

# First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

## *Signs and Wonders: Acts 8*

Sunday, June 28, 2020 Sermon

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### Introduction

Friends, we're faced with a bit of a rough transition this morning going into the stark reality of Acts chapter 8. Acts chapter 8 opens with grief, destruction and persecution and all seems hopeless, when this chapter unfolds. You may remember from our study last week in Acts Chapter 7 that that chapter ended very sadly with the death of the deacon Stephen, who was stoned to death for his belief in Jesus Christ.

Following that, Acts chapter 8 opens with Saul bent on the destruction of the early church and he begins persecution of Christians for the very first time in history. We hear in this chapter how men and women were dragged out of their homes and thrown into prison because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

What we remember through this dark chapter is that our hope is never found in our circumstances, but our hope is found in the person of God, and in the saving work of Jesus Christ, and in the presence and power of God's Holy Spirit at work in our lives and in the world today. As we look more closely at Acts chapter eight, we are reminded once again that the Holy Spirit is the main character at work. Within the entire book of Acts the Spirit is at work, and in Acts chapter 8, in the deacon and evangelist who is active in sharing his faith. There are important life lessons and lessons of discipleship we can learn from his life, so let's turn our attention now to God's word. Let us open up Acts chapter 8:

### Scripture

#### **Acts 8:1-8**

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

#### **Philip in Samaria**

4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. 5 Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. 6 When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. 7 For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many, who were paralyzed or lame, were healed. 8 So there was great joy in that city.

## **Acts 8:26-35 Philip and the Ethiopian**

26 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 the Kandake (which means “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 This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,  
and as a lamb before its 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.

## **Sermon**

Friends, today, here in church, we are exploring the question of what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? To answer this question today we are going to go a bit “old school”. What I mean by that is old-school sermons used to always be outlined into three very clear points and often miraculously those points all began with the same letter, so they were easy to memorize.

Well today the answer to what it means to be a disciple does clearly have three points. Instead of all beginning with the same letter, we're actually going to follow an ABC pattern and we're doing this intentionally, because I want the answer to this question to be something that we can remember and hold onto. In 2020 we have had to face all kinds of challenges and none of us know what the coming weeks and months hold for our nation or for our world. We rely on God's grace as we go into an uncertain future but it can be helpful to us to hold onto this clear teaching of the Bible that comes from Acts chapter 8 about what it means to be a disciple. So let's explore that answer as we turn our attention to the story of Philip.

Now there are two Philips in the Bible. There's Philip the Apostle, which one of our sanctuary windows memorializes, and then there's Philip the deacon. We first encounter Phillip the deacon in chapter 6 of Acts, at verse 5, where we're told there that seven different people were chosen to serve in this role of deacon.

To be a deacon in the biblical time of church meant that you were really the one feeding the hungry, providing funds for the needy. It was the practical arm of ministries so that those apostles could really devote themselves to preaching and teaching. But as persecution came into the church and those apostles became increasingly in need, more people that were deacons rolled into this teaching and preaching role. That was certainly the case for Steven, who we heard about last week, and is certainly the case for Phillip, as well.

What Philip did that made him such an outstanding disciple of God was that he made himself consistently *available* to God wherever he was needed to go. We're told Phillip preached the gospel wherever he went. Later, when Phillip receives very specific instructions from God, beginning at verse 26 in Acts chapter 8 it says go to the South road or go to the chariot and stay near there. In both of these cases, Phillip followed God's instructions exactly. Having that repeated pattern of listening to God's instruction and following it is what allowed Phillip to become available.

Within our own lives we can follow this same pattern of listening to the instruction of God given to us in his Word and following it. Then our own ministry becomes a ministry of availability as we minister where God plants us, first within our own family units, and then within our work environment, then within our neighborhood and with our friends and perhaps church family, and then further out, even to those friends that we are connected to around this nation and world. We are called to be available to God's holy purposes in each of these widening circles of influence.

For Philip, we know that he remained faithful to God throughout his life. I say this confidently, because in Acts chapter 21, at verse 8, we gain a glimpse of this faithful disciple 20 years later. We're told he's living in Caesarea with his four unmarried daughters, all of whom had become prophets! Now, to have four children that became prophets, I have to believe that Phillip was faithful within his own family of sharing his faith. He made himself available to God in that setting, and then those four daughters would go and influence so many others.

I wonder, how available are we today to God's Holy Spirit working within us, in every sphere of influence, where God has placed us? Philip was not only *available* to God which is the "A" of what it means to be a disciple. Phillip was also *bold* in sharing his own experience of faith and bold in sharing his faith. Phillip truly lived into those words from 2 Timothy chapter 4, which says, "Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction"

It seems like Phillip was always ready to share the hope that was in his heart and that's certainly the case with the encounter we read about in Acts chapter 8 where he meets this Ethiopian eunuch. By sharing and answering questions of this eunuch, Philip brought the witness of Jesus Christ to Africa, possibly for the very first time! Philip was bold in approaching the chariot. Following God's instruction, he was bold in asking what was going on and in answering questions.

What we can learn from Philip's example is that sharing our own faith doesn't need to be something that we're worried that we don't have the words or the knowledge in order to do. We simply can answer people's questions. People might ask us, how do you hold on to hope today? What do you think of heaven? Simply by answering questions we make ourselves available for God to work *through* us. We can be bold in our responses as we share our faith.

Finally, friends, from Phillip we learn that in order to be a disciple today we don't simply have to be *available* and *bold*, but we also need to serve as *the church in the world today*.

The deacons of our church recognized the importance of instilling that idea to go and *be the church* in the community even before this Covid pandemic happened. What the deacons have been at work doing is making parking lot signs that you see as you exit our church parking lot. They are there as a reminder and encouragement to people to live out our faith beyond these church walls. To give you an idea what these parking lot signs say, one says "Be a blessing to someone today". Another says, "Your life may be some people's only Bible". The third one says, "The sermon starts now the minute you leave the church".

Friends, if we have learned anything through this pandemic, it has to be that the heart of the church is not found in the building itself. The heart of the church is in its people and the people that live out their faith in God and allow the Holy Spirit to work through them. So, today, we hold on to this teaching of AB&C, *availability boldness and be the church*.

We remember that Saint Francis of Assisi once famously said, "Preach the gospel at all times and, when necessary, use words". Saint Francis also said, "It's no use walking anywhere unless our walking is also our preaching."

I hope, dear friends, that today we would remember these lessons of discipleship. I pray that our lives would become the sermons that other people hear and see and respond to, and that God's Holy Spirit would be as powerfully at work within us as God's spirit was at work within Phillip. May our lives, like Phillip, give God both glory and praise. today and always. Amen.