

First Baptist Church of Fitchburg

1400 John Fitch Highway Fitchburg, MA 01420 Phone# 978-345-5622

May 2nd, 2021, 5th Sunday of Easter / Communion Sunday

Pastor: Rev. Meredith H. Christian

Song Leader: May Goff



“Dazed And Disoriented”

A Message from Acts 8:26-40

Welcome and Announcements:

Good morning Congregation. This poses to be an active month here are FBC Fitchburg with a multitude of special guests as I plan to spend the last two weeks of this month resting and realigning with God. Even so, I am now and will be available through my contact info at (774) 276-0505 or meredithhchristian@gmail.com .

Call to Worship:

Leader: We come in submission like Philip:

People: Following the angels, waiting for a word from Your Spirit.

Leader: We ask that You breathe Your Word into us, O God, that we might have boldness

People: To speak to the stranger on the road, to proclaim the Good News about Jesus to those who are searching.

Leader: Let us dwell within Your deep love for us.

All: Let us share Your love with those whom we encounter. Amen.

Invocation:

We come to You today, Lord, very much aware of our need to open our lives to Your power, Your love, and Your words. Inspire us, we pray; empower us, encourage us, speak to us and through us, equipping us to be Your worthy and effective servants, we ask in the name of Jesus, who is worthy of all honor and glory. Amen.

Gloria Patri:

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be
world without end. Amen, Amen.*

Hymn: “Stand Up and Bless the Lord” # 11 (Click on link) <https://youtu.be/5yMNnSX92ig>

First Reading: Psalm 22:25-31 (NKJV)

“My praise shall be of You in the great assembly; I will pay my vows before those who fear Him. The poor shall eat and be satisfied; Those who seek Him will praise the Lord. Let your heart live forever!

All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You for the kingdom is the Lord’s, and He rules over the nations.

All the prosperous of the earth shall eat and worship; all those who go down to the dust shall bow before Him, even he who cannot keep himself alive.

A posterity shall serve Him. It will be recounted of the Lord to the next generation, they will come and declare His righteousness to a people who will be born, that He has done this.”

Celebrations and Concerns, followed by a moment of Silence:

Please keep our dear song leader, Diane in prayer.

Pastoral Prayer:

God of compassion and hope, we come before You in prayer in need of Your help. We know that You invite us to pray, and in fact have even commanded us to do so, but we have sometimes neglected prayer and have not always prayed well. In our active world we have come to think that the only important thing is taking things into our own hands, and we have not communicated with You.

When we feel too physically or mentally tired to pray, we ask that You will give us the strength to carry on. When we feel too busy to pray, remind us that we are simply too busy. When we feel that our prayers have not been answered, give us faith that indeed You have heard us. When our prayers concentrate too much on ourselves, give us a wider concern. When we begin to think that our prayers are really orders for God, give us humility and when our prayers are not answered immediately, please give us patience, we ask in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray,

***Our Father**, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.*

Children's Message: (Offered by Debi Cross)

Eyesore

The lot was filled with weeds, rocks, and broken glass. More than a few people had dumped their trash in the old, abandoned lot. To make matters worse, a dilapidated house sat right in the middle of the grounds. The windows had been broken out years ago. Rumor had it that the house was filled with rats and mice and other creepy things. People went out of their way to avoid this spot. It was hopeless. The only thing that could fix this lot was a bulldozer.

One beautiful spring morning, a lady known as "The Gardener" walked by the old lot. The weeds were now waist high and flies were buzzing around the trash. The poor house looked sadder than it ever had. The woman paused, then began to walk around the outside of the lot. A few of the townsfolk watched as she took down several pages of notes, then quickly walked away. The Gardener had seen enough.

Word spread quickly throughout the town that the woman was going to demand the city clean up the lot, bulldoze the house to the ground, and plow it under. Why, how could anyone be upset with her? After all, the lot gave the whole town a bad reputation. It didn't matter if it would be very costly to clean it up, the city would just have to find the money. "It just wasn't right having an eyesore like that in our town," the people would say. "Someone had to do something!"

Several days later the Gardener walked into City Hall. The clerk behind the desk braced himself for a fight. The clerk knew the city didn't have the money that it would take to clean up the lot.

