

I

I spent the early years of my life living in small towns, but when I was seven, our family moved to Houston, Texas, one of the largest cities in the United States.

That Christmas, I received a new bicycle, and I spent Christmas afternoon riding it up and down our street. I spotted a little boy about my age playing in his front yard, and I stopped to talk to him. I showed off my new bike, and he admired it enthusiastically, and then I said, “So what did you get for Christmas?”

And I’ll never forget what he said. He said, “We don’t celebrate Christmas in our house.” I said, “You don’t celebrate Christmas?” I’d heard of kids getting a lump of coal in their stocking, but I’d never heard of someone being so bad as to have Christmas canceled outright. “What’d you *do*?” I asked.

“I didn’t *do* anything, silly” he said. “We’re Muslims. We don’t celebrate Christmas in our family.”

“Oh,” I said, pretending that I knew what Muslim meant. At the age of seven, my world was still very small, and I had not yet considered that not everyone in the world thought about matters of faith in the same way. So we just talked and played for a bit longer, until it was time for me to ride home again.

But over the years, I’ve often thought about that Christmas afternoon, because it marked the point at which I

became aware that not all of my neighbors are the same.

II

For you and I who live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the world in which we live is growing smaller by the day. We have more access to information and more opportunities than any generation that has come before us to encounter people who look differently, who speak differently, who pray, who love differently.

And to be honest, when we encounter difference, it can make us uncomfortable. It can force us to reexamine things we once took as a matter of course. It can force us to rethink our assumptions. It can cause us to wonder about ourselves, about our neighbors, about how we think about God, and about how we all fit together in the grand scheme of things. And those kinds of questions are at the heart of our story this morning.

III

This spring and summer, we’ve been reading and preaching our way through the Book of Acts, and as we’ve said all along, Acts can really be read as Volume II as the Gospel of Luke. The scholarly consensus is that both Luke and Acts were penned by the same author and were meant to be read together, with the Gospel of Luke describing the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and Acts describing the birth and growth of the movement that grew up in Christ’s

name that came to be known as the church.

You may recall that when we began our read through Acts in chapter 1, as the resurrected Jesus was ascending into heaven, he promised his disciples that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them and that they would be his witnesses beginning there in Jerusalem, then out to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Thus far in the story, all of the action has been centered in Jerusalem. But starting today, Jesus' promise is beginning to be fulfilled: by the power of the Spirit and through the work of the church, the good news about Jesus Christ is beginning to move out of Jerusalem. Just before our passage today, one of Jesus' original 12 disciples named Philip carries the good news about Jesus to the north, into the region of Samaria. And in today's reading, Philip is instructed to take the good news to the south.

And so now I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Acts 8:26-40.

*Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.*

*Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "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." The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

What a strange picture these two men must have made as they rode along in that chariot. Philip was one of the first disciples that Jesus called to follow him in Galilee. Philip had been raised as a first-century Jew, and he was most likely poor, and like most of his contemporaries, he likely had very little formal education and was probably functionally illiterate. We of course don't have any photographs of Philip, but his complexion and features were most likely those common to the people of the Eastern Mediterranean basin. If Philip was standing in a crowd of other men in Jerusalem, it would be hard to pick him out from a distance.

But the Ethiopian Secretary of the Treasury was another story. The text doesn't say so, but as a senior member of the Ethiopian court, he was likely wealthy and almost certainly traveled with an entourage, or at least a security detail. His chariot likely bore the flags and symbols of the Queen. He was clearly educated, as he pored over the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and read it aloud. We of course don't have any photographs of him, but his complexion and features were most likely common to the people of Eastern Africa. And of course, there's one other key difference that Luke notes – he was a eunuch – perhaps made so as a condition of his service at court.

So Philip and the Ethiopian were different in almost every conceivable way. They were different racially. They were different culturally. They were different economically. They were

different in terms of their formal education or lack thereof. And they were different in terms of their sexuality.

But I submit to you, friends, that neither Philip nor the Ethiopian Treasury Secretary are the main characters in this story. The main character, the main actor in this story is the Holy Spirit.

It was the Spirit that told Philip to leave Jerusalem and go down the wilderness road toward Gaza. It was the Spirit that told Philip to go and approach the Ethiopian chariot. It was the Spirit that was tugging on the Treasury Secretary's heart, giving him a longing for a deeper understanding of God's Word. It was the Spirit that broke through all the lines of difference between these two men – that broke the barriers of race and culture and education and economics and sexuality. It was the Spirit that led them both into the waters of baptism, and it was the Spirit that sent both of them joyfully on their way – the Ethiopian home as the first ambassador of Christ to the continent of Africa, and Philip off to his next assignment in Azotos.

