

A Divine Appointment

(Series: Reimagining Church; Message Nineteen)
Acts 8:26-40

Review (Slide)

August – focused on prayer and waiting...

September – focused on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit...

October – focused on the early church's Rule of Life: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer

November – focused on the Church's mission

This month – focusing on Spirit-empowered leadership

Scripture:

²⁶Now 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 traveled 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. ⁴⁰Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Message:

A Divine appointment is a **God-intervention** in our life to orchestrate a **spiritual** connection that **builds** God's kingdom (cf. Ephesians 2:10).

The Bible is actually filled with **examples** - Ruth grazing in Boaz's field; Esther entering a beauty pageant; Paul and Lydia (**Acts 16**).

And...they still happen; they are not **coincidences**, accidents, or **chance** meetings; they are divine interventions into our daily life that God uses to transform lives. A lot Christians have an airplane story - God puts you together side by side for hours; you/they can't walk away.

John Wimber tells of when he got on an airplane he saw the word "adultery" written across the forehead of the man sitting across the aisle. Then, God gave him the name, "Jane." When he had an opportunity, he leaned over the aisle and asked the man if he knew "Jane;" the man panicked. He asked, "Where did you hear that?" John said, "God told me." Then God used John to lead him and his wife (not Jane - sitting next to him) to Jesus. (*Power Evangelism*; page. 32f)

Nancy Beach was flying from Denver to Chicago. She sat next to Don who was returning from visiting his 88-year-old mother in Montana. He helped lift her carryon into the overhead bin; soon he was asking questions about her church. He noted the strong faith his mother had; but acknowledged he didn't know God personally. He was a Vietnam vet. His wife had cancer. His son was very confused about life. Life had been hard. Don said he'd lost hope the world would ever get better. They talked for two hours and exchanged emails. As they parted, he said, "I'll write my mother and tell her there is a reason to hope after all."

Kerry Jennings heard the Spirit tell him to stop at a familiar restaurant, ask for a certain waitress, and tell her what God would say to him. He went; was seated in her section, and when she walked up to him, she said, "You have something for me, don't you?" What he told her she knew could only come from God. This daughter of a pastor, who had turned away from God, recommitted her life to Jesus.

We remember the dramatic illustrations of this truth - but *divine appointments* happen all the time - to ordinary people like you and me (if we're just paying attention).

Marilyn and I went to late movie one evening some years ago while on vacation; after the movie we ran into a member of a church we'd served - her husband had recently left her, and we talked for over an hour.

Marilyn frequently gets "nudges" to visit someone; when we arrive, something is always happening – and has resulted in our being there when someone took their last breath. There have been numerous times I've been in the hospital and bumped into someone I didn't even know was there - "*at just the right time.*" There are the phone calls, the words of encouragement, cards/notes, the check surprisingly in the mail...

Acts 8:26-40 is a classic *divine appointment*. This story follows Stephen's stoning in Jerusalem, the intensifying of persecution against Christ-followers there, and the scattering of believers into Judea and Samaria.

Instead of hiding out in fear, these early disciples decided to boldly spread their testimony; they're being his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the world (**Acts 1:8**). The first part of **Acts 8** tells us the result was amazing and miraculous - people were coming to Jesus in bunches! Now Luke shares a personal evangelism story with his readers.

THE CHARACTERS

The story begins with a visit from an *angel*. Wow. If an angel is available, why didn't the angel just do the job himself? Appearing to this leader would (practically) guarantee a conversion. Answer: because that's not how Christ designed his kingdom would be built; his plan is to use his followers of Jesus like you and me!

We're called to be his witnesses/carriers/deliverers of the Good News. We're to go where God sends us and do whatever he asks.

(I personally think if God used angels directly, his kingdom would get built a whole lot faster; but God isn't into *fast and furious*; he's into slow and deliberate, faithful and obedient)

The angel tells *Philip* - one of the seven table waiters appointed in Acts 6 - to go south to the Wilderness Road that went from Jerusalem to *Gaza* (map/pics).

The Greek for "South" here can also be translated "midday"; so the angel tells him to go to a **desolate** location at the most **desolate** time of the day (Really? Like checking out Yellowstone's hot springs in the middle of a moonless night; No sane person will be there!)

Let's acknowledge this probably made little sense to Philip. Why would one leave a nation-wide revival they were successfully leading to go to a lonely desert road to meet with just one person? Because God asked. Notice Philip's

response: “So he **started** out...” (8:27). He doesn't question the request; doesn't demand the details; doesn't even hesitate - he goes. Leaders (must seek and) hear God's voice and obey – no matter how foolish the request may sound.

Divine appointments are worthless if we not listening for God or ready to obey.

