

SERMON TITLE: "Acts of the Spirit: Guidance of the Spirit"
SERMON TEXT: Acts 8:14-17, 25-40
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: June 27, 2021 (151st Anniversary), at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

A few evenings ago, my husband and I watched a movie in which one of the characters decided she really needed to go on a vacation. She was interested in international travel, but had to decide which country to visit. So she said, "Well, I speak English, so where do the people speak English?" Just that quickly, she immediately settled on England. Some of us, faced with such an opportunity for world travel, might be a little more adventuresome and consider more options. But, eventually, some criteria, desire, value, or principle would shape and guide our decision.

In today's scripture reading, the guiding principle was the Holy Spirit. Over the past six weeks, as we've been working our way through the chapters of Acts, we've seen over and over again how the Holy Spirit was active among the earliest Christians, shaping and influencing what happened. In the first chapter, Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to his successors in ministry. The Holy Spirit then empowered them with wind, fire, and languages so they could be witnesses of the Spirit. They received the gift of the Spirit and proclaimed the message of the Spirit. Last week, we saw how the gospel was spread by fathers of the Spirit. Now, today, as we're reading from Acts 8, we see the Holy Spirit on a whirlwind tour, moving the gospel from place to place and farther and farther from Jerusalem. So let's consider what's happening with Peter, John, Philip, and the Ethiopian eunuch—to see how we too can receive and share the guidance of the Spirit.

1—GUIDANCE ABOUT WHERE TO GO

In Acts 8, the first action of the Spirit was providing guidance about where to go. All over in this chapter we see instructions and movement from one geographical place to another. For example, in verse 14, "when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent

Peter and John” there. Later, in verse 25, we see that Peter and John were to return to Jerusalem by way of “many villages of the Samaritans.” These verses don’t specifically say that the *Holy Spirit* sent them to Samaria, but that understanding is built into all that we’ve been reading in Acts. As the successors of Jesus’ Spirit, the apostles had the ability both to receive and convey this guidance of the Spirit about where Peter and John should go. The four gospels indicate that Jesus’ disciples had had very little contact with Samaria before this. Generally speaking, Jewish people didn’t like Samaritans very much, and Peter and John probably wouldn’t have chosen to go there on their own. So we know it took an act of guidance by the Holy Spirit to get the Jewish Christian missionaries to go to those Samaritan villages.

Likewise, in verse 26, we see that the Spirit guided Philip where he should go. Being one of the Hellenist, Greek-speaking Christians that we talked about last week, Philip probably had a little more natural comfort traveling outside the Jewish center of Jerusalem. But, still, verse 26 tells us that it was “an angel of the Lord” who told him to go south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. The expression “angel of the Lord” was just another way of saying that God’s Holy Spirit was directing the action. We see this again, in verse 29, where “the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot.’” And, then finally, in verses 39 and 40, we read that “the Spirit of the Lord” snatched Philip away, later dropping him off at Azotus, so Philip could pass through “all the towns until he came to Caesarea.” From all that, it seems pretty clear that the Holy Spirit is in the business of guiding us where we should go.

2—GUIDANCE ABOUT WHAT TO DO

A second way we see the Holy Spirit acting in this chapter is by providing guidance about what to do. Once the Christian missionaries got to those regions and towns where the Spirit had guided them, what then were they supposed to accomplish? How were they supposed to behave? In verses 15-17, we see that Peter and John prayed and laid their hands on the Samaritan believers so they could

receive the Holy Spirit. In verses 25 and 40, the Spirit guided Peter, John, and Philip to proclaim the good news about Jesus.

In the account of the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip, in verses 26-40, we see that the Spirit guided Philip to join the chariot so he could have a conversation with the court official and instruct him about the scriptures and Jesus. And then, once that lesson-in-the-chariot was complete, the Spirit guided the Ethiopian eunuch to ask if he could be baptized. Over and over again, those early church missionaries and their converts figured out not only where to go but also what to do because they had the guidance of the Spirit.