The Gardener walked up to the desk, pulled out her notes and said something the clerk would never forget. She asked, "How much is the abandoned house and lot at 371 Beacon street? I'd like to buy it."

The rumors going through the town couldn't have been further from the truth. The Gardener didn't want to destroy the lot, she wanted to buy it.

The clerk found the few records there were for the property and looked carefully at them. "There are a lot of back taxes due. It would be quite costly to buy it, let alone the expense to clean it up."

"Never you mind that, is the property for sale or not?" the Gardener replied.

The Clerk scratched his head. "Yes Ma'am, the lot is for sale." Hearing that, the Gardener bought the worthless eyesore right then and there.

All summer long, she and her husband worked extra hard. They cleared weeds, removed trash, and made major repairs to the house. Then, they trimmed the trees and bushes, and planted many kinds of beautiful flowers.

They even added a cobblestone walkway leading up to the front door. Out back, behind the house, they added a small pond with a fountain. The lot that was once such an eyesore had now become a beautiful showplace. Love, time and a little work had transformed the lot. Now, people went out of their way just to walk by and take a look at the beautiful view of the property.

What the Gardener did next also surprised the whole town. She hung a sign out front that read:

THE GARDEN CENTER - NOW OPEN - FREE GARDENING LESSONS

She knew her lot could be restored because when she was younger, someone else taught her how to do it. Now, she wanted to teach others how to transform eyesores into things of beauty. And before long, the whole town was indeed a place of beauty.

Some people are like the old, dilapidated house sitting in the middle of a trashy lot. They look worthless and many people go out of their way to avoid them. It may be the bully at school or the neighborhood kid that looks a little geeky. The Bible says that we all have trash in our lives. The trash in our life is called sin.

The Good News is that none of us are worthless in God's eyes. In fact, His will is that none of us perish. (2 Peter 3:9) He wants us to get rid of the sin in our lives, but we can't get rid of the sin by ourselves. We need to ask Jesus to forgive us and give us a new heart. When we do, we become "Born Again" to follow God. Then, just like the gardener, you will want to share the good news with others. You can let others know about the wonderful work God has done in your life, and that He can do the same for them.

Reflection: Think about this. When you look at others do you see an eyesore or a garden?

Blessing of the Tithes, General Offerings, Communion Offerings and Gifts:

Precious Lord, we give because You first gave. We offer because You have given us opportunity and we share with others out of the abundance of infinite love that You have shared with each of us. We gladly lift up our tithes, offerings and gifts, praying that Your Spirit will move us to rightly discern their proper use and best opportunity to bless others. May You bless those who joyfully give, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

(Tithes, offerings, and gifts are greatly appreciated in order to continue to care for our facilities, the needs of each other, and our local and worldwide community. We thank you for your pledges at this time and ask that you **Please Pray over your gifts** and mail them to the church at **1400 John Fitch Hwy, Fitchburg MA 01420**).

Doxology:

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise Him all creatures here below
Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts
Praise Father Son and Holy Ghost.*

Sermon Text: Acts 8:26-40 (NKJV)

“Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, “Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is desert. So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go near and overtake this chariot.”

So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. The place in the Scripture which he read was this:

“He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.”

So the eunuch answered Philip and said, “I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?” Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. Now as

they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?"

*Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may."
And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."*

So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing. But Philip was found at Azotus. And passing through, he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea."

"Dazed And Disoriented"

The *Ethiopian* was returning from Jerusalem where he had gone up to worship (v. 27-28), along with a scroll of scripture. The last part of the verses in Isaiah that the eunuch read was "For the transgressions of My people He was stricken." (*Isaiah 53:8b*).

This man seemed dazed, or stunned by what he was reading, perhaps dazzled by the description of the man of which he was reading, so there he sat, in his chariot, a long way off from Ethiopia, the place where he was headed, trying to make sense of the text of Isaiah all by himself.

Then enters Philip. An angel appeared to this man and said that he should head toward Gaze (v.26), so he started walking. Simple enough. As Philip was making his way south, perhaps disoriented from the dry desert and I would have to guess a bit confused as to why he was walking all this way, the Spirit of God then urged him to overtake a particular chariot (v.29), that was stopped by the side of the road.

