
Sermon for the Feast of St. Philip the Deacon

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A sermon by Bishop Robert C. Wright

I greet you this morning in the wonderful Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. And I bring you the greetings of your brothers and sisters from all around the Diocese of Atlanta: from Middle Georgia to the Tennessee border from the Alabama line to our eastern most congregation--96 congregations, 56,000 men, women, children, teenagers and feisty seniors!

Let me also say a special word of thanks to Dean Candler, his staff and the entire Cathedral family for their care and hospitality over the last month and especially over this weekend. I am excited to partner with you, and together bear fruit worthy of our God.

No preacher, at the beginning of a new ministry, could ask for a better lesson to preach from than the eighth chapter of the book of Acts. What a delicious story. Everything you could need is here. Everything we need to be God's church today is right here. This morning we find Philip in the midst of a full-time, whirlwind preaching tour. That's funny because he didn't begin his life intending to be a preacher.

But, as his life unfolded, he discovered something. Or, he discovered someone.

He discovered that there is something about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that touched his heart. And, he discovered that he wasn't the only one.

He discovered that when your heart is moved, your feet find new directions, your lips learn a new song, and your heart makes room for all kinds of people.

That's discipleship! All Philip has is what he has seen and what he knows: Jesus is Lord. And, that there is power in His name and adventure as His follower. That's all Philip's got, and that's enough.

That's enough because God is enough. Enough to bet on, enough to build on. I wonder: Do you believe that this morning? I wonder: Do you live that on Monday? Like God is Almighty? Like God is all sufficient? Like his was and is the way?

At first glance, it looks like this story is only about Philip's encounter with a well-to-do African and the resulting baptism. But this story is about God. God is all over this story, speaking, guiding and relocating the faithful.

Three times God intervenes in Philip's day. First by an angel, then twice by the Spirit. Three times the still, small voice that is within us all but beyond us all urges Philip to respond.

Take an action. Do a new thing. Reach out. What kind of God is this? Here's some good news; our God is an always-speaking God.

Contrary to popular belief, there is no famine of God's word in the land. And, there is no famine of God's word in the

church today. Believe it. God is just as loquacious, multiloquent and chatty as ever. The same God that spoke to Moses then is speaking to us now.

The same God that spoke to Ruth then is speaking to us here. So committed to always speaking to us, God named God's only son Word, according to John. What was God's last whisper to you? Philip heard a clear word that day. "The Angel of the Lord said, Get up and go south" You want more good news? We serve a sending God.

We serve a God that is clear in a shades of grey world. What kind of God talks like that? A whole life promised to us in a single syllable, "Go." We can claim all things necessary for body and soul as a consequence of taking directions from God. How excellent is God's name above all names!

Why has God spoken this kind of treasure into us? The only answer has to be that God has no purpose other than good, and that God would have us partner with God in this good—that we would "know life and life abundant."

When the faithful hear God speak, the faithful worship God by responding. God is a sending God; we are a sent people. To hear and not go is to frustrate grace. To hear and not go is to forgo peace and purpose. To hear and not go is to "...take on a form of godliness while denying the power thereof."

I agree with the preacher who said, "Living an unsent life is about the saddest thing I can think of."

Philip was sent on a road going south. That's it. That's all the detail he got. But to know that was from God was enough to take the step. That's why they call it faith.

Living a sent life is as countercultural as it gets. The world is awash with people who know where and what how and how many but can't answer the better question, why!

We know why, because we were sent by God. That's the center of our authority. Jesus said that. A sent life produces a joy in us that the world cannot give. A sent life produces results that confound the cynics.

At the beginning of my ordained ministry, I was a chaplain to an Episcopal school in New York City. And I remember reading some wondrous Bible story or the other to kindergarten children—the upshot being, how God used ordinary people to do some extraordinary thing.

After chapel was over a little girl, with the cutest ribbons in her hair, approached me and asked, "Chaplain Wright, how come God did all the really cool stuff way back then?" I told her, God did do really cool things then. And, I assured her that God is still in the really-cool-stuff business.

But Philip helps us answer her wonderful question better than that. To do that though, I have to use a "four-letter word" in this sermon. Brace yourselves, here it comes: obedience.

Read the record of our faith and you will see that God does really cool stuff downstream of obedience. Every time.

Moses obeys God and becomes a deliverer. Jesus' mother, Mary, upon hearing God's desire for her life said, "Let it be unto me according to thy will." Is it any wonder then that her son, in the Garden of Gethsemane said, "... not my will but thy will be done."

I have read a truckload of leadership books only to discover that the best definition of Christian leadership is, simply, obedience to Christ! Philip obeys the Spirit's command and is at the right place and at the right time to instruct and baptize the African.

What saving grace is God working through you now because you are obeying the Spirit? What more grace would work through us if we would really give ourselves to God?

Oh what a useful life. God could do some really cool stuff through more of us if we would just go where God is sending us.

Philip walks his dusty southern road. He meets this impressive African, a man of culture and wealth. And then Philip does something that's a lesson for the church today. Philip engages the world person to person.

And while Philip clearly has a lot to say, Philip only answers the questions that the African actually asks, three questions:

- "☪ How can I understand scriptures?
- "☪ Who do the scriptures speak of?
- "☪ What prevents me from being baptized right now?

Three questions about believing, belonging and becoming. Three questions from the world to the church.

That's what the world wanted to know then, and that's what the world needs from the church today. Three opportunities to teach, to share and to include.

There is a challenge here for the church this morning. And, by church, I mean you and me. Stop apologizing for being Christians, and be apologists for Jesus Christ.

This is not about talking points, not about denominations or even church. But, in your own way, in your own idiom, with the same ease you recommend a restaurant or a movie "... comfort others with the comfort we ourselves are being comforted with."

Listen to the world's infirmities and lack, and then share. The world is in desperate need of good news, and you and I, because of water and Spirit, have been entrusted with the best news there is: that God is real, able, good and generous. That there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus; that God's mercy endures forever. That guilt and shame don't have to be our constant companions. "That earth has no sorrow that Heaven cannot heal." That a life with God is about being free and buoyant. That worship together is how we practice peace and joy. "That nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus."

Share this good news. I double-dog dare you! Be this good news for your soul's sake and for the sake of the world. Like Tennyson said, "'Tis not too late to seek a newer world," to re-describe the world.

You don't have to do it by yourself. Ask God to give you the occasion and the words. Make that prayer this morning.

And don't worry, "Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense immediately" But if we would offer ourselves to God today in this way, be an instrument in God's hands now, like Philip, people will ask you, where is this living water and how can I get some.

"O for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer's praise;
the glory of my God and King
the triumphs of His grace."

What a great season it is to be God's Church!

Amen.