

A Community of Unstoppable Witness

Acts 8:26-40

Introduction

As some of you know I love to read the biographies of former presidents of the United States – those big thick 600 page biographies. Right now I'm reading one about Rutherford B. Hayes.

One of the best books in that genre was written by Doris Kearns Goodwin about President Abraham Lincoln. The book is titled "Team of Rivals." It details how Lincoln created a cabinet from among the men he defeated to become the Republican nominee, and eventual president of the United States. Highly regarded men like ...

- William Seward, Secretary of State
- Edwin Stanton, Secretary of War
- Edward Bates, Attorney General
- The most contentious of them all, Salmon Chase, Secretary of the Treasury. As a side note, Chase was the one responsible for getting the phrase "In God We Trust" on our coins.

The Treasury Secretary has always been one of the prime positions in any cabinet. It is a position of great influence and power. It has been that way for thousands of years. That position was also a very powerful position in ancient Ethiopia. One of the main characters in our text today held that very position. We know very little about him. For example, we don't know his name, but as we read our text, we do learn that:

- He was in charge of the treasury.
- He was a eunuch.
- He was on his way home after going to Jerusalem to worship.
- And, while traveling, he was reading the Old Testament book of Isaiah.

The eunuch's trip to Jerusalem was unique, but really not that unusual. One commentator makes this observation:

In those days the world was full of people who were weary of the many gods and loose morals of their nations. They came to Judaism and there found the one God and the moral standards which gave life meaning.

Perhaps, like me, you find it interesting that 2,000 years ago people were turning to our God for hope and satisfaction when their own gods were not providing any meaning to their lives. It is a reason for ongoing optimism about the current climate in our nation and in our world. Nothing else satisfies, so people are always looking for something that does ... and we know that only Jesus gives meaning to life and satisfaction to our souls.

The second character in our drama is a man named Philip. This is not the Philip who was one of the original 12 disciples. This Philip was one of the seven men chosen to be the first deacons in the Bible. We first meet him in Acts 6. Specifically, this man Philip was

charged with the responsibility of keeping a watchful eye on the widows of the church, so that the disciples (apostles) could focus on the ministries of prayer and preaching.

So Philip possessed the gift of service. In addition to the gift of serving, Philip also had a powerful gift of evangelism. When the persecution of the church intensified, forcing people to leave Jerusalem for other parts of the world, Philip ended up in the region of Samaria. While there, he began to tell his new neighbors about Jesus.

When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city. (Acts 8:6-8)

The Jewish leadership tried hard to squelch the good news of the Gospel that was being proclaimed by those earliest Christians. They applied so much pressure that those Christians scattered throughout the whole world. They had been driven away from home, but they never stopped sharing what Jesus had done for them. Instead of stopping the chatter about Jesus, it only increased. That's because these Christians in the early church had an:

UNSTOPPABLE WITNESS

You see, the early church was not dependent on being geographically centered. There was no particular building or street address that was at the center of their lives. No, they were 100% Jesus-centered. The Great Commission had directed them to go to the ends of the earth. Now because of the persecution, they had been scattered to the ends. And no matter where they were, their witness continued. It was unstoppable!

So far in this sermon series that I have titled "Unstoppable," we have seen this community of believers demonstrate unstoppable grace, unstoppable faith, unstoppable courage, and now today we observe its unstoppable witness, reflected in one of its servants ... a man named Philip.

Philip displayed that unstoppable witness as:

#1: HE FOLLOWED GOD'S LEADING

Look at verse 26:

An angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out ...

Think about it. Philip is having an amazing impact in Samaria. People are being healed. The gospel is being communicated. The crowds were paying close attention to him. Who would ever want to leave a situation like that?

But in the midst of all this evangelistic success, God speaks, and says something totally illogical. "Philip, leave where you are making a difference and start walking south into the desert."

- Philip doesn't know it yet, but from our perspective we can see that God asks Philip to leave the crowds so he can go talk to one man.
- Philip also doesn't know, although we can see it, that this one man – this eunuch treasury secretary – will carry the gospel back to Ethiopia and will ignite a great fire of faith in his home country.
 - Did you know that today, the nation of Ethiopia is one of the leading voices of evangelical Christianity in the world?
 - Mekane Yesus the largest individual branch of Lutheranism in the Lutheran World Federation. It has more than 11 million members, one of which is our own Gemechis Buba.
 - The Methodist Church in Ethiopia has kept the United Methodist Church from officially adopting several more liberal stances in its General Conferences.

The Ethiopian Christians I have been able to speak with trace their faith story back to this eunuch. Amazing! Philip has no idea what God is up to. But God said "go," and so Philip went. Even though it made no sense, Philip was ready to share the good news as God gave him the opportunity. He wanted to follow God's leading.

