

Shawnee Presbyterian Church
Sunday, June 14, 2020
Rev. David Cornell
“Navigating Transitions”
Acts 8:26-40

Welcome and opening remarks:

Hello people, and welcome to Shawnee Presbyterian’s weekly online worship service.

We’re glad you have chosen to join in and worship with us, and as you do we trust that you will sense God speaking to your soul.

And as a matter of note, thank you to each one who has been faithful in keying in to worship with us these three months now.

Today as we record this it is another beautiful day in Pennsylvania, and I hope that as we come before our God in worship, there is an attitude in our souls similar to that of the Psalmist- I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord.

Please join me reading Psalm 34:1-8 as a call to worship:

¹ I will extol the Lord at all times;

His praise will always be on my lips.

² I will glory in the Lord;

Let the afflicted hear and rejoice.

³ Glorify the Lord with me;

Let us exalt His name together.

⁴ I sought the Lord, and He answered me;

He delivered me from all my fears.

⁵ Those who look to Him are radiant;

Their faces are never covered with shame.

⁶ This poor man called, and the Lord heard him;

He saved him out of all his troubles.

⁷ The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him,

And He delivers them.

⁸ Taste and see that the Lord is good;

Blessed is the one who takes refuge in Him.

Prayer of Confession:

Now again using the Psalms, King David’s prayer of confession recorded for us in Ps. 32:1-5

¹ Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

² Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit.

³ When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

[b]

⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.” And you forgave the guilt of my sin.

This is our prayer also, O God. Thank you that you are a prayer hearing and prayer answering God.

And we pray all these things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Assurance of Forgiveness:

Then friends, the certain hope of those who have genuinely confessed their sin, depending on the grace of God in Christ alone, is forgiveness. As the Bible tells us in Isa. 43:25 *“I, even I, (God speaking) am the one who wipes away your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.*

How great our God is.

Today’s message is “Navigating Transitions”

Scripture reading: Acts 8:26-35

For those of us who love the outdoors, one of the real pleasures of living in the Pocono’s is canoeing and kayaking. In particular, canoeing the Delaware is a rich experience as you navigate from one quiet stretch of water through a stretch of chaotic white waters, called a riff, to another quiet stretch.

Many years ago I was introduced to this by a friend who was an expert.

His advice on handling the rapids was to first of all, listen for the roar ahead as the river drops. If you do that, you can stand up in time, being careful since standing in a canoe is a dicey proposition at best, and look at where and how the river drops. Then find an inverted V in the water, and head for the bottom of the V, always paddling faster than the river is moving. That way, if there is a back curl, you will move through it fast enough to prevent filling up. It works. And I have taken all of my sons for this, and they still enjoy it.

Navigating properly through chaotic waters starts with listening. So does navigating through tumultuous times. It also starts with listening to God. The context of this passage is that the early church was also beginning to navigate great change. God was shaking things up. Reports were coming in of people becoming followers of Christ who in the past had been very much disdained.

The time frame was probably a few years after the Lord had risen from the dead, ascended into heaven, and the church had begun. The church, which had been vitally alive, may have settled somewhat into the role of a sect of Judaism, centered mainly in Jerusalem. This localization was in spite of the Lord’s last words to His followers that they were to go with His message of reconciliation to God and salvation throughout the region and to the furthest most parts of the globe.

So when the execution of Stephan, which is recorded for us just one chapter earlier, initiated a persecution and dispersal of believers throughout the region, it may be that God was shaking His people up to bring them into conformity with His plans.

For a result was that not only were the dispersed believers sharing their hope in Christ with other Jews, they were also in contact with non-Jews. Some leaders who had been scattered, like Philip, were also involved.

Friends, God is no less in control today than He was then. Whatever societal shaking we may see has been fully factored into His plans. Remember, God is Lord over the circumstances, not under them.

We don't have the ability to eye global and national political, military and environment events as He does because most of us are more geared to our own particular circumstances.

But I think if Philip was here today he might give us several instructions as to how to navigate the times in which we find ourselves, and successfully move into the future, a future of which God already knows the beginning and end.

There might be five instructions Philip would give us, perhaps more. The first instruction is a negative one:

1. Don't be so involved in your own priorities that you cannot sense God speaking to you.

Philip was able to sense God speaking to him. Some of us are so absorbed with ourselves that for anyone to effectively communicate with us, much less for the subtlety of the Spirit of God to break through, seems limited. All too often the strongly felt needs of what we want, what we lack, what we have, how we feel, or the health we need...is that for any message to cut through that clutter might be hard.

This also begs the question: how does God speak. So let's try to answer that. The Bible seems to indicate that God speaks in several ways:

- One is through creation. Ps. 19:1-4 says the heavens speak forth the glory of God, the firmament declares His workmanship. Day to day and night to night speaks. In other words, creation speaks. Romans 1 and 2 state the same thing.
- Another avenue is through conscience.
- A third is in, through and by the Bible which we call the word of God or the word of the Lord. Peter said in the third chapter of his 2nd letter to the churches that what St. Paul wrote was sometimes difficult to understand, but that it was authoritative, as are the rest of the scriptures. So Peter places Paul's writing on the same level as what we call the Old Testament and the other NT books.

Scripture is the mind of God put into words for us. And when we read it together in church the pastor or person reading or closes with the phrase, this is the word of the Lord.

- Lastly, God sometimes uses His people to address us at times. God uses His activity in believers to influence the thinking of others.

The real question is, am I listening? Am I able to hear?

If we are going to be able to sense what God is saying, we can't be so caught up in 'our thing' that we don't sense His voice. Philip heard the voice of God.

