

Sermon: Finding God on the Road
5 Easter, Year B
Acts 8:26-40

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And the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go...!”

Today’s reading from Acts offers us a compelling story where two men meet unexpectedly on their seemingly separate journeys. In Acts, the Holy Spirit is a key player, a main character, who inspires and leads people to God. The Spirit nudges Philip to get up and go down the wilderness road so that he can meet this man from Ethiopia, a high official in the Ethiopian queen’s court. The Ethiopian is returning home from his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which is very interesting since he is likely considered an outcast from the covenantal people. As a eunuch, this man would likely have been forbidden to enter the Temple. And yet, he has come all this way as a pilgrim to worship God. A spiritual hunger has driven him from such a distance. It is a connection to God that he seeks.

We don’t know exactly what his experience in Jerusalem has been, and now as he travels home, he meets Philip. It is one of those God moments. He has been seeking God, attentive to the movement of the Spirit and in this surprise encounter he finds connection to the Divine, through Philip. He is so moved by Philip’s words about the scripture that when he sees the water, he says, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” On the road, together Philip and this Ethiopian pilgrim experience the transformative power of God.

What is pilgrimage? It can be a physical journey through time and space but it can also be a spiritual journey where we find ourselves looking for and expecting to find God. And so often God turns up in unexpected places. Pilgrimage is for seekers of God and allows for, gives space for, transformation.

I will be leaving on Sabbatical soon. Several of you have asked me what I am going to do. My focus will be on prayer, as I hope to cultivate a deeper way of connecting with God. Several years ago I took an OLLI (Osher Life Long Learning) course on the Pilgrimage some of you are probably familiar with called the Camino de Santiago in Spain. As I learned more, I thought “I want to do this!” You can walk as much of it as you choose; it begins in France, and ends on the coast of Galicia, Spain, in Finisterre, which literally means the “end of the earth.” But as I learned more, I realized that the focus was very much on Roman Catholicism. Not that there’s anything wrong with that! But I thought, “As an Episcopalian, I am an Anglican, so maybe it would be better for me to do a pilgrimage walk in England.” So my sabbatical time will begin in England, getting in touch with our Anglican spiritual roots, with some of the time including an 81 mile walk in the Yorkshire Dales area. But I hope to see the entire three months as pilgrimage, even when I’m not walking.

Anne Grizzle, who grew up in this church and was recently ordained a priest, has written a book called *Reminders of God*. In it she describes how any trip can be a pilgrimage.

She writes, “The heart of pilgrimage is going with God and being open to the Spirit.”¹ I think that perfectly describes our friend the Ethiopian, going with God and being open to the Spirit! Anne also writes, “I have discovered that the real pilgrimage begins when I look for, and expect to find God in the unplanned moments of travel.”² When we step out of our comfort zone, we have the opportunity to depend on God in new ways.

I wonder if we can treat life itself as pilgrimage? All of us, every day, whether we are going on a trip or staying close to home? What would it be like at the end of our lives to look back and see that we had gone with God, that we had been open to the Spirit? We can plan our day, our trips, our calendars to fullness. Some of us over plan! But have we left space to encounter God? Perhaps God is in the interruptions of our day. Maybe we will have a holy encounter with another patient in the waiting room at the hospital. Or witness the kindness of a stranger in the grocery store. Maybe a song or a poem will touch our hearts. Or maybe we will be surprised by the compassion of someone who is more often terribly grumpy! Yes, what about life as pilgrimage?

Pilgrimage can be made to the traditional sites where people have encountered God for hundreds of years, such as Jerusalem, Mecca, Santiago de Compostela or Canterbury. Or for some of us more attuned to nature, pilgrimage can be made hiking to the top of a mountain, or a setting out to watch migrating birds, or driving to the Atlantic Ocean each year. Pilgrimage can be coming to Emmanuel Church each week. Going any place where we seek and expect to find the hand of God. It can be when we find the sacred in the ordinary. Can we hear the Spirit’s voice in our everyday activities? Can we cultivate the heart of a pilgrim?

What brought you here today? Maybe you came because you wanted to please your mother or spouse? Or perhaps you came because you were assigned to usher or to be the lector or the nursery attendant. Donuts and coffee have a certain allure! But maybe you came to church today to encounter God. To connect with the transcendent, the holy, the divine. God is indeed here in this place and I sure hope you will feel it and know it.

Now can you take that pilgrim attitude of attentiveness to the Spirit with you to the next place, your back yard where you will plant flowers today or cut the grass, or out to the restaurant or to the shut in’s house where you will visit, seeking and expecting to find God there, too? Wherever you go, will you aim to find and be found by God? And when you lie down tonight before you go to sleep, will you look back over your day, and see where God met you, where you experienced love, and what tugged on your heart and where you encountered goodness and mercy and healing?

My sabbatical will be a time when I hope to see Jesus wherever I go, where I hope to find God in the Canterbury Cathedral *and* in the waiter’s face in the pub, on the long walk in the countryside *and* in the beggar on the city street, in the prayers of the Anglican liturgy spoken in a very English voice *and* in the sweaty, frustrating moments when we get lost. My hope for you is the same, that you will see Jesus wherever you go

¹ Grizzle, Anne, *Reminders of God*, Paraclete Press, 2004, p.15-16.

² *Ibid*, p.19.

and in whatever you do over these next three months, whether you go somewhere exotic or travel down Beverley Street. The Ethiopian pilgrim can be our model. May we all be just as open as he was to the unexpected encounters on the road that lead to transformation, the encounters that expand our minds and hearts.

I will miss you. I love you all. And I look forward to when we meet again and can tell each other about our encounters on the road, sharing new stories of God's goodness and love. May we go with God and be open to the Spirit.

Amen.