3—GUIDANCE ABOUT WHAT TO BELIEVE

The third way the Spirit was acting in this chapter was by providing guidance about what to believe. For example, beliefs about the nature of God and baptism come up in verses 14-17. We're told that the Samaritans had not yet received the Holy Spirit because they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Jesus' name was very important in the early Christian mission, but Jesus didn't stand alone. Peter and John rectified the Samaritans' problem by laying hands on them, so the Samaritans could receive the fullness of God the Father and the Holy Spirit too. That's why, when a person is baptized in a United Methodist Church, they will be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—all three. We United Methodists and most other Christians believe that the fullness of God's divinity is known in this Trinitarian way. We believe this because of the guidance of the Spirit.

In the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, the Holy Spirit was also providing guidance about what to believe. As the court official was reading from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, the Holy Spirit was able to affirm the Ethiopian's belief that the Bible is worth reading and studying. I think most of us would agree with the eunuch that the Bible is often difficult to understand. But, as the Holy

Spirit works through spiritual guides and teachers like Philip, we are able to make sense and find hope.

Like the Ethiopian, we are able to believe that scripture is a valuable source of faith and salvation.

The Spirit also guided the eunuch to believe in Jesus. Yes, it involved a very expensive and rare scroll of the prophet Isaiah that probably only an official of a Queen could afford. And, yes, it took a well-coordinated meeting along a road, Philip's willing cooperation, and a conversation in a chariot. But the Holy Spirit was definitely guiding the events that led Philip to share the Christian good news. In verse 39, the Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing because the Spirit guided him to believe in Jesus.

I want to point out one more way that the Spirit guided belief here. Do you remember the lame beggar in Acts 3 who wasn't allowed inside the Jewish temple because his body was considered defective? It was only after Peter and John healed him in Jesus' name that he gained access to the rituals and community of faith. Something similar is going on here with the Ethiopian eunuch. Verse 27 indicates that he had gone to Jerusalem to worship. But we know that, because he had been castrated, he would have been considered physically defective and spiritually impure by traditional Jewish scriptural interpretation. Therefore, he would not have been allowed to worship God in the holy part of the Jewish temple. In contrast to that exclusionary policy, Philip extended to the eunuch full baptismal fellowship in the Christian community. Guided by the Spirit, Philip believed that everything in scripture must be interpreted through the lens of Jesus' love and mercy. That's why the Ethiopian eunuch was able to go on his way rejoicing.

CONCLUSION

Tomorrow my husband Steve and I will celebrate our 39th anniversary. Over our 39 years of marriage, there have been quite a few times when we've needed the guidance of the Holy Spirit in regard to where to go, what to do, and what to believe. I'm reminded that, in our wedding, we had the congregation sing the hymn "Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us, much we need thy tender care." The fourth verse of that song prays these words: "Early let us seek thy favor, early let us do thy will; blessed

Lord and only Savior, with thy love our bosoms fill.”* I don’t remember any of the other prayers or vows that were spoken in our wedding, but I think Steve and I have been pretty well served by that song’s request for spiritual guidance.

But there’s a bigger anniversary happening this weekend, isn’t there? Today, all of us are celebrating the 151st anniversary of this church. One hundred fifty-one years ago tomorrow, Rev. G.M. Pierce preached Ogden’s first-ever Methodist worship service in the passenger terminal of the newly-connected Union Pacific and Southern Pacific Railroads. We have no record of the hymns sung in the worship service that day or the topic of Rev. Pierce’s sermon. But I’d be willing to guess that he preached and prayed that the people gathered there would be guided by the Holy Spirit to start a Methodist congregation in this city, since that’s what they did over the next weeks and months. Like the earliest Christians in Acts, like the Ogden Methodists of 1870 and the 15 decades since—for our own personal lives and for the mission of our church—I hope we too will be led by the guidance of the Spirit.

*Lyrics attributed to Dorothy A. Thrupp, 1836.