

Poof!
Acts 8:26-40
April 29, 2018
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The English newspaper “The Guardian” ran a contest a few years ago to pick the favorite English word. As you can imagine, there were a lot of entries, with words like “nincompoop” and “discombobulate” ranking in the top five. But the No. 1 favorite word came from the original name for the island we now know was Sri Lanka. In 1754, writer and politician Horace Walpole wrote a fairy tale, *The Three Princes of Serendip*, in which the heroes “were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of.” From that story, we got the No. 1 English word “serendipity.”

Serendipity is defined as “the phenomenon of finding valuable things not sought for.” We’ve all experienced serendipity in our lives. We might call it “good luck” or “chance” or “fate,” but we know the unexpected joy of serendipity, like finding a \$20 bill in the pocket of some pants you haven’t worn in a while or humming a song that then comes on the radio.

I was in Chicago last fall for a wedding, and several of my former youth group members and I sat around talking, reminiscing about the good times we had shared together and the good people we had spent them with. One person we talked about was Maggie, who had gone on a couple mission trips with us. Everyone had lost touch with Maggie and we wondered together where life had taken her. When I was getting ready to fly back to Lexington, I was walking down the concourse of O’Hare airport, one of the busiest airports in the world, and guess who I happened to run into. Michael Jordan! Just kidding. It was Maggie, her husband, and her newborn daughter. Poof! Serendipity, the phenomenon of finding valuable things not sought for.

Our story today from the book of Acts is a great example of serendipity. The apostle Phillip is minding his own business when – poof! – God shows up and calls him to go to a wilderness road that runs between Jerusalem and Gaza. Back then, there weren’t a lot of rest stops between cities, so when I say it was a wilderness road, I mean there wasn’t even a Speedway or Starbucks there. This was as deserted a road as you could find.

God’s call to Phillip is a reminder that God often calls us to the strangest of places. You just never know what God is going to call you to do, do you? Abraham is minding his own business and gets called to move. Moses is tending his sheep and gets called to Egypt. The disciples are busy casting their nets in the sea when Jesus says, “Follow me.” I was preparing to start a doctoral degree in communications when the idea of seminary popped up. You never know when God is going to call you or where God is going to put you.

I’ve been called to some pretty interesting places. Crestwood Christian Church comes to mind. I’ve also been called to some scary places. Hospital rooms. Funeral homes. Talk about desert roads, paths that lead through the wilderness. Have you ever been called to go somewhere you didn’t want to go? Maybe to a doctor’s office. To the bedside of a friend or family member. Even to church, where you have been called to serve and you’re just not sure if you’re good enough for the job. I wonder how Phillip felt when he got this call to meet the Ethiopian in the middle of the desert. Me? There? Now?

So Phillip goes and meets this Ethiopian eunuch, an official in the court of the Queen. It seems this Ethiopian has a serious problem, and Phillip is just the man to help him with it. The Ethiopian has been to Jerusalem to worship and on the way home has been reading the Bible. But

he's struggling to understand what he is reading. Really? He can't understand the Bible? What's wrong with him? This is SUCH an easy book to read.

When I was in high school a Christian friend of mine gave me my first Bible. I had never owned a Bible, much less tried to read it. So that night I propped up a few pillows, got a tall glass of water and set to work to read the Bible. It was the King James version, which is of course the original language of the Bible, right? Despite all the "thees" and "thous," things started out well. Genesis is a firecracker of a book, lots of sex and violence and other stuff that, as a high-schooler, really held my attention. Exodus was pretty cool, some good special effects with the plagues and Moses parting the sea. I made it about halfway through Exodus. And then came these strange laws and obscure instructions. The Ten Commandments were OK, although as a teenager I questioned that "honor thy father and mother" part. But then I got to things like, "All fowls that creep, going upon all four, shall be an abomination unto you. Yet these may ye eat of every flying creeping thing that goeth upon all four, which have legs above their feet, to leap withal upon the earth. Even these of them ye may eat; the locust after his kind, and the bald locust after his kind, and the beetle after his kind, and the grasshopper after his kind." Huh? I remember thinking, "Who eats bald locusts?" And therein endeth my first attempt at reading the Bible.