How awkward it must have felt for Philip to walk up to this fancy cab of a person he didn't know. If it were me I would be wondering what I was going to say. What if the person in the chariot thought I was there to harass him or looking for an opportunity to take some of his things? This almost reads like one of those movies where you just know that the main character is about to do or say something really strange and uncomfortable.

These two men could not have been more different. The man in the Chariot was, "a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury" (v. 27-28). He was a highly trusted, refined, servant of a great queen in her day. There is no reason to assume she would have given charge over her vast fortune to a fool or fowl person.

And yet Philip, who had been commissioned along with Stephen (*Acts 6:5*), to help the widows and orphans living in Hellenistic societies, was just an evangelist trying to do his best to fulfill His commission as best he was able. He was a common man. A deacon of the growing church. The only qualification he seems to have had was to be known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom (*Acts 6:3*), of God. And He was walking.

These were two very different men, though this is not a story about race, as some would make it. The Apostle Paul said that there was, "neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus" (*Galatians 3:28*), not that there was now neither Black nor White, Middle-Eastern or Asian Pacific. The Bible does not focus on such things, as some would have you do, except to say in the beginning of the Book, "God said, 'Let Us make mankind in Our image, in Our likeness'...so God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them" (*Genesis 1:26-27*).

God created but one race, the human race and called it good. My apologies if that offends you. I did not write the Bible. My job is merely, like Philips, to ask if you understand what it says and try my best, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit to share it with you, but Whoa to me if I should add anything to remove anything from the word of God, as we are all warned in the last paragraph of that Book (*Revelation 22:18-19*).

God then scattered the people in order to interrupt their wicked intentions (*Genesis 11:6-8*), until the fullness of time does finally come upon this earth and He sees fit to restore all things to perfection, when we like John will look, “And behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (*Revelation 7:9*). Until then, Jesus says that we can expect nation, and ethnos to rise against ethnos, kingdom against kingdom (*Matthew 24:7*), in our own ignorance as a sign of the wicked state of humanity at the end of this age.

When someone is leaving you, and they have the chance to tell you one last thing, it is typically significant. I have been by the bedside of many who in their last moments, look up at those they love and do not ask them what time it is, to check the expiration date of the milk or how their hair looks. Last words are important. God’s last words in the Bible are for us not to change, omit or remove what He said and that He will be coming back.

The last thing that Philip would have been told by witnesses that Jesus had said just before His ascension was to directive to “go and make disciples of all nations” (*Matthew 28:19*), and this is exactly what Philip was doing. As I said, this is not about race. It is about struggle. It doesn’t say here that Philip saw a black man. It says he saw a man and he heard him struggling with the Word of God, and did what any decent neighbor would do. He asked if the guy needed help.

So Philip ran over to the chariot and, in hearing what the man was reading, asked a simple question, “do you understand what you are reading?” (v.30). And the man’s response was, in turn, a question, “How can I know unless someone guides me?” (v.31). Then the man asked Philip a question about whom the prophet was speaking (v.34). This was an open invitation for Philip to share with him about Jesus.

At this point, Philip’s primary obligation was to simply open his mouth (v.35), and let the Word of God come forth, and as they talked and road down the path God provided the words and the water. Did I not read in the very beginning that this was a desert (v.26)? Seeing the water, and having heard the simple truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Ethiopian asked to be baptized (v.36).

There are some copies of the Bible, including the *New International Version* that go from verse 36-38 and skip over what I consider the most important and beautiful part of this passage, that of the sinner’s prayer, “*Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (v. 37).*

We are often so worried about extending invitations to receive Christ that we fail to see that it is not our smooth talking which leads people to the saving knowledge of Jesus. Our job, as we are commissioned to do, is to simply be present as vessels that we may facilitate the workings of the Holy Spirit to those who seek Him.

And far be it for me to remove the miracle and mystery in pointing out, as a Baptist, that this was not sprinkling, it was a baptism by immersion, as evidenced by the explanation that first went down into the water and then came up out of the water (v. 38-39). Then the same God who had led Philip to go forth in faith for the sake of that Ethiopian man, uplifted Philip and supernaturally transported him to his next assignment in Azotus, where he preached in all the way to the city of Caesarea (v. 39-40).

