

Sermon title: "Surprised by the Spirit" © Ellen Clark Clémot - 2018

Scripture text: Acts 8: 26-40

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*Theme:* Following our faith through scripture takes the work of the Spirit and the help of a preacher, teacher and guide – to help us feel God's welcome and to send us out rejoicing over God's good news for the world.

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Holy Spirit of God, we seek you out and long for your welcome. Be present with us now to help us understand your Word in scripture. Guide us on our journey, and restore us in our faith, through your surprising, reconciling, resurrection power, and the abundance of your grace. *Now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer, Amen.*

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Here's a question for you: "Who's your preacher?"

Who helps you uncover the richness and hope, the joyful good news of Scripture? We all need a preacher, a teacher, a guide.

Who's yours?

Is it Cindy? Probably. Or is it Austin? Or Brian? Or maybe some talented young people preaching from their hearts on a recent Youth Sunday.

Sometimes we find ourselves with a surprise preacher – perhaps that would be me, Ellen, for most of you this morning.

But for the Ethiopian official in our Scripture reading today, it was Philip. Philip was a surprise preacher if ever there was one. Even his mode of transportation was surprising. Especially for him! The whole preaching episode was a surprise. But powerful!

Philip was persuasive. His very first congregant, a wealthy official from Ethiopia, responded to his preaching by becoming a convert to Christianity. This traveler from afar heard Philip preach, asked to be baptized and went home rejoicing. Would that all our preaching moments yield such glory!

Philip was not even trained to be a preacher. He was merely a Spirit-filled Greek who believed in Jesus as Christ. He had been chosen by the Apostles to assist with the daily food distribution to the burgeoning community of followers of Jesus in Jerusalem.

Thousands of new believers were joining the community of Christ every day. Philip was assigned to wait tables, to feed them. He, along with six others, was named a *diakonos*, the Greek word for deacon. Their help as deacons, essentially working in the kitchen, would free up the Apostles to go out and spread the good news of the gospel, heal the sick, and baptize all who wished to follow Jesus.

So, when an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip sending him out to the middle of the Gaza desert in the heat of the noon day sun, *to preach*, Philip must have been – surprised. But Philip got up and went where the Spirit sent him without a word.

Now, notice it's the Spirit at work here. Philip just follows God's directions. And, sure enough, when the Ethiopian official comes riding by in his chariot, on his way home from worshipping at the temple in Jerusalem, the Spirit sends Philip to join him. The Spirit sends him for a reason: to be his preacher, his teacher, a guide.

Remember, we meet the Ethiopian official riding along in his chariot, reading aloud from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Words of hope – of inclusion, of recognition at long last. But perhaps these words sounded too good to be true. The Ethiopian wanted affirmation.

We can guess that he was a God-worshipper from the diaspora of Jewish influence. He believed in God's covenant community but he could not access it. He was an excluded person - in part because he

lived so far away from Jerusalem. Ethiopia was considered the “ends of the earth.” But more decidedly, he was excluded from the community because he was a eunuch. Although his impairment made him trustworthy as a servant in the Ethiopian Queen’s Court, it left him a permanent outcast from the insider worship group under Jewish purity laws.

He was looking for a way in. But how could he take part in God’s joy if his physical differences, and the attitudes of others, kept him out?

We’ve all experienced something like it – whether we are physically impaired, handicapped in some way – or we’re simply different because of our race, or gender, or whom we love or how we identify. When we don’t fit in, but we want to – it hurts. That’s when we need the Spirit. That’s when we look to the Word. And that’s when we need a preacher, a teacher, a guide. Someone like Philip. We all need a Philip from time to time, to help us find our hope, and send us home rejoicing.

It’s incredible, really, how Philip was moved by the Spirit to preach that day. Philip runs up to the man’s chariot and hears him reading scripture aloud.

“Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asks him, ready to help. He’s a deacon remember. “Do you really understand?”

“How can I without a guide?” comes the response. The Ethiopian official invites Philip on board. He welcomes him in.<sup>1</sup> Notice the welcome.

Then Philip begins to preach. He recounts the prophesy of Isaiah, the allusions to the suffering servant and the sacrificial lamb. We can surmise from what happens next that Philip moved from prophesy to fulfillment, to the life of Jesus, and his saving death on the cross, to baptism and inclusion in the Risen Christ, to the joy of belonging to God through the resurrection power of reconciling love.

Then, there in the desert, water suddenly appears. The Ethiopian official, now enlightened, now hopeful, now welcomed, now encouraged, now “gets it.” He shouts joyfully: “Look! There’s water! – what’s to keep me from being baptized?”

“Nothing at all,” the Spirit whispers. “Nothing at all.”<sup>2</sup> The Spirit surprises. Philip obliges. And God’s newest beloved, the Ethiopian Christian, rides home rejoicing.

Such good news! It’s a message we need to hear again and again.

The Spirit permits us passage.

The Scripture shows us the way.

But to make sense of it all, we need a preacher, a teacher, a guide.

Who’s yours?

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Some of us might have read Sara Miles’ powerful memoir called *Take This Bread* – it came out about ten years ago when most Christian churches were still working on welcome for the gay community. Things are so much better now – at least in the PC(USA). Back then Sara was an activist, a reporter, and newly married to her wife Holly. She found herself drawn to the church the way the Ethiopian found himself drawn to Jerusalem, wanting to worship God. And wanting to be included.