Then we meet the Ethiopian Eunuch. I know you want to know about the second word, but the first word tells us he's from what is now **northern Sudan** - Northwest Africa - considered then to be one of the most southern parts of the earth. He likely has dark skin (Ethiopia means “*land of the burnt-faced people*”). The Gospel message is taking a significant geographical, cultural and ethnic leap.

A *eunuch* is often understood as a person who has been castrated - usually a man put in charge of the king's harem; but it also has another meaning - a **court official**. This second definition is more likely because this man is said to oversee the Ethiopian treasury - although both definitions may have applied.

He is man of wealth and status; he has his own chariot (i.e., his own chauffeured limo) and his own personal Isaiah scroll!

He is a God-fearing man; he is returning from worshipping in Jerusalem. (That's about 1200 miles to church one way - like commuting from Orlando to Covenant!). It would have taken 40-50 days each way - longer if he stopped on the way.

Here is a man who is earnestly searching; he is spiritually hungry; he has significant questions of faith.

THE CHALLENGE

Then the Spirit tells Philip: “Go to that chariot [or carriage] and **stay near it.”**

Philip, a lowly Greek-speaking disciple with a Hebrew accent, is told to approach the (moving) chariot of a very wealthy, influential foreign official (try that today and you might get shot). So this is a bold move – and way outside one's comfort zone.

To “witness” you have to be in fairly **close proximity** to the person you're witnessing to.

Sadly, today, the **longer** one has been a Christian, the **fewer** non-Christians they know. The longer we're Christians, the more comfortable we are just being with Christians; we enjoy our “holy huddles.” We like being with people like us and not having to mess with people who don't think like we do, look like we do, talk like we do, or believe like we do. That makes it comfortable.

The CRC's who have taken the REVEAL survey note that over **80%** of us don't have regular spiritual conversations or invite our neighbors to church. Very few of us are intentionally building relationships with people who are far from God so we can bring them closer to God.

Many churches (and members) believe we need to get our "house in order" first, before we invite someone – but that time never comes. Many members think it is someone else's job - someone "gifted" in evangelism, a staff member or pastor; someone older/younger who should be doing that.

Jesus reminds us we need to evangelize first and then our house will be in order; he reminds us that it is every followers' responsibility to witness (all the time). In fact, it is the main thing; it's the Church's mission.

God says to Philip: "*Go to that chariot and stay near it.*" He goes. God tells us something similar: "*Go there...[or] we might already be by our chariot?*" "**Where** (what/who) is your chariot?" Your workplace? School? People in your neighborhood? Where you shop?

"I have a hard time building relationships; most of the people at my workplace say they already know Jesus (and all the people I work with do)" "I go to a Christian school!" Okay, but we all have neighbors . . . and waitresses, and people across the aisle in the airplane.

Where is your chariot? Are you "staying near" non-Christians? Are you praying daily for three or four people by name to come to Jesus?

The chariot continues to move; Philip comes alongside and listens... He doesn't just jump in; he runs alongside (That's inconvenient; Philip must have been in pretty good shape!). Notice, he doesn't take out his four-spiritual laws booklet - he just listens so he can respond authentically.

The Ethiopian is reading out loud - a common practice in those days; [and] *it just so happens* he is reading from **Isaiah** - chapter **53** - from the Greek Septuagint (We can tell from the quote Luke includes here in the text).

Wow! Perfect! I can't imagine a better Old Testament passage to introduce someone to Jesus. So Philip just jumps in to talk about the suffering and death of Jesus... Right?

No, as he runs alongside, he asks a **natural** question: "*Do you understand what you are reading?*" Witnessing always starts with where people **are**; Philip engages in a natural conversation that God - in this divine appointment - has set up perfectly.

Witnessing is simply following the **promptings** of the **Holy Spirit**; you don't have to control or manipulate the conversation...just run alongside with the Spirit.

Then the Ethiopian invites Philip into the chariot; Philip gets in. I imagine they have a fascinating conversation about how Jesus is the one Isaiah refers to as the *Suffering Servant*; the one crucified like a lamb and led to the slaughter (8:28).

The Ethiopian is open, receptive and inquisitive: “Who is the **prophet** talking about, himself or someone else?” The Spirit has already been working in him.

As a Hellenistic Jew, Philip, who has been a student of the Scripture all his life, is familiar with Isaiah’s prophecy; as a Christian, he also knows its fulfillment. He talks all about **Jesus** (It’s what Christ followers love to do).

Philip was **ready** when God called him to an appointed assignment. The Ethiopian Eunuch was **ready** to embrace Jesus; to step into faith; to go all-in. God had **orchestrated** it; it was a **divine** appointment.

At that moment they see water (Yah! Right! In the middle of the desert! This is obviously a divine appointment). And he asks to be baptized! And Philip complies.

Now some of us are thinking - this is way too soon. Doesn’t he need time more time to grow and mature, a new members’ class at least, or a new Christian’s small group for at least a year to see if his “conversion” is real.

