

**- Saint John's Pulpit (May 2, Fifth Sunday of Easter)
- "Post-Pandemic Mission" Acts 8:26-31, 34-40**

²⁶ Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷ So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

The post-pandemic mission

About a month ago, I had a chance to chat with two young families who visited for our pre-school tour. They were looking for more information about the CECE because they wanted to send their kids to the preschool this summer. Linda Meaney thoughtfully connected those families with me, so I had such a wonderful time to introduce St. John's and children's ministry.

One big surprise through the conversation was that they knew St. John's well. They knew that I am a pastor here. They already looked around not only St. John's preschool website but also St. John's website and Facebook. Even they watched St. John's online services too!

During the pandemic, lots of churches have experienced a serious downfall in worship attendances. Still, lots of churches are juggling to see when they do re-opening services in-person. Evangelism, mission, and outreach seem to be paused now. The only word for all churches might be 'survival' very sadly.

Given these challenges, the visit by two prospective preschool families made me see hope in St. John's mission. Before our active outreach, there were people who knew our faith community and our mission. Then, they visited us! So, hope that I have more chances to see them and chat with those families this summer.

Jerusalem, Samaria, and End of the Earth

This story is not about one individual's baptism only. In terms of Christian mission, this story should be illuminated very seriously. Why? Acts 8 presents a fulfillment of Jesus' mission statement which puts in Acts 1:8.

⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Acts 1:8 NRSV

When you read Acts 8 carefully, you see that this chapter presents two mission stories. One is evangelizing for Samaritans by Philip. The other is baptizing Ethiopian eunuch by Philip. Since in the ancient Mediterranean world Ethiopia was often considered to be located at the "ends of the earth", this conversion proleptically fulfills the prediction in Acts 1:8.

Besides, here are more reasons to read this story. This unnamed eunuch from Ethiopia was the first Gentile to be converted and baptized. Actually, all discussions about the Gentiles mission are presented in Acts 10 and 11, with a story of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. With his conversion, the Apostles began to deal with the Gentile mission, but Acts 8 is free from such a theological debate, but by the Holy Spirit only.

26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) Acts 8:26 NRSV

39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. Acts 8:39 NRSV

Additionally, from the fact that the first conversion was given to an unnamed foreign eunuch, we see the power of embracing people by the Good News.

Just like I met a couple of young parents unexpectedly, Philip met this Ethiopian eunuch in the same way. During the pandemic, lots of Christians could not make it to their services in-person. Joining on-line service had been highly encouraged, but still we have no idea how many Christians have joined their church on-line services actively.

Simply speaking, it is very hard to do evangelizing people by church these days. Inviting people to churches was a virtue before the pandemic, but now requires lots of courage and consideration. If so, how could we outreach people? With that question, the story today might give us good answers.

Be sensitive

Please be more sensitive to get any chance to share the Gospel. In the story today, Philip was very sensitive to receive a call from the angel of the Lord. The best moment to share Jesus will come soon in your life. Although it seems that there are lots of people who don't know about Jesus, we also know that there are people who want to know about Jesus and join services at your church.

29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." 30 So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" Acts 8:29-30 NRSV

Yes, just like Philip, please be sensitive to be guided by the Holy Spirit. Pray for a chance to meet people who need the Gospel. They might be your friend, or relative, or neighbor, or preschool visiting parents. At the same time, be sensitive to what people need. In the story, Philip asked the

eunuch, "do you understand what you are reading?" Philip was doing his best to assist the one whom he met and trying to figure out what he needed!

Be ready

When this eunuch was reading the prophet Isaiah, Philip offered him to help. Then, Philip was asked to interpret the Bible.

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. Acts 8:34-35 NRSV

By our funny imagination, what could be happening if Philip had no idea about the prophet Isaiah when he had been asked to explain? "Well, I am so sorry. My specialty is the New Testament. I am very limited to help you. I am happy to give you Peter's cell number. Ask Peter!"

However, that funny scene never happened in the story today. Philip not only explained the scripture but also proclaimed to this eunuch the good news about Jesus. What lessons can we see from this? Post-pandemic Christians need to be ready to answer, support and share.

Here is one request from this story. We need more practice to become good Christians by our knowledge and Spirituality. The pandemic prevents us from outreaching people more actively, but this never discourages us to share the good news of the Lord with people when chances are given to us.

² proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. 2 Timothy 4:2 NRSV

Pandemic, is it favorable or unfavorable?

Let's take a moment to look at the world. Still, we are in the pandemic. Do you think it is favorable to share Jesus with people? However, before asking this question, we should ask this. Who is controlling our time? Instead of seeing time in our standard, we need to see it in God's standard. In Acts 8, Philip did not intend to evangelize Samaria in the first. It was not his plan or his choice. Ironically, what Philip led to Samaria was severe persecution in Jerusalem.

That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. ⁴ Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. Acts 8:1, 4-5 NRSV

Certainly, the time was unfavorable to Philip. But to Samaritans, the time was favorable. What about this pandemic? Although it seems to be unfavorable, as long as we are ready to follow the Lord and serve people, we would experience God's transforming Grace from unfavorable time to favorable time. God is still working among us. Amen.