

Philip: He Got Up and Went

Acts 8:26-40

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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Unlike many visitors to the Holy Land this Ethiopian civil servant was not just a tourist. He was a pilgrim in quest of God, so he had come to worship in the Temple and to study the Scriptures under renowned rabbis. But not all his questions had been answered. So here he is returning home, puzzling over Isaiah 53: "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." And whom does God send to help this struggling inquirer? Not an apostle or a pastor. Not a theologian or a grad student in Biblical studies. God sends Philip. And Philip, we learn in Acts 6, started out as a waiter in the church's food bank. When the apostles discovered that they had a horde of hungry people on their hands they appointed seven men to oversee the church's food service, and Philip was one of the seven. Now God calls Philip, a layperson, out of the dining room and sends him off to help this bewildered Bible reader. God is no respecter of titles. God doesn't need "Reverends." You, in fact, are a perfect candidate to do God's work.

About ten years ago our church in Arizona wanted to rebuild our campus in order to expand our ministry to younger families, but we were stymied by a parking shortage. Where, O where, could we get the space to park more cars? Betty Gullen walked into my office one Tuesday afternoon and said, rather off-handedly, "We ought to go to the school next door and buy a strip of land along our common property line. We could create head-in parking for another hundred cars." Well! You should have seen me jump out of my chair! That was the word we were waiting for, the word we were praying for, and it didn't come from the clergy. It came from a woman whose mind was not clogged up with all the reasons why it couldn't be done. In time, the school not only leased us that land; they offered another piece of their property for a parking lot. We paid to build the lot. They used it during the day, and we had it nights and weekends when we really needed it. And all because God spoke through Betty Gullen, a lay person, to show us the way.

"Ah," you say, "I've heard no voices from heaven. I've seen no writing in the sky. God has never spoken to me." Is that so? Listen to John Calvin: "If anyone objects that angels do not come down from heaven every day to make plain to us what we have to do, there is an easy answer, that the Word of God gives us an abundance of instruction about what we must do. Therefore our own laziness and neglect of prayer are the only things that impede and hinder us from being ready and eager to follow God." God speaks if only we will listen. And God speaks most clearly, Calvin says, when we open the pages of this book and go to our knees in prayer.

And when we listen, one of God's key commands is, "Get up and go." Remember God's word to Abram? "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." That was it: no AAA roadmap, no full color brochure of Canaan, no list of motels along the way, no assurance of a job once he got there, just "Go!" And because Abram got up and went, the followers of three major religions--Judaism, Christianity, and Islam--honor him as their patriarch.

Now God tells Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza (this is a wilderness road.)" To call that a wilderness road is one of the great understatements in the Bible. I've traveled the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza in 1984, and I can testify to its barrenness. Apart from an oasis or two, the Gaza road is little more than a strip of macadam in the middle of wind-swept sand dunes. It's a road without gas stations, Starbucks, or McDonalds. So wouldn't you hesitate if an angel pointed to the Gaza Road, and said "Get up and go?" "Lord, you can't be serious! It's a wilderness road. It's a road that leads nowhere. And why should I trade the delights of Samaria for the desert of Gaza?" Sound like anyone you know? Sounds like someone I know. I have all kinds of excuses for not sacrificing my wants to minister to others' needs. I'm tired after a long day in the office. It's not safe to travel in that part of the city. I've paid my taxes, so let the government do it. And so on, ad infinitum, ad nauseum.

Philip didn't hide behind my excuses. God said, "Get up and go," and our text says "he got up and went." And because he got up and went, a man confessed his faith in Jesus, was baptized, and then carried the Good News back to his people. Two 4th century church historians, Eusebius and Irenaeus, write about a thriving church in Ethiopia in their day. The Ethiopian eunuch, baptized by Philip, may well have been the single seed by which the Gospel of Jesus Christ first took root in the soil of Africa. And from that seed there sprouted a church that is still in existence today.

If, when God speaks, we will get up and go, we will discover that the road isn't really empty, nor is it barren. For one thing, God is always there ahead of us. And opportunities to serve and to share the Gospel are there. And who knows what effect we may have. A whole continent opened to Jesus Christ because Philip got up and went.

Last month, Douglas Groat received his Eagle Scout badge at a Court of Honor in the Chapel of the Presidents. Douglas has been volunteering every week as a tutor at the Unique Learning Center in DC. That means traveling into a very dangerous area to help little boys and girls with their lessons. Sherry Woods, the Center's director, was present at the Court of Honor, and she praised Douglas for coming week after week to help the children of the inner city. Douglas missed only when it was necessary, she told us, and even then he never failed to let her know that he wouldn't be coming and to tell her why. Then Sherry said this: "Douglas is a young man without excuses."

"A young man without excuses." I wish I deserved that label. But to be honest, my easy chair is often my excuse. Or the book I'm reading, or a favorite TV series, or the NBA playoffs. And all the while there are children waiting and wanting to be tutored at the Unique Learning Center. There are homeless men waiting to be fed at Third Street Church of God. There are international students at AU wanting to meet an American family. There are youth at risk in DC needing a big brother or a big sister. There are neighbors in

need of a helping hand, colleagues going through tough times, a spouse down the street carrying for her loved one and needing respite care. Will we hide behind our excuses, or will we get up and go?

In one of their recent ad campaigns, Microsoft asked, "Where do you want to go today?" Jesus Christ is asking a far more important question: "Where are you needed today?" When you get an answer to that question (and I guarantee it won't be hard to find), "Get up and go!"