

Poof!

Acts 8:26-40

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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 a few years ago 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 shared them with. One person we talked about was Maggie. 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 Dollar General there yet. 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 when God calls him 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 do something completely different 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 strange and 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 haven’t been in years, or where 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. 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. I love how Eugene

Peterson, the pastor who created the Message translation, describes the Bible. He says it is “characteristically unsummarizable. It resists abstractions.”

When I was in high school a Christian friend of mine gave me my first Bible. I was decidedly not Christian and 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, “There are locusts AND 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. Surely no one on there has an agenda.” 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.”

Phillip and the Ethiopian are reading scripture and Phillip is telling him about Jesus, and lo and behold, the story 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.

The Ethiopian, who only speaks in questions, asks the most important one: “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Well, honestly a lot of things. He wasn’t Jewish. He wasn’t from Jerusalem. He was a foreigner, most likely of a different language and color. And the fact that he was a eunuch disqualified him from many of the basic rights of life, including baptism. He was damaged goods, no fitting into the binary norms of society. But he’s heard the word about Jesus, and those barriers have been rolled away like a stone in front of a tomb. What does Phillip do when his religion isn’t big enough for what God is doing, when his beliefs are too

narrow to incorporate all of God's children? He expands his understanding of who God is and what God calls him to do.

I believe the Ethiopian was one of the spiritual forefathers of our denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I say that because one of our principles of identity is that we hold the centrality of scripture, recognizing that each person has the freedom - and the responsibility - to study God's Word within the community of the church. We believe scripture speaks to each one of us, but it may say one thing to you and another thing to me, depending on our life experiences and current struggles and questions. I'll never stand up here and tell you what to believe, because I believe you have a brain and should determine that for yourself. You have both freedom and the responsibility to study God's word for yourself.

In order to do that, the Ethiopian had to see reading scripture as not something we do alone. We have those same types of resources available to us today. You may not have Phillip walking around, but you have pastors and teachers who are willing to sit down with you and help you ask your questions. I don't know if you've heard of this Gutenberg guy, but his printing press is pretty cool. Because of that, we also have resources like study bibles, bible dictionaries, and commentaries which can help us delve into the word of God and go beyond the sometimes perplexing surface. I believe a good study bible is the best tool we can have as Christians. If you need a recommendation for one, just ask me.

Now, a word of caution. It's important to note what might happen if you dare to read the Bible for yourself. After Phillip shares the Good News of Jesus with the Ethiopian, the Ethiopian is moved to respond by asking to be baptized. That's the thing about God's word. If you are truly paying attention, you can't just hear it or read it and then not respond. Someone said the Bible is like a rock in our shoe, it keeps pestering you until you finally decide to do something about it. My friend David Shirey says not all scripture calls for the same response. Sometimes it calls for thanksgiving or apology, praise or sacrifice, a change of mind or a change of heart, moving us to say or do something or to stop saying or doing something. The Bible calls for all kinds of different responses, but it always calls for a response.

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 our faith compels a response, and we respond trusting that when we do, God shows up. You just never know when and where that's going to happen - in O'Hare airport, on a desert road, in a passage of scripture, in a piece of bread and cup of juice. 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 God does...what's your response?