Throughout Acts, Luke suggests conversion is quickly followed by **baptism** - it’s the sign of **belonging** to Jesus and his family. Baptism acknowledges the **grace** and **forgiveness** of Jesus Christ. Baptism is a celebration of God’s **goodness** and **faithfulness**. Baptism isn’t about us or our knowledge or achievements - it’s about **Jesus**; but it’s the first step of **obedience** once a new believer embraces Jesus as his/her Savior and Lord.

How long has it been since Covenant had the adult baptism? Anyone remember? When was the last time you invited someone to come to church with you? There’s a correlation.

THE CONCLUSION

The story ends with the sudden removal of Philip. (Scripture isn’t clear whether he literally disappeared or simply walked away).

But Philip went on preaching in all the towns of Judea and Samaria until he reached Caesarea (...from Jerusalem to Judah, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Sound familiar?)

What Philip did between Gaza and Caesarea, Halford E. Luccock calls a “**meanwhile ministry.**”

See, this *divine appointment* was not Philip's primary assignment or job; but *meanwhile*, without departing from his primary calling, he used his current circumstances to spread the Good News - to tell people about Jesus

This "*meanwhile ministry*" Luccock says, is one of the big **reasons** for the rapid expansion of Christianity in the first two centuries.

These early disciples lived their Christianity **24-7**; they were **all-in**, sold-out to Jesus in everything they did. They were always witnessing - whether in Jerusalem, Judah, Samaria, or another part; whether in the heat of midday or the cool of the evening; whether it was their primary calling or just a "meanwhile ministry."

The Ethiopian went on his way **rejoicing** - a sure sign of God's Spirit at work. Eusebius, the early church historian, says this Secretary of the Treasury brought the Good News of Jesus back to Ethiopia and started a church there. The Ethiopian Eunuch returns home a follower of Jesus because of the sovereign power of an Almighty and gracious God - and the obedience of one "table-waiter."

Let me pause here a moment to underscore the high-calling of table-waiting. These examples of table-waiters Stephen and Philip are amazing: witnessing to the Gospel, leading people and nations to Jesus Christ, promoting the Gospel with their life and their death, and building the Kingdom of God. Table-waiting was not their fulltime job, but it is a high calling! (We often prioritize jobs and vocations - even in the church; God reminds us here, it's about sharing Jesus, about being obedient and faithful, about building His Kingdom).

God often uses our obedience and faithfulness in little things to make a big impact we may be unaware of - until we get home.

What if Philip had decided the angel was crazy (a lonely road at high noon?! Yah, right!). What if Philip had **ignored** God's prompting? What if Philip wanted to stay where he was comfortable and things were going well (Samaria)? What if he wanted to keep doing things exactly the same way they had always been done?

The Christian life is, by nature, an adventure - because we are not in control. Change is guaranteed; comfort is not. In fact, if we're comfortable for too long; something is wrong, because if we're following Jesus, we will be persecuted.

If you make yourself **available** to God to be used (that is, if you do what God requires of everyone who believes in him must do) you'll receive leadings - promptings, divine appointments - from God.

Accept **one**, he'll give you **another**. (Philip did; God used him in Samaria; then on a wilderness road). If you disobey and turn a deaf ear, the results can be devastating.

We are on **mission** from God! Sometimes our assignment might mean a small act of kindness; sometimes a medium size challenge like building an authentic relationship with someone who doesn't know Jesus in order to have a spiritual conversation; sometimes God might even ask you to pick up stakes and move...for the sake of the kingdom.

Each assignment **matters** - from table-waiting to healings to praying to being a Spirit-empowered leader - because unbelievers **matter** to God.

So what does this passage (message) have to do with Spirit-empowered leadership? Well, let me back up a pinch. A leader is, by simple definition, someone who goes first. We tend to think leaders are limited to those elected, appointed or placed in a leadership role. Truth is, none of those things, make a leader a leader. Let me tell you again about the spiritual leadership of Stephen and Philip:

1. They knew the Word of God.
2. They made themselves available to Jesus' and the Spirit's leading.
3. They recognized God's voice when he called.
4. They obeyed God without hesitation.
5. They loved to talk about Jesus.
6. They understood their mission was not to huddle; the huddle was just a place to prepare and be encouraged.
7. They kept the main thing the main thing...

They modeled this day in and day out. They were leaders in the truest sense of the word! The Church needs spiritual leaders.

We never know when God might engage us in a divine appointment. So the question is, "Are you ready for a divine assignment?" Are you in the Word? Are you listening for your God's voice? Are you talking about Jesus?

God longs to give each of us a bunch of "good airplane stories." God longs to have us **participating** in **life-changing** conversations. God longs to use us to build his kingdom. How **long** has it been since **your last** divine missional **appointment**?

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