

**“Divine Appointments”**  
**Sermon Series on *The Way of the Spirit!***  
**Dr. Peter B. Barnes**  
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**(Acts 8:26-40)**

**Introduction.**

Have you ever had an occasion when you met someone, and this chance encounter changed your life? It's only in hindsight that you look back and begin to realize that God had your paths cross for a purpose, and you come to understand that it was a *divine appointment*.

When I was a freshman at the University of Georgia, the day I moved into the dorm another student down the hall invited me to join him and his roommate to go to a Hardee's hamburger joint and grab something to eat. I jumped at the invitation because I was eager to meet new people. When we got there, the guy who befriended me introduced me to another freshman with whom he had attended high school. His name was Robert Jackson.

That chance encounter with Robert would eventually change my life forever. Over the next few weeks during that freshman year, my conversations with Robert about God, Jesus, faith, and the Bible led to a renewal of my faith. And over the next four years I grew like a weed in a greenhouse in my commitment to Jesus Christ – all because of a chance encounter with a guy I met at a Hardees's hamburger joint who just happened to be there. Looking back, I realize that meeting was a divine appointment.

This morning we read of two other people who experienced a divine appointment, and it would change their lives forever, too. Let's take a look together.

**I. The Response of Philip to the Call of God.**

Two weeks ago we learned of the way in which Philip the deacon became Philip the evangelist. He shared the good news of Jesus Christ with the people in a city in Samaria, and many came to know and follow the Lord, including a man named Simon who previously practiced sorcery. Peter and John traveled up from Jerusalem to check things out, and they put their apostolic stamp of approval on this cross-cultural work of the Holy Spirit.

Soon after the departure of the apostles, we're told that Philip was given another mission. He was instructed by an angel of the Lord to go south to the desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza. It was a road that stretched through the desert for about 60 miles. Gaza is the most southerly of the five formerly Philistine cities, and it's near the Mediterranean coast. We're told that as Philip walked along the road, he met a eunuch from Ethiopia.

Philip responded to the call of God, and he was sensitive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. But at first glance, in many ways it didn't make any sense. Why leave such a great ministry in Samaria to go and be with just one person? Why leave the city to go to the desert? Things were really hopping in Samaria. It was the first time the gospel had crossed cultural and racial barriers. Many people were coming to faith in Christ, and miracles were happening right and left. Why leave now? But God's call was unmistakable, so Philip responded in obedience, trusting that God would continue the work in Samaria through others. He left a large dynamic ministry to be with just one person.

Harold Hughes was a distinguished senator from the state of Iowa in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He even ran for President in 1971. Harold served effectively in the senate for a

number of years, and he was one of the key followers of Jesus who began a Bible study on Capitol Hill that continues to this day. However, in 1975 he chose not to run again for his seat in the Senate. The reason was because he felt God was calling him to minister to one man who was struggling with alcoholism. You see, Harold Hughes was himself a recovering alcoholic, and he had experienced God's touch in his own life. The great senator announced, "I'm going to resign to be with this one man." Many people thought that this person must be a very important individual for Howard Hughes to resign his position of influence to be with just one person. However, when he was asked about it, Harold replied, "No, he's really a political nobody. But I feel called to be with this one man."<sup>1</sup>

I also think of the late Henri Nouwen, the great Catholic theologian and writer. At the height of his academic popularity, Nouwen made a remarkable move. He went from being a professor at Harvard University to serving in a community for handicapped people in Toronto called Daybreak. Nouwen went from teaching the best and the brightest in the world to serving a small group of physically and mentally challenged people in Canada.

Henri gave a talk about it at Harvard a year or so after he made the move to tell them what his experience had been like. At Daybreak he was called an "assistant", not "professor." His only assignment was to help care for six handicapped people in his family unit. An epileptic young man named Adam was his special assignment. The priest bathed, shaved, dressed and cared for Adam's needs every day. After a seizure, Nouwen had to bathe and soothe Adam until the trauma passed. And in Adam, Nouwen said he saw God's unqualified love for a person who can neither produce nor perform.

When I think about the willingness of Harold Hughes and Henri Nouwen to make these kinds of sacrifices, it pulls me up short. I have to ask myself, "Would I be willing to respond to God's call like that? Would I make that kind of sacrifice if God asked me to?"

