

“Get Up and Go! – Escape or Embrace?”
Acts 8:26-40
Sermon Preached by Thomas P. Markey
John Knox Presbyterian Church - Indianapolis, Indiana
April 29, 2018

I wonder if any of you all can relate to the following scenario:

You need to run a quick errand, just grab a few things – you’ll be in and out – so you throw on something comfortable, maybe even stay in your pajamas. You’re getting through your list, you’re avoiding interacting with other human beings, things are moving along well, you’re making your way down the aisle, preparing to grab that last final item when, you look up and see “them.” “Them” might be a former love interest that ended poorly, “them” might be a colleague or a co-worker, “them” might be an old friend with whom you’ve lost touch, “them” might be a relative who you don’t often see, a neighbor, or a former teacher.

Whomever it might be, your certain that they’re the last person you wanted to see, the last person you wanted to have a conversation with, especially when you’re wearing pajama pants.

The blood begins to rush to your face, your heart begins to beat a bit faster, your palms are sweating, and your most immediate thought is – “I hope that didn’t see me.”

If you’re anything like me, most often in these situations I attempt to do my best impression of a private investigator, doing my best to simply “blend in” and escape this unexpected encounter as I awkwardly snap my head forward to ensure that no eye contact is made. I then pretend to become incredibly invested in knowing every nutritional fact about whatever item of food I’ve randomly grabbed, waiting until this person has left the aisle so that I can swiftly sneak away.

Others of you, which I am sure is the majority of you, are far more courageous. You embrace the opportunity to engage with this person. You don’t shy away from eye contact or from a brief conversation.

Either way, encounters like these – those that are unexpected – can leave us impacted in ways we might never imagine.

What must have Philip been thinking?

Just as he had been told him, he’s been in Samaria sharing and spreading the Gospel as best he can with the Samaritans. He’d been hard at work, doing his best to remain faithful to his call and just as he’s getting into a routine and rhythm, an angel from the Lord appears and tells him to “take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza” – a wilderness road.

So Philip goes, and then as he is walking along the road, he sees the chariot making its way towards him. Tired and worn out from his time in Samaria, Philip takes a deep breath, sighs loudly and says to himself, “Ugh. Not a eunuch. We’ve got nothing in common. Nothing to talk about. I’ll walk by him, say hello, but that’s it! I don’t have the energy today for some deep and in-depth theological conversation.”

What must have the Ethiopian eunuch been thinking?

He’s been on a long journey, having traveled from Ethiopia to Jerusalem, he is now on his way home, making the long trek back. He too is tired and is simply enjoying some light reading from his scroll, when he looks up and sees Philip trotting towards him.

“Oh no! Not one of those crazy Jesus people! We get it, he rose from the dead, but its been a long trip and I’ve still got a long way to go. Please don’t come and talk to me! Maybe if I keep my eyes forward and don’t make eye contact, he won’t notice me.”

As we heard read in our story for today, we don’t get to hear the internal thoughts and feelings of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. In fact, unexpected as it might be, both of them seem eager – or at least willing – to embrace this unexpected encounter. And so, as Philip makes his way up to the Ethiopian eunuch, they decide that the best way to begin a conversation is through a good old-fashioned Bible study right there in the eunuch’s chariot.

They’re reading together. They’re discussing what this scripture might mean. They’re enjoying each other’s company and perhaps, in the midst of meditating on the scriptures they each begin to wonder how the other ended up on this road.

So they take a break from reading and begin to share their stories.

Excited and eager to share, Philip tells of his call to spread and share the Gospel throughout Samaria. He tells the eunuch that an angel of the Lord had come to him and told him to travel along this road.

Defeated and deflated, the Ethiopian eunuch shares of his painful experience in Jerusalem. He had come to Jerusalem in the hopes of being able to attend worship. But he had been denied access to join in on the assembly.

You see, while the eunuch had a unique status as being “trusted to perform social functions for royalty,” the eunuch was seen and “stereotyped as sexually immoral,” because, “in ancient times a eunuch was a castrated male,” literally “neutered human beings” who were, “therefore deemed safe to serve among women of the royal household.”¹

¹ Karen Baker-Fletcher, Theological Perspective: Acts 8:26-20, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2.

I know that the story tells us that Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch do their best together to interpret a particular passage from chapter 53 of the prophet Isaiah, yet I cannot help but think that, in light of what the eunuch had experienced – this complete denial of worship – that they made sure to keep reading, to arrive at chapter 56 when the prophet makes this proclamation as well, “The Lord says: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, choose what I desire, and remain loyal to my covenant. In my temple and courts, I will give them a monument and a name better than sons and daughters. I will give to them an enduring name that won’t be removed.”