What I learned from that experience, and what the Ethiopian confirms for us, is that reading the Bible can be hard. This is the primary revelation of God, and yet it's so darn thick. If it were easy to understand, we'd all know exactly what to believe, wouldn't we? The reason we have all these denominations is that one person reads the Bible and says, "It obviously means this" and another person reads it and says, "I beg to differ, I think it means this" and then the first person says, "No it doesn't, you idiot" and before you know it fingers are being pointed and punches are being thrown and then I have to step in between these two nice ladies to separate them.

The Bible is not easy to understand – sometimes its obscure or complex or even boring – and trying to understand it can frustrate us, confuse us, make us feel like we're not good enough. And when that happens, we have two choices. First, we can just give up, like I did. We can say "This is too hard! I don't get it." That's an understandable response, but then that means we're willing to let others decide for us what we should believe. "I don't have time to figure out my faith for myself, so I'll just believe whatever I read on Facebook." The other option is to do what the Ethiopian did. He kept reading, and asking, and looking for God to show up. And when Phillip magically appears, the Ethiopian doesn't say to Phillip, "Just tell me what to believe." He said, "Help me understand what this means."

That's what happens when we persevere through the challenges of having faith. Following Christ isn't easy; in fact, it can be really, really difficult. Sometimes I feel like it would be easier to ditch the whole "belief" thing and just do what I want. But if I did that, I would be removing from my life the opportunity for divine serendipity, those sacred moments when – Poof! – God shows up when you least expect it and, before you know it, it's Easter all over again.

Phillip and the Ethiopian are reading scripture and Phillip is telling him about Jesus, and lo and behold, scripture says, "As they were going along the road" – the desert road, mind you – "they came to some water." That's not typically something you find on a desert road. If the Bible had said, "they came to some sand" or "they came to a cactus," I'd believe it. But water? In the desert? The phenomenon of finding valuable things not sought for. That's serendipity.

You see the pattern here, right? The Ethiopian tries to read the Bible, he doesn't quite get it, he perseveres and asks for help, God serendipitously sends him the right person at the right time, and the Ethiopian says, "There's water for baptizing, and here I am." He has a life-changing experience. You just never know where God is going to show up, but to see God, you have to keep looking for God.

On Friday, March 2, 2000, I was traveling on my own desert road, lying in a hospital bed awaiting what would eventually be my MS diagnosis. Like the Ethiopian, I was searching for answers and not finding any. I closed my eyes and screamed silently at God that I didn't understand, and when I opened them – Poof! - there stood Rick. Now, I imagine most people in Rick's position would have assessed the situation and politely excused himself. It was obvious I was in a lot of distress, and the last thing I wanted was a visitor. But Rick stayed.

Two months earlier, Rick had lost his wife Linda to pneumonia. She was a sweet lady, only in her 40s, and beloved by the church. Rick had shown incredible strength during the whole ordeal, and was an inspiration and comfort to us when we were supposed to be doing that for him. So there Rick stood, hands in his jacket pockets, watching me process my news. I tried to gather myself as best as possible and but on my hospitality face, but Rick didn't care. He simply said, "Kory, God sent me."

"Did you know," he continued, "that Linda was in the room right next to this one before she died? I pulled into the parking lot tonight, and I didn't think I'd be able to come in. But God told me to, he said I had to see you. So I came in the hospital. But when I got on the elevator, I couldn't bring myself to push the button for this floor, for Linda's floor. But I had to. And then I saw your room, and I saw her room, and I knew I couldn't walk into a hospital room again. But God told me it would be OK. So here I am."

I didn't know what kind of journey I was facing in my life, but I couldn't imagine it being any more difficult than the journey Rick had just made to see me. I remembered my prayer, "God, what do I do?" And I remembered Rick's words, "God told me it would be OK. So here I am." In the midst of my darkness, Rick walked again through his own wilderness experience to bring me a refreshing word from God, like finding water in the desert.

Having faith isn't always easy. Sometimes you don't feel like praying or going to church. Sometimes the Bible is boring or complex. Sometimes it's easier to stay quiet than to speak up. But we don't do any of this faith thing alone. God puts people in our lives to help us navigate the desert roads of our faith and lead us to the living water of Jesus Christ. You just never know when and where God is going to show up – in O'Hare airport, on a desert road, in a passage of scripture, in a hospital room. We are simply called to wait, to watch, to listen, to expect that God's promises are true and that God will show up. And when that happens, all we have to do is say, "Here I am."