We're all drawn to the crowds, aren't we? We like to be where the action is. We want the high profile jobs which give us significance and meaning. We want to be people of influence. But then I read about Harold Hughes, or Henri Nouwen, or Philip the deacon. God's math and His economy are very different from yours and mine, and each of us needs to develop a willingness to heed His call, whether it's to the multitudes in Samaria, or to the one person on the road to Gaza.

Are you listening for God's voice? If He calls you to leave the limelight and go to the desert, would you be willing to go? If He wants to send you away from the multitudes to minister to the one person, are you open to doing that? If God wants you to serve people the world considers nobodies, are you ready to make that kind of sacrifice and respond to the call?

## **II. The Spiritual Hunger of the Ethiopian Eunuch.**

As Philip traveled on that desert road, the Holy Spirit told him to go up to a particular chariot and stay near it. Philip ran up to the chariot, and when he did he heard a eunuch from Ethiopia reading aloud from the book of Isaiah. It was a common practice in antiquity that whenever a person read, they read out loud. (It's actually a good practice. Try reading the Bible out loud the next time you have your devotions.) Philip asked the man, "Do you understand what you're reading?"

I think this is a great scene in Scripture. Philip is walking down the desert road not sure why the Lord has him out there. Then the Holy Spirit tells him to go up to the chariot in which a black man was riding and to stay near it. He runs up alongside the chariot, hears the man reading

out loud from the book of Isaiah, and asks breathlessly, "So, whatcha readin'?" Try doing that the next time you run a 5K race!

Who exactly was this man in the chariot, and why was he reading from the prophet Isaiah? The Bible tells us he was a eunuch from Ethiopia, an important official who was in charge of the treasury of Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians. Candace was actually a traditional title for the queen mother, and she was responsible for performing all the secular duties of the reigning king. This man was in charge of the money for the nation. Today we would probably call this man the Secretary of Treasury for Ethiopia.

The text also tells us he had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and he was on his way back home. We're never given the man's name, so we're forced to see him only as Philip did – by categories. He was black, being from Ethiopia. He was also a foreigner. And he was a eunuch, a man who had been emasculated, for what reason we're not told. Even though he was an important official, the guy had three strikes against him from a Jewish point of view. He was black, he was a foreigner, and he was emasculated. This man wasn't someone with whom Phillip would naturally feel an instant connection or be drawn to.

When Philip asked the man, "Do you understand what you're reading?" the eunuch replied, "How can I unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him in the chariot. The eunuch went on to ask Philip, "Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?"

The passage he read was from Isaiah 53 which speaks of the Suffering Servant. It says, *"He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendents? For his life was taken from the earth"* (53:7,8).

Now, why in the world do you think this eunuch would be so interested in this particular passage about someone who was humiliated and had no descendents? My friend Craig Barnes<sup>2</sup> points out that according to Deuteronomy 23, Hebrew law didn't allow a eunuch to enter holy places. Remember, this man had just come from the temple in Jerusalem. He went there to worship, but they wouldn't let him in. He traveled all that way from Ethiopia to Jerusalem, but he was stuck outside because he wasn't considered good enough to go in the Temple. Imagine coming here to church on a Sunday morning, and an usher stops you at the door and tells you that you aren't good enough to get inside. So you stand outside and ask the people as they leave what it was like, because you're dying for a word from God. That's how the man from Ethiopia felt.

I suspect that if you and I are honest, and if we realized just Whose house we have wandered into this Sunday morning, to some degree we would all wonder, "What am I doing here?" You see, none of us are clean enough, or good enough, or whole enough to be here. We all fall short. Perhaps you look around in this sanctuary and you think to yourself, "Well, she belongs here, but not me. I don't have a great family like they do over there. And I don't have anyone to love. I haven't for years. I'm not a eunuch, but I might as well be. How can I fit in here? I'm sure I can't make my life right, because I'm in too deep and I've made way too many mistakes. If everyone knew the truth about me, they'd probably throw me out, too."

As Philip began to interpret Isaiah 53 to this man from Africa, he explained that the prophet's description was of Jesus Christ. Jesus was a man who was despised and rejected by people. He was wounded for our transgressions, and He was crushed for our sins. The chastisement of our peace was laid upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. Jesus Himself also had no children, He had no descendents, just like this eunuch. But as our Messiah and

Savior, He created a whole new family of faith with His heavenly Father, and we are all invited to become children of God.