The Rev. Jill Duffield is the Editor of the Presbyterian Outlook. This past week, she published an article titled, “Letter to a young pastor.” While the article was aimed at challenging new pastors who are just beginning in the profession, I found her words to be fitting for all of us as we strive to be faithful to whatever our calling might be, especially in those unexpected encounters.

My hope for you is this: that you won't capitulate to the prevalence of grumbling among church leaders. We work so hard. We are so stressed. We never get a day off, not really. Nobody knows the trouble we've seen, not even Jesus. If you find yourself falling into this trap of self-pity and self-absorption, I hope you will take a walk and look around. Get up at dawn and listen to the trash trucks roll by no matter the weather. Read the paper and remember the public defender representing the young man who shot his former classmates. Go have lunch with some local school kids, thank the cafeteria worker, the janitor, the teachers who buy pencils and markers and the principal worried about the student who sleeps in a car. Make sure you get out a lot so that you don't imagine that your call is the most important, the most difficult or the most holy.

I know the church has changed a great deal since I donned that first robe. I hear it all the time: smaller, shrinking, less prevalent, less relevant. Yes. Guilty as charged. And yet, Jesus says the gates of hell will not prevail against his church and long before our branch of the vine existed, God spoke to Moses and temporarily blinded Paul and visited Teresa of Ávila. Through plagues, wars, revolutions, natural disasters and all manner of change, God remains faithful, calls together the covenant community, raises up leaders, promises justice, restores people, transforms lives and refuses to give up on this chaotic, sinful beloved world. So, in short: Be not anxious. It doesn't help anyway.

That's my hope for you: Don't be afraid. Be the voice of hope to the hopeless, the light in the darkness, the one who speaks of resurrection even to, especially to, those chained to the grave. Proclaim the wisdom that is foolishness to the world until you believe it most days yourself. And every day

may you feel less foolish and more present, but never convinced of your own wisdom and always only a fool for Christ.²

In light of today's reading, two lines from Rev. Duffield's article stuck out to me in particular,

"I hope you will take a walk and look around..."

"Make sure you get out a lot..."

Or, as our story today puts, "Get Up and Go!" When we do that - when we get up and go, when we take a walk and look around, when we make sure to get out a lot - we find ourselves unable to escape those unexpected encounters.

One of my favorites portions of this encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is the exchange between the two of them just before they make their way to the water.

The eunuch exclaims, "Look! Water! What would keep me from being baptized?"

The answer - Absolutely nothing. There are no conditions. No polity or procedures to follow. No questions to which the eunuch must respond "I will." and "I do." No doctrine to dedicate one's self to. It is not decent and in order.

In her commentary on this week's text, Rev. Duffield reflects on this reality,

I confess that my deference for church polity might have left the Ethiopian eunuch dry on that desert road. I would have happily expounded upon the Scripture, but I might have balked at presiding over an unauthorized sacrament. We have rules about such matters. The session must approve. Authorized representatives of the church must be present. Baptism is no private matter. Has the eunuch been properly instructed in the meaning and implications of baptism? Perhaps we could schedule a time to get together in a week and talk more about his request. Meanwhile, the fruit on the vine rots, and the branch begins to die.

How many times do we well-intended, committed church folk become barren branches in our earnest quest for decency and order? We put in place wedding policies, building use policies, funeral policies, rules for who is eligible to be an official church leader, a check list for how to respond to someone seeking help, and on and on and on. We abide in our mostly well-meaning, thoroughly-vetted, liability-preventing policy manuals even as we look around

² Jill Duffield, "Letter to a young pastor," Presbyterian Outlook, <http://pres-outlook.org/2018/04/letter-to-a-young-pastor/>.

*and see that we are withering. We don't want to upset the status quo or ruffle the feathers of the faithful, even if it means dying on the vine.*³

Our text today reminds us that we do our best when our theology is not decent and in order, but rather a theology that is “Get Up and Go!”

To get “Get Up and Go” means for us to embrace those unexpected encounters in our life, rather than trying to escape them.

It means to “Get Up and Go” out into the world, offering the radical and welcoming embrace that Jesus offered to the world.

To “Get Up and Go” means to extend the full, radical, and inclusive love of God to ALL people, welcoming them, affirming them, and loving them just as they are, for who they are – a beloved child of God. No exceptions.

A “Get Up and Go” theology ensures and insists that the doors are always open and access is given to all who desire to join in with the community.

Friends, it is time for us to “Get Up and Go!” to take the road – from Jerusalem to Gaza, the wilderness road, so that we too might encounter that which is unexpected. The chariot is making its way towards us, and the Holy Spirit, well, she’s nudging us forward.

Amen.

³ Jill Duffield, “April 29, 2018 — 5th Sunday of Easter,” Presbyterian Outlook, <http://pres-outlook.org/2018/04/april-29-2018-5th-sunday-of-easter/>.