

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Savior Jesus Christ, amen.

Do you remember the movie Raiders of The Lost Ark from 1981? To refresh your memory... Indiana Jones discovers the Ark of the Covenant, the 4-foot long container holding the two tablets of the 10 commandments God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai. (SLIDE) Jones takes the Ark back to America, and at the end of the movie you see it being stored with millions of other crates in a humungous warehouse building, lost once again, but this time to the bureaucracy of government (SLIDE)... That's fiction, of course, but it makes me wonder where the Ark of the Covenant might be today? Was it destroyed or is it intact and in a cave somewhere waiting to be found again like the Dead Sea Scrolls, or is somebody keeping it, hidden away in a no-name building?

The Orthodox Church of Ethiopia claims it has the ark (SLIDE). They say when the Queen of Sheba, ruler of Ethiopia, visited King Solomon around 1,000 B.C., she witnessed first-hand Solomon's great wisdom, the great temple, and the great land of Israel. She also got pregnant by him and bore his child when she returned to her homeland. Years later, her son returned to Israel to visit his father. Unbeknownst to her son, his companions stole the ark and brought it back to Ethiopia! Today it's being guarded by a group of priests in a chapel high in the mountains of northern Ethiopia. Nobody but the priests are allowed to see it.

Quite a story! I have no idea if it's true... I read it on the internet so it must be true, right? One thing we do know is that the Christian church in Ethiopia is ancient. In fact, since about 350 A.D. Christianity has been the official religion of Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is one of the oldest churches in the world! It just might be that in our Bible reading for today we find the reason why. An Ethiopian official on his way home from Jerusalem hears the Good News of the Gospel and becomes a Christian. (SLIDE)

I think God positioned this scripture reading for us to hear this day as a sign for us. We debated the timing and how to loosen the Covid-19 restrictions we've placed on ourselves at our Church Council meeting last Wednesday. One of our topics was whether to return to Sunday School and how to go about it in safe manner. I believe it's no coincidence this scripture reading came up on the Sunday after our discussions. After all, it's still true today as it was in the first century for the Ethiopian, that none of us can understand without someone to guide us. If we continue to keep our Sunday School closed, how will our children understand the lessons we all learned from our time in Sunday School? Marge will have an announcement about Sunday School and Vacation Bible School coming soon. I will also start back with Adult Sunday School in the near future. Another way we learn to understand scripture and to share our faith is through music. I was so surprised when I heard some folks were getting back together to form the Trinity

Choir. Music helps us discern God's still small voice and help us clarify God's will for our lives through both the melody and the lyrics of the songs and hymns.

The more I read this scripture text this week the more I began to appreciate the many themes and layers it presents. God used Philip to change a man, who changed a country. The Holy Spirit, plus the Word, plus a willing servant equals great miracles glorifying God. What gifts do you have? What is the Holy Spirit leading us to do as a congregation? Have you felt God's spirit leading you? If asked, could you explain God's vision for your life, as you see it. Phillip heard from God not once but twice in this short story. First the angel of the Lord told him to take the road to Gaza. The Lords said. Go" and Phillip got up and went... I looked up where else in the Bible the word for go is used. I discovered to go is one of the most commonly used verbs in the Bible, used over 1,400 times! I'll just quote two... **Matthew 28:19:** Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... And **Genesis 12:1:** "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'" I actually read several, not all 1400 verses where the verb go is used, but a good portion of them. I read enough to catch on to the usual pattern. It usually goes something like this... Someone is told to drop what they were doing and leave. Most of the time they aren't told where they're going or what they are to do once they get

there. They're just told to go and to trust God for more instructions to follow...

It's hard to do that... Get up and leave a place without the slightest idea of what lays ahead. In the Bible, that's how God works. God works through people who trust enough to follow without knowing the outcome. God said to Phillip, get up and leave the land of Samaria and travel down that road from Jerusalem to Gaza.

Folks that was a dangerous wilderness road. There was Phillip enjoying the fruits of his labor in Samaria where entire cities and towns had just converted to

Christianity. Phillip must have been feeling pretty good about himself. He had been casting out demons and healing the sick. I mean my ego would burst at the

seams if my preaching attracted even 10 new people, let alone entire towns and

cities... I can't imagine he would have been ready to move on... I mean to where

do you want me to go God? What do you mean just take the road less traveled to

Gaza? I'd be arguing with God that my place was with all those newly converted

members who needed my guidance... Not so with Phillip. He is asked to go, and

he gets up and goes... Once on the road, Phillip gets his second instruction from

the Holy Spirit who points to the Ethiopian Eunuch attempting to decipher one of

the hardest parts of the old testament. I mean if you're going to start out as a new

Bible reader maybe you should ask your pastor where to start. I think you might be

directed to the birth of Jesus or the story of Moses being found in the bulrushes

along the Nile River, or maybe even the entire book of Mark or perhaps the single

verse of John 3:16. No one would recommend you to start with the 53rd chapter of the book of Isaiah! On the other hand, what a set up these verses are for entering into a conversation about Jesus Christ the long waited for Messiah...

It's too bad evangelism isn't this easy. First of all, you have to overcome yourself and recognize the opportunities God presents us with each and every day. Phillip could very easily have missed out on the most important encounter of his life, if he had decided he was much too important to his new congregations in Samaria. When Phillip baptized this Ethiopian Eunuch most scholars say he baptized the first gentile, the first non-Jew, to be converted to Christianity. Tradition goes on to say when the Eunuch returned to his homeland, he became the founder of the Christian Church in Ethiopia. The Holy Spirit moved one man, Philip, to go and tell the Good News to another man. That event becomes the spark that ignites an entire nation. By the year 350 Christianity was the official religion of Ethiopia and today there are nearly 40,000 Christians in Ethiopia! One person can make a difference in the world. That person can be you.

May the Holy Spirit never stop speaking to and through us! May we have ears to hear when God's Holy Spirit speaks. When called, give us the courage to get up and go where the Spirit leads us. Through our obedience to the Spirit's leading, may God bring many blessings to our neighbors and much glory and honor to our Father in heaven. Amen.