

### **“Get Up And Go” – Acts 8:26-40**

It's a miracle! The story about the Ethiopian eunuch – it's a miracle story. It has all of the elements of a great story, and all of the elements of a real miracle. As biblical commentator Carl Holladay puts it, “it is a superb illustration of Luke's storytelling ability. It is a tightly crafted literary piece, with fine attention to detail. We are given the crucial essentials: time (high noon), place (deserted road, chariot), character (the Ethiopian, a eunuch, minister of the queen, God-fearer who had traveled to Jerusalem to worship), and a plot.” Indeed, the plotline of this story is the miracle, not only revealing Luke's key theological understandings but also the defining characteristics of a miracle, the kind of miracle that happens to us and with us. Miracles have some common characteristics – they tend to happen suddenly, almost ‘accidentally’ and yet with seeming purpose, are almost always irrational or unexplainable without reverting to a hidden power such as an action of God, and are always good.

With so much to look at, and so little time to do so, where do we begin? Let's begin by quickly recapping the story. An Ethiopian eunuch is returning home along a desert road, reading scripture. Philip is moved by the Holy Spirit to join him, hears what he is reading, interprets the passage and proclaims the good news of Jesus, the eunuch is converted and baptized, and Philip disappears. Seems simple enough, doesn't it? There are a few distractions, such as the detail about the eunuch being seated in the chariot – every chariot I've ever seen in Hollywood movies was a stand-up kind of vehicle, so I have trouble imagining him seated – but for the most part the story is straightforward.

However, when we dig into the story a bit deeper we discover a lot more happening, and a powerful message for us. Take for example the angel of the Lord directing Philip to be at the right spot at the right time, and when the event is over the Spirit of the Lord “snatches Philip away”. The gift of the Holy Spirit from God and the acting of the Holy Spirit in the lives of disciples and believers is one of Luke's most powerful themes (remember as we approach Pentecost Sunday it is Luke's account of that event that is the most popular).

A second part of the miracle in this story is the message of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, or at the very least the key to unlocking the meaning of those scriptures. The eunuch questions Philip as to who is the sacrificial lamb cited in Isaiah, Philip reveals the full story of God's saving action in Christ Jesus and the eunuch moves immediately to a desire and request to be baptized.

But perhaps the greatest part of the miracle in this story is another of Luke's favourite proclamations, namely the universal nature of God's saving act in Jesus Christ, that that good news is to be spread from Jerusalem, through Judea and Samaria and indeed unto the ends of the earth. That the eunuch is a key character in this miracle story emphasizes this understanding – he was a foreigner, not of the bloodline of Abraham and Moses, and so not really admissible into worship in the Temple. That he was a eunuch, sexually mutilated, was the ultimate barrier – but we need to notice that his sexuality was not a barrier either to Philip or to God.

This miracle story is both an occasion for thanksgiving and an opportunity to learn a bit of what is required of us in faith! Thank God for the intervention of the Holy Spirit! Thank God that the Spirit had an angel whisper into Philip's ear, “get up and go”. Thank God that Philip did just that, that he got up and went. That he went down to the road, uncertain and unsure of exactly why he was there apart from being called to be ready to proclaim the good news, the gospel, of Jesus. Because he heard the Spirit, because he responded, because he actually got up and went, because he was ready to proclaim, Philip was in place to accomplish the will of God as the eunuch rode by. More than that, he was in the right place to hear the Spirit encourage him again, this time to go over to the chariot and join it, and so he did.

And as we watch Philip's contact with the eunuch, we should note the number of ways in which Philip was prepared for this assignment from the Holy Spirit. First, as we just saw, Philip was aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit – no, he was more than aware, he truly believed in a gut-level way that the Spirit was alive and active in his own life. For Philip, the Holy Spirit was not just some theological doctrine repeated in a yet-to-be-written creed, for him the Holy Spirit was God himself, acting to enliven, to instruct, to direct and sustain him in all that he was called to do. In addition, Philip was familiar with scripture, so that when he heard the eunuch reading he recognized that he was reading from the prophet Isaiah. Would that many of us could recognize it from the Old Testament, never mind which book! Philip was also ready to proclaim at a moment's invitation how Jesus was the fulfillment of the suffering servant spoken of by the prophet, and so when he was invited to explain he was ready to do so, and did. Perhaps most of all, Philip was ready to proclaim the good news of forgiveness, acceptance and reconciliation with God through Christ Jesus, and he did.

What a contrast between Philip's treatment of the eunuch and what we suspect happened to him at the temple! What a change from an aloof, "here, read this book, and when you're willing to change to become one of us, come back and see us", that he had encountered in Jerusalem. Here, in a plush chariot bumping and grinding along a dusty road, the eunuch hears from Philip in simple terms how he is not only acceptable to God, but welcomed and pardoned already through the death and rising again of Jesus. "What is there to prevent me from being baptized?", he asks, and the answer is clear: "nothing". Nothing, indeed. There was nothing to prevent this person from responding to the good news of Jesus, to be baptized into the body of Christ. Not the fact that he was a foreigner. Not the fact that he was a eunuch. Not the fact that he was from a different race. None of these were barriers to his being accepted as one of Christ's through his acceptance of the good news of Christ. No wonder he went on his way rejoicing.

No wonder, either, that the church continued to grow from Jerusalem through Judea and Samaria and unto the ends of the earth. No wonder that in spite of intense persecution, in spite of believers being hauled off to prison to be tortured and killed, the church continued to blossom and flourish. With people like Philip prepared through study and worship, who were open and responsive to the urging and direction of the Holy Spirit, and who were prepared to actually get up and go, the church could not help but grow. As long as there were, indeed as long as there are, people prepared to put themselves into discomfort if not at actual risk to proclaim the good news of the unlimited, unbounded grace of God demonstrated in Christ Jesus the church will continue to grow and to flourish. As long as there are people prepared to get up and go out and echo Jesus' message of forgiveness for all who would believe, the church will prosper. As long as there are those who are willing to get up and go out to where the children of God live, children of all colours and races and backgrounds and lifestyles and personalities and proclaim to them God's message of acceptance sealed in the blood of his Son Jesus, spilled for the forgiveness of sins, as long as there are such people the church will live.

And we share in the rejoicing of the eunuch, for there are such people who hear the whisper of the Holy Spirit, and get up and go out to invite the homeless and the lonely to breakfast. There are people who hear the command to get up and go out and invite others to come to hear the Word of mercy and acceptance of God in Christ, and to come to feast with our Lord at His table. There are such people – and you are counted among them, and that is a good thing in the kingdom. Continue in your faith, continue in your work, continue to listen for and hear the voice of the Spirit, continue to get up and go out, and you can rejoice that the church will live and prosper to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.