

What's stopping you?

Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:25–39)

Jim Loepp Thiessen

The stereotype of us preachers is that we are bold as blazes in our lives of faith, as confident in our witness as Billy Graham; if we appear otherwise, it's because we haven't had the chance. I believe with all my heart that I am to share my faith with others, I read books on the subject, and I talk with people who are good at it, but the sad truth is, when it comes to sharing my faith, I'm a bit of a coward. I don't usually confess it, but talking about my faith with others often frightens me. This reticence makes me a good Canadian, perhaps even a good Mennonite, but sometimes it leaves me with a sense that I've failed.

In spite of my fears and failings, I regularly pray for opportunity to share my faith. Every now and then the Spirit nudges me, as directly as Philip was nudged in the story in Acts 8. I don't always listen. Five years ago, I walked into a restroom at McDonald's and saw the back of a man in a red-checked flannel coat. Out of the blue, inside me, a voice said, "Tell him that Rebecca loves him." I had been asking God to speak to me, but I was so astounded, so bewildered, that I ignored the nudge. Many times I have wondered, "Was that God's voice I heard at the golden arches?"

On a frosty February day a year ago, our family was going through an exhibit at the zoo when the same voice said, "Tell her that her baby is going to be all right." I thought, "What baby?" and snapped my head around to see a very pregnant woman walk into the room, looking sad. I hate to say it, but I ignored the Spirit's nudge to speak peace to a woman who seemed in turmoil.

Then there was Bob, a total stranger I met at a conference. I felt God murmur to me that in Bob's life there was a man named Walter who was important to God. That time I heeded God's whisper. Bob's eyes got wide and moist as he told me he had had a falling out at church with Walter. Walter had been on his heart a lot lately. My word invited him to finish the reconciliation he had

begun earlier. I can still see Bob, tears in his eyes, waving for his wife to come over so he could tell her about this word.

One day as I was praying with a colleague, the Spirit kept whispering a phrase into my spirit. I said it to him, and the words brought him release. He had been dealing with fears about reentering ministry after many years away, fears related to a conflict he had had. The Spirit's words enabled him to move ahead, to receive God's invitation. Now he happily pastors a congregation.

Sometimes I have responded to the Spirit's nudges, and sometimes I have hesitated. What grabs my attention about the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is Philip's complete willingness to listen when the Spirit speaks. An angel says, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza," and Philip immediately gets up and goes.

The story is set up so perfectly that it may provoke our skepticism. A man from the Ethiopian high court is traveling by chariot to Jerusalem to worship God. Not one to suffer from motion sickness, he is reading his Bible on the way. He doesn't understand part of his reading from Isaiah. Philip comes along and hears the Spirit say, "Go over to this chariot and join it." He proceeds to hop on the chariot, and he uses the Ethiopian's questions to proclaim God's story in Jesus. The man decides, on the spot, to receive baptism with some water that happens to be beside the road. It's too neat, too easy. The story grips me, though, because it is so easy, because the Holy One has set up the whole thing, and all Philip and the Ethiopian do is respond to the Spirit's work.

The first responder in the story is Philip. He is aligning himself with God's activity, and following through. He is missional even before that word wandered into our vocabulary. A few years ago I made up my mind to respond to the Spirit's nudging when I felt it with regard to folks from my church. If people were on my mind, I called them. I was amazed to see how often my call coincided with a significant moment. "Today is the anniversary of my wife's death," one man told me through tears. Another time I had a strong urge to pray for a couple from my church. I finally phoned them and learned that the house where they were staying had been struck by lightning, throwing the husband in the air as he

worked in the garage. God's longing for us to be God's presence for others means that God does speak to us about others, and to them through us. Philip, bless his heart, had the courage to respond to what he heard. Without Philip's "yes," the Ethiopian would not have heard the good news about Jesus.

The eunuch also says "yes." He has the courage to go deeper. He is not settled with things as they are and wants to know more. Bless his heart for wanting that knowledge. The Bible isn't always easy to understand, and this court official, knowledgeable about finances, has the guts to ask about things of the Spirit. For his part, Philip has a presence that invites further conversation. Several times a year, I run an ALPHA course, an introduction to Christian faith. The "A" of ALPHA stands for "ask anything": the course creates a safe space for asking questions. Brian McClaren, in his book on sharing faith in a postmodern world, says the problem with many of us Christians is that others don't perceive

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us as safe to talk with about issues of faith. People are dying to talk about spiritual things but fear we will pounce on them if they speak honestly.¹ Philip is safe. He starts with the man's questions and proceeds from there.

The eunuch also has the courage to respond to what he has learned. As he hears the rest of the story, he feels the impulse to be baptized. Here the Spirit is also leading. Baptism is his response to the new work of Christ in his life. Was he ready, within

minutes of hearing the good news on a bumpy chariot? In the first conversation I had with a friend after my baptism, he told me he was not ready to take the same step. An eighteen year old, I told him, "None of us feels quite ready." Baptism is our faith response to the work of Jesus in our lives, to an invitation from God to live in grace, the grace of not being ready, not being all put together, not being perfect. The Ethiopian demonstrates dramatic faith; he is willing to respond to the opportunity the water presents.

Was the eunuch too impulsive? Was Philip too eager to baptize? Was the eunuch really ready for baptism? He hadn't even had catechism classes! How much of the Christian story did he know after a brief chariot ride? The story doesn't tell us.

I recently heard of Mennonite colleagues who, after a baptism at their church, felt the urge to invite people who wanted to respond to the invitation of Jesus by being baptized on the spot. Several responded. If we believe baptism is a response to God's initiative in our lives, is a spontaneous invitation appropriate? Early in its history, the church established a three-year process to prepare catechumens for baptism. Fortunately, the Ethiopian got dunked before the church raised the bar!

What is the right time for baptism? This story invites us into more spontaneity than we may be ready for. In my early teens I asked my dad about getting baptized, because my cousins were all doing it. My father, sensing that I wasn't ready, encouraged me to wait a bit. Later I was glad for his advice. A colleague says, "Baptism for those who have not experienced a relationship with Jesus only inoculates them against real Christianity." I agree. Sometimes when I work with catechumens, I sense that they are doing the right things for the wrong reasons, because of friends or parental pressure. I don't presume to judge, but I look for the yearning the Ethiopian experienced as he heard the story of Jesus.

This story doesn't answer all our questions. It doesn't tell us the "how long" of instruction, or the "when" of baptism. But it invites us to risk: to risk sharing our faith with others, and to trust that the Spirit of God is longing for us to do so. For those of us on the journey, the story invites us to risk going deeper to find out more. And when the dust settles after the chariot ride, it invites us to move ahead with the work of God in our lives, through baptism.

When you feel the Spirit's nudge, what is stopping you from taking a risk to respond by sharing the hope within you? If the Ethiopian had the courage to dig deeper in his faith, what is stopping you from doing the same? And if the Ethiopian had the guts to ask for baptism before he had it all together, what is stopping you from receiving baptism?

Note

¹ Brian D. McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize: Evangelism As Dance in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

About the author

Jim Loepp Thiessen preached this sermon at Shantz Mennonite Church, Baden, Ontario, where he and his wife, Ingrid, are pastors. Jim also serves as a missional formation staff person for Mennonite Church Eastern Canada.