
Then the Spirit Said to Philip ...

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Feast of St. Philip

Today is our patronal feast — the day we remember Saint Philip, the deacon after whom this cathedral is named. His story is our story, too: a story about being sent by the Spirit to bear witness to what God is already doing. That's what it means to be church — to live attentive to where the Spirit is already at work.

Saint Philip the deacon serves as a model of discipleship because his life reflects Christ's presence. The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is the one we tell about him most often. We read it several times a year and always celebrate baptisms on this Sunday.

My favorite part of the story are the words, "Then the Spirit said to Philip"

Those are the words that remind us that every time the Spirit moves one person toward another, it is an act of God.

Philip really isn't the hero of the story. Saints never are. Philip is a witness — the one who listens.

I recently read a story Andy Root tells that helped me see more clearly how God works in the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.

Root writes about a man born in a small Midwestern town just after the turn of the twentieth century.

The child was born with a physical deformity. His parents, ashamed and frightened, refused even to hold him.

They hired a young immigrant girl to care for him — a girl who herself was lonely and far from home.

She took the baby in her arms and loved him. She looked into his eyes and touched with tenderness the very features others called monstrous.

She whispered that she saw him, that he was beautiful, that she loved what others said was broken.

From the beginning, she sang to him — dozens of times a day — the same simple refrain.

Their bond grew strong. But soon it was cheaper to put the boy in an asylum than to pay her wages. She wept as she said goodbye.

He grew up in that institution, treated as less than human.

On his eighteenth birthday, when they could no longer hold him, he walked out, climbed a tall hill, and sat down with a bottle of pills, ready to end his life.

"Why, God?" he cried. "Why have you hated me so much? You've never cared for me."

As he raised the pills to his mouth, he heard someone singing behind him. He turned, but no one was there. Still, the words were clear: "God's mercy is wide, God's love is deep, and you, dear child, are loved."

He froze. The song came again. He lowered his hand, put the pills away, and wept. Then he walked down the

hill like someone who had seen God.

In time, he became a priest, leading countless people into moments of hearing God's voice for themselves. But he never understood that song — until near the end of his life, when he learned that the young woman who had cared for him was still alive.

When they finally met, he recognized her instantly. They talked for hours. She told him she had never felt more alive, more called, than when she cared for him as a baby.

Then she asked, "Do you remember what I used to sing to you?"

He shook his head.

Quietly, she began to sing: "God's mercy is wide, God's love is deep, and you, dear child, are loved."

A shiver went through him. He realized that the song he'd heard on the hill was hers — the voice through which God had called him from death into life.

That story is what grace sounds like when it breaks through human love — one life becoming the instrument of God's call for another.

And that's exactly what happens on the wilderness road between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.

Here, too, is a person the world has dismissed — someone who wonders if there is a place for him in God's story.

And here, too, is a disciple sent by the Spirit — not to fix him, not to explain him, but simply to join him.

Two lives meeting — and in their meeting, the Spirit moves.

The Spirit says, "Go over to that chariot and join it."

That is the whole shape of Christian ministry in a single line.

Philip doesn't bring God with him; he discovers that God has been there all along.

He listens. He asks questions. He bears witness to what the Spirit is doing right before his eyes.

When the eunuch says, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Philip realizes the answer is: nothing. Nothing at all.

Root's story helps us feel the same mystery: God's love reaching through one human life to awaken another.

The girl's song was God's instrument of calling.

Philip's obedience was God's instrument of calling.

You might say that God comes to us in the form of ministry — when we share in the personhood of another.

This is the pattern of grace that we are baptized into.

Baptism isn't our story about God; it's God's story about us.

It's not our declaration of faith; it's God's declaration of love.

It's God saying, "I see you. I love you. And now I send you."

In baptism, we are joined to God's work of joining others.

We become witnesses — people whose lives echo the song of God's mercy wherever we go.

We are not baptized to mark an accomplishment; we are baptized to begin a calling.

We are seen and loved so that we can see and love others — so that someone else might hear God's song through us.

That's what it means to be part of the parish of the Cathedral of St. Philip: to listen for the Spirit's prompting, to go where love sends us, to join the chariots of others' lives, and to bear witness to what God is already doing there.

In a few moments, we'll pour water over the heads of these children.

The words we speak are ancient — but the act itself is a living encounter.

When we say, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever," we echo the same song sung to that child on the hill, and to the eunuch in his chariot, and to every soul who has ever wondered if they are seen or loved.

It is the song of the living God, still singing through us: "God's mercy is wide, God's love is deep, and you, dear child, are loved."

And for those who are baptized today — and for all of us who remember our baptism — that song becomes a call: go, join the chariot, bear witness to the love that first found you.

You are seen. You are loved. You are sent — to see, to love, and to go.

Amen.