As Philip and the man from Ethiopia traveled along the road, they came to some water. And the man asked Philip to baptize him. He was ready to make a commitment to Christ right there on the spot. So the chariot was stopped, Philip and the eunuch waded into the water, and the evangelist baptized this new believer. When they came out, a black man and a white man became brothers, and a little more hope entered the world. I wish that all of us had the spiritual hunger of this eunuch from Ethiopia.

### **III. Lessons We Can Learn For Our Lives Today.**

There are several things I think this story teaches me as I think about my own discipleship in Christ. *First, this story reminds me to be flexible in my schedule.* God has unexpected blessings for us whenever we're open to His leading, and we need to learn that an interruption may actually be a divine appointment. Hold your days loosely, and give the Holy Spirit some wiggle room as you make your plans for the future. This is something I especially need to learn. I've got my lists of things to do, I've got my calendar, and I don't want to get thrown off schedule. But this passage reminds me that I need to slow down and take time to be more flexible. Maybe you do, too.

*Second, this story reminds me that I need to take the initiative in talking to people about Jesus.* Philip had to run up beside the chariot and ask the eunuch a question. Many Christians hope that their lives will show their love for Christ and that words aren't necessary to tell people about the Lord. They keep waiting for their friends to bring up the subject, but it rarely happens. Often we're the ones who need to take the initiative and break what I call the "sound barrier." We need to ask the leading question. "What are your spiritual beliefs? What do you think about Jesus?"

*Third, this story portrays the value of one person coming alongside a seeker.* Philip entered the eunuch's world, and he got up into his chariot. He joined the man on his terms and his turf. As fishers of men and women, if you and I want to catch fish, we've got to go to where the fish are. We can't wait for them to come to us here at the church. We've got to learn how to go and come alongside people and meet them where they are in our attempt to lead them to Christ.

A few years ago, there were three men in my former church who led what they called a "pub crawl" with people who were outside the faith. They actually went to a bar and talked about theology. Now that's incarnational and missional ministry! It's coming alongside people on their terms and their turf.

*Fourth, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian reminds me that I need to learn to ask good questions.* All too often in our efforts to share the gospel with people who don't know the Lord, we do most of the talking and try to cram in too much information. We need to learn to listen, and we need to become better at asking good questions.

*Finally, this story reminds me that I need to push past my prejudice and extend the hand of friendship to people who are different from me.* Philip was Jewish. The Ethiopians were black. They didn't have anything in common, and God brought them together in the family of God. In this post-Ferguson world in which we live, we're coming to see how that racial tension is still a big problem in this country. And we've got a lot of work yet to do to break down the walls that divide us. And it begins with me.

Next month, our church will be involved with many others in this community to try and address these kinds of problems, and I want you to be involved. Black churches, white churches,

and Hispanic churches are going to come together for a special event to try to address the problem of racial tension in a constructive way. You'll hear about it more next week.

Look at the example of Philip as you seek to share your faith with other people. Be flexible in your schedule, be willing to take the initiative, be incarnational in your witness, and be effective in the questions you ask. God wants to use each of us to plant seeds of faith in others, just like He did with Philip the deacon.

### **Conclusion.**

Two different men from different races, different faiths, and different cultures were traveling in different directions. But God had a new idea. He brought them together for a divine appointment, and the world would never be the same again. When the Ethiopian eunuch returned home, he started a family. Oh, not a biological family, but a spiritual one. You see, from this first convert the Christian church in Ethiopia grew and grew until in the 4<sup>th</sup> century Christianity became the official religion of the nation. And Ethiopia was the longest standing continuously Christian nation in the history of the world until 1974 with the fall of Emperor Haillie Selassie.

Even today, African Christianity is the most dynamic and fastest growing church in the world. I believe it all started with a conversation one day between two men in the middle of a desert on the road to Gaza.

If you believe in divine appointments, then there are no ordinary conversations. There are no ordinary people, and there are no ordinary days. You may be talking to a co-worker, or a classmate, or a stranger in the grocery store. Maybe you take a wrong turn and get off schedule, and you run into someone unexpectedly. All of a sudden, God's presence fills the moment. Put away your iPhone. Lay down your To Do list. Focus on the person right in front of you, and get ready for a divine appointment. God has something wonderful in store for both of you. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Cited in *"Scattered, But Not Shattered,"* Jim Singleton, p.5.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Barnes, in his sermon "Water Thicker than Blood," preached at the National Presbyterian Church on January 30, 2000.