So Philip got up and went, and likely walked down the highway that led from Samaria in the Northern part of Israel to Gaza on the coast in the far southwest. And Luke, the Greek medical doctor who wrote the book of Acts, inserts a little phrase, “now this is a desert road.”

The Bible often has seemingly small phrases like that which carry a ton of information. And this phrase packs in quite a lot. It allows us to consider what the journey may have been like for Philip, and so helps us gain application.

Think with me. Philip has been involved in what was undoubtedly a great spiritual movement, evangelical in nature, in Samaria. This group of people the Bible calls Samaritans, and there are still a few left, were the descendants of non-Jews brought in by the conquering Assyrians to repopulate the northern region of Israel in the late 8th century BC. They had intermarried with Jews who were left after the majority had been forcibly removed. Because of intermarriage and corrupted worship, Samaritans were looked down on by Jews. In the Gospel of John chapter 4, when Jesus stopped by a well in Samaria, the woman he asked for a drink of water questioned why Jesus, a Jew, would even talk with a Samaritan. In Luke 10 we remember the story of the Good Samaritan who Jesus uses as the unlikely rescuer of an assault victim.

Now, a few years after the church had begun, these Samaritans were turning to faith in Christ in record numbers. Philip had been a key player in this. Then suddenly God directed him to leave, and he was plodding south along a deserted highway, immersed in his own thoughts. Likely he is tired, thirsty, and thinking, what am I doing? I have left something really significant going on up north, I'm in the middle of nowhere.

Did I hear God correctly? Is this what I am supposed to be doing, because this doesn't make sense?

Ever feel that way? Sure. We all have. We set out confidently on some endeavor, fully convinced this is what we are supposed to do, only to have our confidence evaporate, our strength wear down, and second guessing ricochet through our minds.

So this might be Philip's second instruction:

2. Persevere in what you believe God has called you to until He calls you away from it as strongly as He called you to it.

That might be a ministry in the congregation or community, it might be a business or creative endeavor. It might be a relationship of some sort.

But it is natural to wonder whether it is the right thing when the going gets tough. When sickness, or financial reverse or interpersonal strife engulfs you. When things, when society, when church, when family, change so completely you hardly recognize them.

Philip kept going. He held steady. He picked up one foot and put it down and did the same thing, all day, for about 4 days. Sometimes we have to do the same thing. It is called perseverance, and it is demanded of all of us, at times. And now may be one of those for you. It doesn't look or feel too spiritual persevere, but it is deeply honoring to God that His son or daughter trusts Him enough to persevere.

And so Philip arrived at Gaza, and there was to meet him, exactly one man. No grand event, no brass band.

We are not told any of the exact details as to how Philip came upon this man, simply that when Philip arrived at the vicinity of Gaza, he met him.

This is in keeping with the Bible's focus on the issues of God's redemptive activity, not of satisfying our curiosity.

We are not told when Philip arrived whether there was big event, or welcoming committee, or pleasant hotel with a hot shower or inviting swimming pool. We are told there was simply one person, a foreigner.

So here might be Philip's 3rd instruction:

3. Don't dismiss what looks insignificant, thinking that limits God. It may be exactly what He is using.

Many times in the Bible, and in life, what looks small is simply the prelude to God's activity. The prophet Elijah saw a small black cloud prior to God breaking a 3 year drought. David used a simple sling shot and a stone to deliver God's people from the Philistine oppression championed by Goliath. Gideon was told he had too many men for God to deliver Israel from the overwhelming numbers of the opposing army. God was going to use lights, breaking pottery, and trumpets to sow confusion and discord in that army and turn it against itself.

In this case the person was an official of the kingdom of Ethiopia, who came along about the time Philip arrived, and also happened to be reading about Jesus.

Now, he didn't know he was reading about Jesus, for he was reading the book of Isaiah, in the Old Testament. But Isaiah is also termed the prophet of salvation. It is Isaiah which contains the servant songs, some of the most profound predictions of the Messiah's life and ministry. It is Isa. 53, which tells us that the Messiah would be executed and that his death would be an atonement for my sin and yours. It is from Isaiah that Jesus defines His own ministry in Matt. 12.

So Philip heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah, and again sensed God speaking to him to lit join up with this man. And the word Luke uses for join, is literally get close.

So Philip tested whether this was what God had called him to do by asking a question.

When the man responded that he could not understand unless someone explained it to him, and then invited Philip to get in the chariot with him, even Philip could recognize this was an opportunity not to be passed up.

In doing so he epitomized Henry Blackaby's advice, which might also be Philip's fourth instruction to us:

4. Find out where God is at work, and join Him.

Our job is not to tell God where to work and how, but to join Him and leave the results to Him.

All of which we can summarize as Heb. 11:6 does, 'without faith it is impossible to please God'. Said a different way, faith is the only tool God ever uses.

Finally, a 5th instruction.

5. Expect great things from God.

We find that when Philip was finished, the Lord moved him on. What about the Ethiopian? Luke tells us he went on his way rejoicing. But that is not all. History tells us that the empire and land of Ethiopia, and what is now Eritrea in the horn of Africa, and Sudan was massively influenced, to this day, by that one man's decision to follow Christ. For centuries it has been a solid Christian bastion of influence in Africa.

I know. I have been there. Even today, in some very repressive regimes, the Lord is at work in the most difficult of places.

So as we begin to navigate through a world that is has been significantly altered by the exposure to covid19, Philip's experience teaches us how to proceed:

- Listen.
- Persevere.
- Don't dismiss the seeming insignificant.
- Find out where God is at work and join Him.
- Expect great things from God.

And as you follow through with that, may the Lord bless you and make His face shine upon you.

Closing Prayer:

Benediction: and now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen

Thank you for listening, and have a great week!