

Mission to Ethiopia

Acts 8:26

Sunday, May 2, 2021 Fifth Sunday of Easter at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

- Introduction: a critical moment in missions

I recently read on the webpage of Wycliffe Bible Translators that they have a new process, whereby they use technology, trained scholars and linguists as well as people fluent in the target language to translate the Bible. It has greatly increased the speed of the process, so much so that the good people at Wycliffe hope to have the Bible translated into every language by 2025, which would be an enormous step forward in missions.* Today I hope to make a personal point about following the Lord by considering a brief point in another major step forward in missions, this involving the Evangelist Philip in the early days of the church as recorded in the Book of Acts.

- Set the stage

It was a rough time for the early church. Stephen the deacon had been martyred, and Saul, the man guarding the coats of the murderers, was himself causing havoc in the church and dragging many out of their own homes to prison. During this time, Philip, a man who was not one of the apostles, traveled into the region of Samaria, the traditional enemies of the Jews and had rousing success in preaching the Gospel. Later, he would have an encounter that changed history. An angel communicated with him that he was to travel south on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, where there was nothing. Philip went anyway and encountered a chariot that held an official from the court of the ancient country of Ethiopia, a former enemy of Israel. Upon closer examination, Philip found the official was reading Isaiah 53:7-8, part of one of the most Messianic passages in the whole Old Testament. Philip explained what it meant, and the official asked to be baptized in the Name of Jesus. Philip obliged, and the moment the official arose out of the water, the Spirit carried Philip away. I assume the two never saw each other again, but the Christian church in Ethiopia is very ancient, dating back to this official. There's a detail in this story that I'd like to consider.

- Mission is God's mission. Philip moved when he was told to move

Philip is one of the earliest evangelists, having traveled around Israel with the Gospel of Jesus. This notable episode began when an Angel of the Lord told him to start walking down the south road from Jerusalem to Gaza. The area was desert and, I'm sure, did not look promising or profitable in any way, but Philip walked. When he finally saw a chariot, he approached when he was told to do so. The conversation proceeded naturally since the official from Ethiopia was already considering an Old

Testament prophecy about Jesus. Once he was baptized, Philip was miraculously taken away from him. With all here to consider, I'd like to point out a detail. Philip stayed put until God acted. After the episode with the official from Ethiopia, Philip continued his preaching tour (his original job) but, once completed in Caesarea, he stayed put. We encounter Philip roughly twenty years later (Acts 21:8) and he was still at Caesarea. I think the point is that he knew that this was God's mission and God does it on God's timing and in God's way.

- Application:

An application is that waiting is not wasted time. We grow when we are steadfast in worship, faithful to our duties, sharing our gifts in the ministry of the church, seeking God in prayer and serving our community as best we can. I wonder if there were times when Philip was tempted to go back to Jerusalem and walk that road again, just to see what would happen, but no, his place was to stay where he was unless the Holy Spirit indicated otherwise. The timing of progress is not in our hands. It's important to recognize that mission is not our project to manage but God's. An author on missions said it well: "God's church falters from exhaustion because Christians erroneously think that God has given them a mission to perform in the world. Rather, the God of mission has given his church to the world. It is not the church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission who has a church in the world. The church's involvement in mission is its privileged participation in the actions of the triune God."** We do what we know is right to do, and leave the timing with the Lord. He does His great works in His own sovereign time.

- Conclusion

These are exciting days for those involved in missions, as the report from Wycliffe Bible Translators indicates. It reminded me of an astonishing episode in the extraordinary life of Philip, great evangelist of the early church. Hidden in this wonderful and historic series of events are times and seasons of stillness, faithful service right where he was located. There are times when God moves in His mission in the world, but until He does, we do well to wait and make the most of the opportunities before us each day.

* <https://wycliffeassociates.org/our-impact/translation-strategies/>

** *Beyond Duty: A Passion for Christ, a Heart for Mission* by Tim Dearborn (p. 2)