If you really want God to use you as a vessel for impacting your world, He will often nudge you to do things, many of which make little or no sense at the time. But a person or church with an unstoppable witness has learned that when God says "go," you go. You can question that nudge, but don't wait for an answer.

Philip had no idea why he was sent into the desert. But when he saw the eunuch and heard him reading Isaiah, the picture became less fuzzy. That's been my experience as well.

Philip also displayed that unstoppable witness as:

#2: HE JOINED THE EUNUCH'S JOURNEY

Look at verses 30-31:

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. (Acts 8:30-31)

There are two components to this journey joining adventure. First, Philip literally traveled with the eunuch. At the eunuch's invitation, Philip climbed up into the chariot and rode along with him. Second, Philip joined this eunuch on his spiritual journey. In the same way Philip was invited to ride along in the chariot, he was also invited to come along as

the eunuch tried to figure out what the Prophet Isaiah meant when he wrote that troublesome text. Philip took two journeys in one: a physical one and a spiritual one.

One of the words we have used repeatedly here at Grace to describe this “joining the journey” is:

ALONGSIDER

Bill is a good friend our church's discipleship efforts. He tells this story about a person who joined his physical and spiritual journey many years ago. Bill writes:

I was on a mission when I entered college. I had told God to shove off, my heroes were the radical left, my culture was defined by rock and roll, and my passion was a girl named Peggy. Then I met Ed.

Ed lived across the hall from me in the freshman dorm. We bonded as friends around the shared struggles of college life. Only this friendship was different. Ed claimed to be a Christian. I had never before met anyone my age who centered their life around their faith.

Once, when I was sitting in his dorm room, Ed posed a question, “Want to meet in the study lounge tomorrow and read the Bible together?” Through reading the gospels and the faithful persuasion of friends like Ed, the Lord lovingly drew me to Himself and I became a Christ-follower my sophomore year. I found a new Hero in Jesus, a new culture in the body of Christ, and a new passion for loving God.

Ed, like Philip, was an alongsider. He came alongside Bill and helped Bill learn about Jesus. What Ed was to Bill, Philip was to this eunuch. We don't know how many miles the journey was for Philip and the eunuch. For Bill and Ed it was a journey that took a year-and-a-half. But the two of them, Bill and Ed, Philip and the eunuch, traveled the journey together. At the beginning of each journey one man knew Jesus, one did not. At the end, both men knew Jesus. That's because both Ed and Philip had an UNSTOPPABLE witness.

Finally, Philip displayed that unstoppable witness as:

#3: HE INTRODUCED THE EUNUCH TO JESUS

Let me read verse 35:

Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. (Acts 8:35)

And it didn't stop there!

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” Then

both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.
(Acts 8:36, 38)

How cool is that! Don't miss what God is doing in this story! God is clearly behind it all.

- God inspired the eunuch to go to Jerusalem.
- God knows the route from Jerusalem back to Ethiopia.
- God knows the eunuch will be reading Isaiah.
- God waits until the eunuch gets to the troublesome passage that needs to be explained, a passage that is 53 chapters into the book.
- God know how long it will take Philip to hike from Samaria and intersect the chariot.
- And here is the best part ... at just the right moment in the conversation God has the chariot arrive at a pool of water. *(pause)* Think about it! They are in the desert and right when it is needed a pool of water appears.

Behind every witness that you and I will ever make, God has already laid an incredible groundwork. So completely has God prepared the way that a word of witness that is prompted by God's leading and that flows from the relational journey we have with those who are seeking, such a witness is always UNSTOPPABLE.

In that same book of Isaiah that the eunuch was reading ... in fact, two chapters after the troublesome passage that prompted this conversation ... we find these words:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

A word of witness may not always result in an instantaneous baptism, but it will always accomplish what God intends for it to accomplish. It will always be UNSTOPPABLE.

APPLICATION

Now baptized, this eunuch gets back into his chariot and continues on his journey home. He is no longer a foreigner who is exploring a relationship with a God unlike the gods of his homeland. He is a Christian, part of the Body of Christ, a member of the church Jesus came to establish. A church that causes hell to tremble.

He goes home with his new-found faith, and begins to share the story of Jesus with the people of his country. And they too believe. He no doubt faced the opposition of the religious leaders in his homeland. Remember, he is the only Christian in the entire nation. But his witness is UNSTOPPABLE.

God doesn't need Philip in the desert anymore, so He whisks him off to a place called Azotus, where Philip does what he always does:

He traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea. (Acts 8:40)

His witness was UNSTOPPABLE.

Now it is our turn. It is our turn to hear the prompting and to join in the journeys of the people God leads us to, giving witness to our faith so that too may believe.

- Listen! Where is God leading you today?

Let's pray ... Amen.