

Acts 8 27to39 ELCSA (N-T) Synod closing service 2017  
Hermannsburg KZN

*Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." 27So 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, 28and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. 29The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." 30Then 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. 32This 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. 33In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." 34The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" 35Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. 36As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" [37] 38And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. 39When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.*

Dear sisters and brothers,  
it is amazing to see how the various day topics of Synod re-appear in this passage. The theme is from Isaiah 43: Fear not ... I have called you by name. We heard that in the short passage God ten times says: I will .... We have a God who is involved. Yesterday we dealt with life threatening fires and floods that we have to face and God's promise: You will not be scorched, you will not drown.  
The passage ends with the statement: You will be my witnesses. I say statement, not command. God is not telling Israel to be witness, but telling them that by his actions Israel will be a witness to this God.  
Acts 8 clearly deals with the issue of being witnesses, more precisely, sharing the good news about Jesus Christ.  
At synod, I was approached by a friend who asked: Why do you ask what the task of the Church is? It is clear! We must tell the world about Jesus. That is true. But, as is the case with obvious statements, they are often ignored. Take for instance Pretoria: Red Traffic light means Stop! That is obvious. And so it is ignored!  
The task of the Church is to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ - and so we don't to it.

This story can help us tremendously to fulfil the call.  
But before I come to that, I briefly want to point out where the other synod

topics feature.

1. Fire and flood seem to be missing from this passage. It almost sounds idyllic: Go to the desert road, walk behind that coach. He does. He gets invited, shares the gospel, a conversion happens, the new believer is baptised and continues his journey rejoicing.

But, let us read between the lines, or rather, also before the lines. Philip is one of the six deacons elected a few weeks earlier to care for the vastly growing Jerusalem congregation. Why is he not in Jerusalem? Because of fire and flood! A severe persecution had broken out. His friend and colleague Stephen had been brutally tortured and murdered, in public. Police and secret service were hunting the Christians to imprison them. Indeed, the young church suffered extremely harsh and life threatening situations. Fear not - I will guide you through the fires, through the floods. Philip and his colleagues had to rely heavily on this promise, in order not to give up!

2. The "I will" is quite obvious in this passage. It is almost as if God is in direct communication with Philip, guiding him, directing him.

What are the chances that the Ethiopian would be reading a passage from Isaiah that points to Jesus, precisely at the time that Philip is within ear shot? It is not co-incidence. "I will" - God is at work.

This is the first thought that I wish to highlight, and put it in your "lunch pack" for the way home.

You shall be my witnesses - that statement is always true. But when we learn to listen to the Lord, to be attentive to his guidance, we will come across special circumstances that He created, where the door for the gospel is wide open.

Be alert! Especially when something unusual happens, when you have an unusual encounter. Is this the Lord busy with perfect timing?

Be alert! He sometimes creates Ideal circumstances for you to be his witness!

3. The very first topic of synod was: I have called you by name! Johann Engelbrecht shared in the opening service how they, as children, made clay oxen and gave them names.

To God we are not a number - we are special.

This is quite obvious with regards to Philip: In Chapter six he is already called by name to be a deacon. I am reminded of the synod elections: being elected into office could be seen as co-incidence. Or it can be understood as: I have called you by name!

In this passage Philip is called by name to go onto the desert road. God does not say: I am looking for volunteers! But he says: You go!

Again, being prayerfully alert is important here. Many of us know this feeling that suddenly someone is on my mind - unexpectedly, without reason. It might be God saying: Visit that person! Phone that person! Send him an email!

The real surprise however in this story is the other one that is “called by name” - the Ethiopian. Although he had been called by name by his queen to be minister of finance, although he had been blessed by name with immense wealth (he could afford to purchase the Isaiah scroll - a life’s work of a scribe!) - he had never been called by God. On the contrary. Although he longed for God, so much so that he made the long journey to Jerusalem, he was excluded. He was a eunuch - a castrated man. And the Laws were quite clear that he was unclean, blemished. He was not allowed to enter the temple, and could never become a Jew - no matter what. His physical condition had rendered him unworthy. For ever.

And now he is called by name! This is the massive change between Isaiah 43 and the New Testament. Although the nations are already in God’s sight in Isaiah, they are also less important. God is willing to sacrifice them for the sake of Israel.

But with the coming of Christ everything changes. “Go to all nations” Jesus said. “Make them disciples”

The Ethiopian is the first recorded non-Jew who becomes a Christian. And this first recorded non-Jew is totally unsuited in every way. Castrated, wealthy (is it not the poor who are blessed?), Finance minister (Is it not the weak, rather than the mighty, who are blessed?)

I am so excited about this passage! The first non-Jew becoming a Christian does not tick any box of suitability! Who are the people that do not tick any box to qualify for God’s grace? For whom do I not even consider to pray because I regard it as useless?

Well - when God calls by name, wonderful things can happen! The same thing happens in the next chapter, when the most furious enemy of the Church, Saul, is called by name and turns into a major missionary for Christ!

I have called you by name! Never underestimate the power of God’s calling!

4. You shall be my witnesses - today’s topic. This passage is a brilliant illustration of how we can be witnesses. Philip does not jump on the chariot and ask: Are you saved? He walks behind, listens carefully and

only then intervenes, asking the question that the Ethiopian has: Do you understand what you are reading?

As witnesses to Christ we need to honour, respect and learn to understand the person that we are witnessing to.

As a teenager we used to go out onto the street on Saturday nights to “witness to Christ”. It was a direct approach, and in hindsight I realise that most of the times we scared the people away - unless they were Christians who showed their appreciation for our efforts. The people, in our eyes, were objects suitable as mission targets, not precious individuals, called by name by our God!

Be alert - not only to hear when God is calling, but also to hear where the person is that you are in contact with. What are the concerns, fears, frustrations? Being a witness does not mean that I push these aside and say: Let’s focus on Christ, but that I start addressing these issues and from there show how the good news of Christ brings a solution.

5. But before I close, I still want to share with you what I regard to be the most surprising aspect of this story. Philip is a witness to Christ. The wealthy Ethiopian is baptised. Wow- what an asset for a congregation in crisis! Hold on to him! Integrate him in your congregation, Philip!

But ... the Spirit of the Lord took Philip away and the Ethiopian continued his journey rejoicing!

Being a witness is not about making your congregation grow! Rather it is about helping others to be a witness themselves. If they stay in your congregation, that is wonderful. But do not hold on to them! Trust that the Lord, who calls by name, knows what he is doing.

It is assumed that this Ethiopian became the founder of the first African Church. Had Philip held on to him ... well, then God would have had to find another way.

Share the love of Christ with people - but do not hold on to them! Teach your Children about Christ, and don’t be sad if they then become active elsewhere. The Church is bigger than my congregation!

We never should create the impression that we are witnesses in order to win people for our church. We are witnesses, because God calls by name, and because he wants all nations to get to know Christ!

Amen

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