When I first read this, I said to myself, ‘Sure, good for Philip, but try just walking up to any person that may be standing on the side of the road, looking dazed or confused in my neighborhood and I don’t think the conversation will go this smoothly’. That was some time ago. Conversations seem so heated and hustle now, as if people have been given social shields of invisibility that allow them to brush past you without saying “excuse, or pardon me”. And then they demand apologies for offences that have not been committed.

I hear people taking out their frustration and offences on perfect strangers that have nothing to do with their turmoil’s as if those poor souls being yelled at were somehow personally responsible. Tensions and emotions are so high in some places it almost seems as if we are all just sitting in one giant bar with everyone around us inebriated on offendedness and anger.

In this kind of a chaotic climate, it is more than fair to more than wonder just how we are to share the love of God when people are so easily offended by our opinions? I am not suggesting that everyone here is equipped with the type of anointing that calls you to grab a box and a Bible and head for the nearest street corner like Dear George Whitfield. Far be it for me to suggest that you grab a mic and camera and start asking people questions about their sin or salvation like Ray Comfort. I am here, however, to tell you that you too have been called as an evangelist, and it is expected for you to share what God has given you with others in your own way.

Allow me to share with you some things about one of the least offensive people I have ever met. She was one of those ladies who was indeed a lady in the traditional sense of the word. She had attended her church for nine months before her birth until her body could no longer make the trip, at which time the church came to her in the days before her passing after a long, wonderful life of dedication to God, her family, which included both blood relatives and bought by the blood relatives in Christ, friends and every person with whom I had ever heard had encountered her.

She was in some ways a simple woman. A small sized deacon whose faith packed a punch. She was an active participant of her church, a dedicated worker, mother, wife, friend and maker of baked goods extraordinaire. If you had called her an evangelist, she may have adopted such a harsh tone as to say, “well, we might just have to agree to disagree there”, though I never witnessed such an argument. Yet, evangelist she was. Her podium was not to be found in an arena or tent revival. She had yard sales.

It was well known throughout town that his lovely lady had a big yard sale once a year. People would come from all around to her off the path street in order to shop at one of her sales. She had repeat customers every year, which she loved to chit-chat with, and many first time buyers, which seemed to be her absolute favorite. They would come to her from all around, as if the Lord, Himself were guiding their cards down this side street and into her driveway.

Many a person in her church, when asked, would tell you that the reason they were such dedicated members of that church was because they had meet her at the yard sale and she shared with them about her Jesus, or that they were driving by the front of the church, late on a Saturday afternoon and she happened to be there locking up and carried on heartfelt conversations with them right there on the side of the road for ridiculous amounts of time and they just had to come back and see this marvelous church she spoke of for themselves, and had been faithful members ever since.

They came for baked goods. They came for Red Socks updates. They came for conversations with this sweet lady and they learned, over time, to come before Jesus through her leadership. This woman understood what it meant to Be the church. She seemed to know that when you see someone struggling with something overwhelming, or who may seem as though they are disoriented or confused with the words or nature of God, like that dear, unnamed Ethiopian man that, no matter their situation, they were her neighbor in that moment.

In most of the situations I encountered with this woman, and many others, God led the lost to someone whom He had filled with the Spirit and wisdom like He had with Philip. This assures me that I don't have to worry if I feel disoriented or out of place engaging in conversations with people I don't know. I encourage you, as the Lord leads people to you or puts His will for you to go and speak with people on your heart that you also pursue the sharing of the truth of God in a loving way to those who are dazed, even if it seems difficult or uncomfortable, or “even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing”(2 *Corinthians* 4:3).

I have faith that the Spirit will give you words to speak when the moment strikes. Jesus says that “ the Spirit of your Father ” will give you the words to speak when you are brought before governors and kings for His sake. (*Matthew* 10:18–20), and I believe God and take Him at His Word. Such a thing takes tremendous trust, I know, for I do not know of a Christians who has not wondered, at least once, for the briefest of moments, if not continually what they should say about God. How should they share the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

What I hear from people is, “I’m not a Theologian like you”, Oh, I’ll leave it to the professionals”, “I don’t know my Bible that well”, “ I can’t memorize verses”, or “I’m not good at public speaking”, even if the “public” is just one guy. But then I hear the words of my Jesus, in *Luke 21* say, “And so you will bear testimony to me. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict” (*Luke 21:13–15*), and I trust those words.

