encounters will probably mess up our travel plans.

There's another important lesson, among many, in this story. What the Ethiopian is missing is someone who will guide him in the scriptures, who will join him where he is. With his knowledge, wealth and status, this Ethiopian eunuch is humble enough to know what he doesn't understand. So, he asks for guidance. ³

¹ Karen Baker Fletcher, "Feasting On the Word"

² Robert Wall, "New Interpreter's Bible"

³ Amy Jill Levine

Maybe we do not do enough of this today, asking for guidance. With the abundance of information available to us just by logging into Google, it's easy to forget that information needs to be interpreted and evaluated. Sometimes, we need help to do that. We might be educated with the highest degree in our field. We might be a well-rounded person who reliably knows and has experienced a lot. We might be in a position of power where others rely on us to be wise and knowledgeable, and to admit that we need help and guidance could be seen as a sign of weakness.

The truth is that in matters of life and faith, we all are always in need of "Philips" who will stop along the way, and meet us where we are. No matter our intelligence, our wealth, or our status, we get lost. We find ourselves on that wilderness road of life, and on the stony path of suffering, and we need to be guided. John Calvin wrote, "By his secret watering, the Holy Spirit makes us fruitful to bring forth the buds of righteousness." The Holy Spirit will work through those we encounter on our journeys to meet us where we are, and to guide us. We all need to be guided. Are we humble and open to that, or are we more comfortable living in the myth of knowing it all, and not needing help?

Of course, the Holy Spirit works through us as well. We will be called and empowered to be "Philip" for others. I am not talking about proselytizing, or cajoling, or "guilt tripping" someone, but rather guiding faithfully, sharing our story in word and action, being God's vessel for grace so that a door might open for someone to ask "Is there any reason, I should not be part of this story, of God's story?" "Absolutely none! Absolutely none!"

We need "Philip" in our lives, and we need to be "Philip" for others.

So, is there a destination in this Holy Spirit's navigation system? Do we ever actually arrive somewhere? Of course, and we already have many times, and will again because God gives us wonderful glimpses in this life God's future for us. We do arrive. Our story this morning assures us of that.

"When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away. The eunuch saw him no more, but went on his way..... rejoicing."

There you have it. In the Holy Spirit's way of navigation, the destination is clear. The destination is "Rejoicing." Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!