Sara was hungry for acceptance, and hungry for God. But her journey came to an abrupt halt at the communion table. Only the initiated were welcome, she was told – only the baptized. Yet it was communion that led her to church – her hunger for God was physical – she wanted to taste and see how good the Lord could be. But, no. She was not yet baptized. And she was different. So, she delved into

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, Fifth Sunday of Easter, Acts 8:26-40, “Homiletical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), observations on inclusiveness, p. 457.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas A. Long, Fifth Sunday of Easter, Acts 8:26-40, “Pastoral Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word, Op. Cit.*, idea of Spirit’s welcome, p.458.

scripture. The Gospel of John. We know the passage: “I am the vine,” Jesus said. “You are the branches. Without me you can do nothing – but abide in me and you will bear much fruit.”

How could this be, Sara wondered, if she was being kept away from this life-giving vine? Christ’s good news fell with a hollow thump. She could not find her way. She needed a teacher, a preacher, a guide.

Sara found her preacher at an Episcopal Church in San Francisco near her home. Her preacher’s name was Rick. He proclaimed an open table where all were welcome: the unchurched, the unreformed, the unbaptized. He pointed out that Jesus fed the stranger first, so we should too, welcoming everyone to the table, whether or not they were baptized, whether gay or straight, repentant or redeemed. If they were hungry, they were welcome. And Sara was welcome. It was the Good News she needed to hear.<sup>3</sup>

She came to the table and the Spirit met her there. She asked to be baptized. The Spirit must have smiled, saying, “Beloved child, what took you so long?”

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Who’s *your* preacher? Who helped you find your way to welcome, and to rejoice in your faith?

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Many of us are familiar with the writings of Ann Lamott, a faith-seeker become faith writer, both irreverent and wise. Ann writes in her poignant memoir, *Traveling Mercies*, how her desperate life first led her to find a preacher, teacher, and guide of her own. Her preacher’s name was Bill. She called him up one day when she was nearly suicidal and needed help.

Bill was a complete stranger, but he was also the new Episcopal priest in town. She spilled out her story to him of too many drinks, and drugs, and poor choices in men. He listened. And then he opened her mind to scripture, and the reconciling love of Jesus Christ.

“What does it mean to be saved?” [she asked him when they met in his office the next day.] ...

“I guess it’s like discovering you’re on the shelf of a pawn shop, dirty and forgotten and maybe not worth very much. But Jesus comes in and tells the pawnbroker, “I’ll take her place on the shelf. Let her go outside again.”<sup>4</sup>

Bill encouraged her to worship at the Presbyterian Church near where she lived. He counseled her for a long time. They became close friends. Eventually she welcomed the insistent Spirit of Christ into her life. She did it simply by taking a deep breath and saying out-loud: “All right – You can come in.”<sup>5</sup> After that, everywhere she turned, she heard the poetry of George Herbert come to life in the joy of acceptance:

*And here, in dust and dirt, O here,  
The lilies of his love appear.*

Everywhere she looked was Easter joy.  
It’s surprising what the Spirit can do in our lives.

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<sup>3</sup> Sara Miles, *Take This Bread* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), p.82.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), p.43.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.50.

Who's *your* preacher? Who has been your teacher and guide?

I discovered the richness of Scripture later in life. Like the Ethiopian official, I had the Bible in hand, but didn't know what to make of it.

The women of my home church in New York City encouraged me to join their Bible study. The associate pastor, a young woman straight out of seminary, taught us with passion and joy. Her name was Christy. She was my preacher. We studied scripture and talked about life – about the challenges and exclusions we faced as women, and about the gifts and miracles we enjoyed as women. The wise women of Bible study were creative artists and professional cooks, mothers and grandmothers, and single women new to New York. They were women of all stripes, and they welcomed me in.

We learned each other's stories and how to pray for one another. How to listen with compassion. How to read scripture and let it work on you. How to struggle with it and how to wonder. And soon I found myself wondering a lot.

I started wondering about ministry, about *becoming* a minister – about whether one day I might be equipped enough to preach. The wise women told me. "Listen for the Spirit's call."

And, so it was, that one morning, in late spring, as I walked to the subway in Manhattan, on my way to work, the Spirit spoke. In fact, it wrote me a message that would change my life.

Sketched out on the sidewalk in thick, white chalk letters were the words: "Become Your Dream." The message stopped me dead in my tracks. I read it again. "Become Your Dream." It was signed by the artist De La Vega. A few paces ahead was a cartoon drawing signed by the same person. The chalk drawing was of a goldfish in its bowl, with a thought bubble showing the fish's dream of being out of the water and walking on two legs. A few paces further still there was another cartoon. This time the fish, now on legs, was walking away from an empty fish bowl. I walked on, shaking my head. "No way," I thought. "Is this for me?"

Around the next corner there was a full-length couch propped up on its side, abandoned on the sidewalk. The cushions had been removed, and there, in big letters, on the seat-lining of the couch, the graffiti artist had again written: "Become Your Dream." All the way to the subway, block by block, his message kept popping up: on the sidewalk, on refuse bins, and even on the subway entrance itself. Each time I read his bold message, I thought about it more, asking myself: Could I possibly become my dream?

How many of us saw that graffiti message and acted on it, I don't know. The graffiti would return from time to time – that autumn, the following spring. A year went by. The message reappeared again, patient yet insistent. And each time, it moved me deep in my heart, until finally one day, I jumped out of the fishbowl and found my feet - steadily following the Spirit's call.

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The Spirit permits us passage. The Scripture shows the way.

Become someone's preacher. Share the good News of God's love for all of us and send someone home rejoicing with hope – that anything's possible in Christ with the dawning of each, and every, brand-new day.

*Christ is Risen! He is Risen, indeed.*

*Christ is Risen! He is Risen, indeed.*

*Christ is Risen! He is Risen, indeed.*

*Alleluia. Amen.*