I do not have to have the answers or the perfect line. I just need to open my mouth and trust the Spirit to say what the other person needs to hear, or better yet just be there to listen; really listen. Now that is truly a loving act, to listen intently and respectfully and to be fully present with someone in their moment of shock or stress, even if it means admitting that you don’t know the answer, but you are willing to work through it together on the faith that God will provide. Amen.

Communion Service

Communion Hymn: “*Break Now the Bread of Life*” # 665 (Click on link) <https://youtu.be/TAZrT8SVYBM>

In the Baptist tradition this is a covenant meal, which we partake of in remembrance of what Jesus has done on the cross for each of us. It is our understanding that all who profess Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior are welcome to share in this meal, which we partake of together, in the presence of the Lord. Please collect your bread and cup in preparation of our remembrance meal.

Before partaking of this meal, the members of the First Baptist Church of Fitchburg take a moment to read and remember our church covenant, which we proclaim as one body, in one voice untied in Christ.

The Church Covenant (*May those of us who are members proclaim our church covenant.*)

“Having been led, as we believe, by the Holy Spirit, to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, and upon profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we now enter into Covenant with one another, as one body in Christ.

We promise, as the Lord shall enable us, to strive daily to love according to the Spirit and teachings of Christ, and to do all in our power to create a spiritual atmosphere within the Church, which will lead others to come into fellowship with God and into saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

As a fellowship of Christians, we promise by the help of God to nurture Christian growth in our homes, and to minister to the spiritual and material needs of one another. We further promise to strive for the advancement of our church in worship, in Christian Education, in service, and in fellowship; to observe its ordinances; to attend its services as faithfully as possible; to contribute regularly to its local and missionary enterprises; to unite with some other church when living away; and by personal and group example, to commend the Christian way of life to all.

May the blessing of God our Father, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, and the Holy Spirit our Helper and Guide ever rest upon us.” Amen.

Communion Prayer:

We have been taught, Lord, to be self-confident, to be self-accepting, and to be self-assured; and we know that these things are important, but sometimes our emphasis on self becomes exaggerated and reckless. We think we can make our own rules. We think we can succeed solely by ourselves. We sometimes forget our total dependance on You and others, which leads to pride in our own self-sufficiency.

Forgive us, Lord, if our self-confidence has become arrogant and prideful, for in so doing we have cut ourselves off from Jesus Christ, our only real and lasting source of strength, for it is by His strength in giving over His own will, that Yours be don, that we have all been saved from the wrath to come. Amen.

Words of Institution:

On the night that the disciples gathered in an upper room in order to share the Passover meal with our Messiah, Jesus lifted the Bread and Cup and prayed that the Father bless them, even as the Lord has blessed them with His presence. May we come humbly before this table, in remembrance of the King of Kings, who became a Suffering Servant for our sake.

The Bread:

On the night that Jesus was betrayed, He took the bread, and asked the Lord to bless it. Jesus broke the bread and shared it with those around Him, saying, *“Take, eat, do this in remembrance of Me”* (Luke 22:19).

Take, Eat.

The Cup:

“In the same way, after the supper He took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20).

Take, Drink.

And so we proclaim Jesus and remember Him, until His return!

After the meal, Jesus and His disciples went out to the Mount of Olives and sang hymns. Please join me in heart and spirit in singing the first verse of our traditional closing hymn,

Hymn:

“Blest Be The Tie”

*Blessed be the tie that binds,
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds,
Is like that to that above.*

Benediction:

As you leave this space and time of prayer and reflection, may you go forth in confidence. May you recognize God’s Spirit ever present, guiding you forth and giving you the wisdom and knowledge needed for your journey in Christ, Jesus. Amen.

May the Lord bless and keep you always.



*“The Lord will
guide you always;
He will satisfy your
needs in a
sun-scorched
land and will
strengthen your
frame.
You will be like a
well-watered
garden, like a
spring whose
waters never fail.”*

-Isaiah 58:11