Philip and the Treasury Secretary are the supporting actors in this story – it's the Spirit that drives the action, and it's the Spirit that is the star of the show.

#### IV

My friend, you know that you don't have to travel a wilderness road to encounter difference – in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, you can encounter lines of

difference just about anywhere you go. Our nation is undergoing massive demographic changes, and the people who study such things tell us that within this century, we will be a nation of minorities – there will no longer be any one group of people that makes up a numerical majority.

And I don't know about you, my friend, but those facts make me a little bit nervous. Because let's be honest – it's always easier to find common ground with people who look like us, who speak like us, who come from the same backgrounds and places that we do. And that's especially true when it comes to matters of faith.

I don't know about you, but when I encounter difference, sometimes I'm afraid that I'm going to inadvertently say something that hurts, or I'm going to make a wrong assumption, or I'm going to mess something up, even though I mean well. Sometimes it feels safer to just stay put in Jerusalem rather than to obey the voice of the Spirit and head out on the road.

But here's the thing I've come to believe, and it's given me great comfort and hope, and I hope it gives you comfort and hope, too. It's not my responsibility nor is it my job to carry the Holy Spirit into the world. The Holy Spirit has already gone ahead of us and is already at work, and the Spirit is beckoning us to come out and join the party.

The Spirit was already at work in the heart of the Treasury Secretary

before Philip knew anything about him. The Spirit was already at work out there on the wilderness road when Philip walked up to the chariot. The Spirit is always going ahead of us, beckoning us to come and see the new thing that God is doing in the world.

You don't have to be afraid when you encounter difference, my friend. God has woven diversity and difference into the very fabric of God's creation. The good news of the gospel isn't just for those few in Jerusalem. It's for those in Samaria, and those on the wilderness road. For the Spirit is at work in the lives of those who are wealthy and those who are poor. The Spirit is at work in the lives of those who hold positions of power and for those who are powerless. The Spirit is at work in the lives of those who hold degrees from prestigious institutions and for those who graduated the school of hard knocks. The Spirit is at work in the lives of those who have dark skin and those who have light skin and for every shade and hue in between. The Spirit is at work in the lives of those whose gender expressions are binary and for those for whom it is fluid. The Spirit has already gone ahead of us, my friend.

So know this. Sometime this week, you will encounter diversity. Sometime this week, you will encounter difference. And it might be a little uncomfortable. It might make you a little nervous. You can stay in Jerusalem if you want to, my friend. It's understandable that it might feel safer and more comfortable there. But the

Spirit, as they say, has left the building. The Spirit is on the road. The Spirit is at work in God's great big world, and the Spirit is beckoning you, my friend, to let the Spirit work in and through you, and to come and join the party and see the new thing that God is doing.

## V

As most of you know, in 2020, our church marked its bicentennial, which means we have just begun our third century of mission and ministry in the name of Jesus Christ here in Athens, Georgia.

And as we move into this new season, we have discerned that the Spirit is calling us to join our hearts and hands with Presbyterians across the nation around three missional foci – building congregational vitality, eradicating poverty, and dismantling structural racism. This denomination-wide movement is called the Matthew 25 initiative, and you've been hearing and will hear more about it in days to come.

As bold as the Matthew 25 vision is, truth be told, it also seems more than a little naïve and foolhardy. Building congregational vitality sounds good, but how can one church, or even one denomination, eradicate structural poverty? How can one church, or even one denomination, dismantle systemic racism? Besides, poverty and racism are hot-button topics in the news these days, and we don't want to upset anyone. Perhaps we'd be better off to just stay put where we are.

But here's the thing – the Spirit is out on the wilderness road. See, that's the thing about God – God is always out ahead of us, preparing the way for us, beckoning us to follow, inviting us to come and see. Jesus said to his disciples, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places, and I am going ahead of you and preparing a place for you, and I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also."

The Spirit has already gone ahead of us onto the wilderness road. God is already at work in the world eradicating structural poverty. God is already at work in the world dismantling systemic racism. God is already at work in the world building and strengthening the beloved community that gathers in Christ's name – the community we call the church.

And the Spirit is beckoning to us, to you and to me, beckoning to the church, to come and join in the thing that God is already doing in the world. May we have the courage to get up, and go and see.

Thanks be to God. Amen.