

May 10, 2009
Easter 5
Mother's Day

"The Risen Savior Wants Baptism for All People"

ACTS 8:26-40

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road-- the desert road-- that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." ³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. ³¹ "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." ³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" ³⁷ ³⁸ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Every time there is fire in Santa Barbara, it is amazing how some homes burn to the ground and other homes right next door escape the flames and remain standing. It almost seems the fate of a home depends on the way the wind is blowing. Why are some homes spared and why do others burn to the ground? That is the question that faces people who are returning to their homes this weekend after the devastating Jesusita Fire.

Today we see a man from Ethiopia experience an amazing rescue in his life, not from fire burning on a hillside, but the eternal fires of hell itself. He is led to faith in Jesus and then he receives the blessing of Holy Baptism, the same blessing that has come into your life and mine. This man was saved while others in Jerusalem rejected the rescue that Jesus offers all people.

Jesus wants all to be saved. Shortly before he descended into heaven Jesus told his disciples, "Go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

On this Mother's Day we are thankful for our Christian mothers who were used by Jesus to lead us to the blessing of baptism and bring God's Word into our lives. Jesus wants these

blessings for all people. That is why he leaves us here on this earth. Let's take a closer look at how Jesus used Philip to bring the blessings of baptism to a man from Ethiopia.

He uses people to reach the lost

The Lord did not use an angel to speak to this Ethiopian man as he rode his chariot from Jerusalem to Gaza. The Lord used a man named Philip. Philip was teaching and preaching to people in a place called Samaria. Many people were coming to faith and being baptized. How surprised he must have been to have an angel of the Lord appear to him and say, "Go south to the road-the desert road-that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." That makes no sense. Leave behind numerous opportunities to talk about Jesus and go to a desert road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. But then God's ways are not always our ways. Imagine walking along a desert road, stopping along the way to get something to drink, sleeping out at night, looking up at the stars, and wondering, "What am I doing here in the middle of the desert?" Do you ever wonder why the Lord is allowing you to follow the path you are on right now? It may not even seem all that useful and productive compared to other better moments in your life.

The Lord knew what he was doing just as he knows what he is doing with your life. Philip started out walking on this desert road. He sees among the other travelers, a man from Ethiopia riding on a chariot. Here was what we might call a VIP, a Very Important Person. Here is the treasurer for queen of Ethiopia. He was a VIP and also a VRP, a very religious person. He is in his chariot, riding to Jerusalem, to worship the Lord. Somehow the words of the Old Testament have come into his life. He is interested in worshipping the Lord and learning more about the one true God. In fact he is so interested in learning more about the Lord he has used his wealth to purchase some handwritten scrolls that contain the words of the Old Testament written on them. He has even taught himself Hebrew so he can read what was written on the scroll and understand it.

In Romans 10 we are told, "Their sound has gone out into the whole world." At times we may think the message of salvation is not getting out to people, but it may be reaching people in ways we cannot see, just as the message of the Old Testament was reaching into the life of this man from Ethiopia. I am holding in my hand a MP3 player. As I was working on this part of the sermon I received a phone call from an organization called, "Faith Comes by Hearing." They offer a disk of the entire New Testament in MP3 format that can be shared with people all over the world. They even offer solar powered MP3 players for people in poor countries so they can hear the Bible in their own language. Think of how much money the Ethiopian must have paid for a handwritten scroll of the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Think of the effort he went through to learn the Hebrew language just so he could read it on his own. This was not just something that happened by chance. This was all part of God's plan to bring salvation into this man's life and into the lives of the people in Ethiopia.

The Lord told Philip to talk to this man about Jesus. "The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it.'" What a blessing it would be for us if the Holy Spirit told us to go near to certain people and stay close to them so we can talk to them about Jesus. Even though this does not happen to us directly as it did to Philip we trust that our risen Lord will direct our lives to people because he wants us involved in seeing people saved and baptized in the name of the true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Lord puts a baby

into the arms of a Christian mother. She is privileged to read Bible stories, sing songs, pray, and bring her child with her to worship. He allows you to have a job where you get to know someone you can invite to come to hear about Jesus and just as Philip did with this Ethiopian man.

If I ask you to throw this ball in the air, and I throw another ball at it, what are my chances of hitting that ball? Slim to none. The fact that you were given the opportunity to know about Jesus and believe in him is not blind chance or a lucky throw. We are not as one evolutionist once said, "A chance configuration of atoms in the slipstream of the universe." It was a sequence of events, carefully orchestrated by the Lord, involving lots of people that brought you and me to the point that this Ethiopian man came to in his life. Romans 9 says, "So then *it is* not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy." "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. That saved a wretch like me. I once as lost but now am found Was blind but now I see."

Philip approaches the man's chariot. He is reading from the scroll the words of the prophet Isaiah. He is puzzled by the words, "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth." He read the words "Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." The eunuch knew sadly what it was like to not have descendants because of what had been done to him physically. At the same time he wondered how the next verses could speak of this person seeing his descendants. He was not able to see what our eyes see in the miracle of Jesus' resurrection.

Philip kindly asks this man if he knew what he was reading. He could read the words, but he did not know this was referring to Jesus. He asks Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" "Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus." Any time someone asks us a question about the Bible, it opens up a door of opportunity to talk about Jesus, and explain the way of salvation to people.

It appears that this man did not know about Jesus. He was a VIP (very important person) and a VRP (very religious person). No matter how much money he had in the bank, or how religious he was, and how faithful in his work, he could not get back to God by following the religious views of the Jews, or Egyptians, or Canaanites, or any other religions he came to know. All the money in the treasury of the queen could not pay off one sin, or purchase one second of respite and relief from the eternal death and punishment that was to come. Romans 3 says, "There is none who does good, no not one." From the lips of Philip he was able to hear about Jesus, about a ransom payment for sin, about a righteousness that was declared to be his when Jesus rose from the dead. From the words of Isaiah 53 he was able to learn that he was a sheep that had gone astray but the Lord laid the sin of the world on Jesus.

We aren't told how long they traveled together in the chariot, or how many stops they made along the way, or whether they sat around a fire at night and talked more about Jesus and his resurrection. We do know from what follows that Philip talked to this man about the blessings of Baptism in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

He provides the blessings of baptism

As they travel through the desert, they come to a place where there is some water. The Ethiopian exclaims joyfully, "Look here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" This man knew the blessings that came with baptism. He had heard about this from Philip. There is no hesitation. The chariot stops and Philip baptizes this man in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. He does not baptize him in the name of the sun, moon and stars, or use the names of some heathen gods of the Ethiopian people. After Philip is taken away, it says that this man went on his way rejoicing. Philip had left him, but he still had his faith in Jesus and the blessings of baptism that he could carry with him the rest of his life and share with the people of Ethiopia.

Every day we live on this earth we can rejoice in the blessings that our baptism has brought us in our lives. For as long as we live we want to recall our baptism using words such as Galatians 3, "As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ." We can say with Paul in Romans 6, "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." As we just heard sung in the baptism hymn:

Sin, disturb my soul no longer: I am baptized into Christ!

I have comfort even stronger: Jesus' cleansing sacrifice.

Should a guilty conscience seize me Since my Baptism did release me

In a dear forgiving flood, Sprinkling me with Jesus' blood?

You have been given these blessings in your baptism. Our risen Lord wants these blessings of Baptism for all people. Amen.