

Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 10, 2009 – Mothers Day  
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

I know for a fact that I have told you before, but the occasion comes up every year to offer a teaching moment. That time has arrived again.

I know that you know that the readings we read every week are on a three year cycle. I know that you know that currently we are in the second year of that cycle, and that our church leaders gathered together to come up with an extremely creative name for the second year of the three year cycle and they came up with, “Year B.”

I also know that you know that there are four readings assigned to every Sunday in the church year and that if you wanted to you could open your hymnals to page 14 and find out what the lessons are for any appointed Sunday of the three year cycle.

If you have nothing to do and want to study the ebb and flow of the lessons, as you get to the Sundays after Easter, a curious thing happens. For all the Sundays following Easter, there are no readings appointed from the Old Testament. “That’s odd,” I hear you thinking, and “why is that,” you ask?

Well, the answer is quite simple and straightforward. In our tradition, as in most mainline Christian denominations, the primary reading for any Sunday is the gospel reading. If possible, all the rest of the appointed readings, take their lead from the gospel. The first reading, most of the year, is taken from the Old Testament, the second from one of the epistles, or letters of Paul. If possible, the Old Testament reading is selected for how it supports or illuminates the gospel reading, or how it sheds light on the whole history of salvation and how God has acted similarly in the past.

Well, when you get to Easter, the history of salvation is what happened AFTER the resurrection and so, instead of readings from the Old Testament, we find readings from St. Luke’s book of the Acts of the Apostles, which is our best history book of what happened in the early years after that first Easter morning.

This morning, we hear a selection from St. Luke’s book of Acts that speaks to us of the situation in that period of time when the church was expanding exponentially. Because the needs of the church quickly outgrew the ability of the 12 original disciples to meet them, the church appointed seven elders to meet the growing need. Stephen and Philip were two Grecian men who were dispatched to meet the needs of the Greek Jews, specifically, the widows and orphans of the movement. Stephen and Philip were so effective in their ministry that they caught the attention of the Jewish opposition in Cyrene and Alexandria and eventually, Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin, accused of blasphemy and stoned to death. The scriptural witness records a young man named Saul as being there at his stoning. Saul, you will recall, becomes the Paul we all know so well.

A great persecution of Christians followed this period and many of the faithful were force to flee Jerusalem and its environs. Philip went to Samaria, that no man’s land between northern Israel

and southern Judah. It is here where he receives his vision, his angelic instruction to go to Gaza. Now Gaza then is as Gaza now, a trouble spot. From earliest biblical times and continuing to this day, Gaza, that small strip of land on the southeastern border between Israel, Palestine and Egypt, from of time of Philistines to modern day headlines, has been a hot bed of controversy and violence.

Philip is told in his vision to go there. Nobody wants to go there, now or then. But Philip is faithful and Luke tells us that he got up and went. Luke goes on, "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 and was returning home; seated in his chariot and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Sort of reminds me of the guy who went into the back of his Winnebago to have breakfast and when his wife asked him who was driving he said, "Oh, I left it on cruise." You laugh, but did you know that he sued the company for not listing clearly in the RV's manual that cruise control requires that the driver stay in the driver's seat to pilot the vehicle. He won several million dollars AND a brand new Winnebago to replace the one that piloted itself into a ditch that morning.

Anyway...back to the story of Philip and the Ethiopian. Legend has it that Ethiopia was founded by the great grandson of Noah. Over the biblical record, it has been called many things, Ethiopia, Abyssinia, Kush and Axum. Axum, A-X-U-M or A-K-S-U-M, was a strong and powerful city and kingdom, ruling northern Africa from 400 BC up until the late 10<sup>th</sup> century. It evolved into a Christian maritime stronghold until Islamic factions started cutting off its primary trade routes. It declined in prominence and population, leaving only its name behind, Ethiopia, which, as you know, became the official name of the nation that we know. It remains a Christian stronghold with about 63% of the population claiming orthodox roots.

The purpose of Luke including the story here is to relate to his readers, how the message of the gospel spread to Africa. It all began because Philip listened to the message that God sent to him. Now, we moderns have a hard time reconciling the enormity of Africa with the consequence of a chance encounter on a country road. But that truth of the matter is, it had to start somewhere and it had to start with someone. Back in the day, Philip's day, you couldn't simply Google Christ and start reading about the movement. No pamphlets appeared in your junk mail and Wolf Blitzer was nowhere to be found. So if the gospel was going to go anywhere, it had to be transmitted by someone who held the faith.

Believe it or not, the same is true today. No one becomes a Christian by surfing the internet. Sure, someone may come to church because they read our web page, or our ad in the Buffalo News, or heard that Jimmy Bigham was playing the mighty Wendt organ today, but they won't come again, if someone here doesn't greet them and in some way embody the gospel for them.

Think back for just a moment, about how you got here. What brought you here, who brought you here, and how was the gospel made real for you here? Some of you say you had no choice, your mother and father brought you here. Precisely...your mother and father brought you here. They were the embodiment of the gospel that made you come. You saw in them, the presence and reality of Christ and they wanted to make it real for you.

It's Mother's Day and so I think it only appropriate that I talk about my Mom. Even though my mom worked weekends and was dead tired on Sunday mornings, she saw to it that we got to

Sunday school and church. I think she's been to church more in the past four years since she's lived here with us, than she was the first 80 years of her life, but she knew that faith was important and that if her sons were to grow up to be the kind of people she wanted them to be, that we had to be introduced to the gospel. She lived it in who she was as a person, that was our first introduction to the way God works, but she also knew that there was more to it than what she knew. And so she introduced us to God and to Christ.

That's all Philip did too. That's all we need to do. The power of the story and the witness to God's love contained therein will do the rest. Ultimately, God will draw all of us to Himself, but pen ultimately, it's our responsibility as His baptized children, to chase down the chariots going down the roads past where we are walking.

How can we do that you ask? Well, how about this:

If you go out for brunch today, bow your heads in prayer before you eat, first, and most importantly to thank God, for your food and for your mother, and second, that those around you will see someone who acknowledges the goodness of God. It's a subtle witness but a witness nonetheless.

Bring someone to church with you next week.

Call your children or when you see your children, and ask them if they went to church today, or if they brought their children to church today.

If they didn't, tell them how important it is.

We're going to invoke the three minute rule today. When church ends today, for the first three minutes, introduce yourself to someone you don't know. Yes, I know it's Mother's Day and you have to get home or out for brunch, but 3 minutes is all God is asking you for today. Be that presence of Christ for someone you don't know, it might, it will, make all the difference.

Come to the 9:30 coffee hour next week and meet our new members, they want to meet you.

And last, but certainly not least, thank your Mom, thank you, Mom, for being God's representative for me here on earth and in my life. Thank your wife, for being God's representative for your children; thank your children for being the kind of parents God hoped they would be for their kids.

And thank you, for being here today. Amen.