

“You Were Made for a Mission”

Acts 8:26-31 (-40) ¹

The pentathlon was reintroduced to the summer Olympics in 1912 by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games. The Baron believed that this event, above all other Olympic competitions, “tested an athlete’s moral qualities as much as their physical resources and skills, producing thereby the ideal, complete athlete.”²

In case you don’t remember much about the pentathlon (I didn’t, either), the modern pentathlon combines five seemingly unrelated disciplines: show-jumping, pistol shooting, fencing, swimming, and cross-country running. What little connection these disciplines have to each other comes from de Coubertin’s romantic vision of the adventures of a military officer whose horse is shot out from under him in enemy territory. After defending himself with his pistol and his sword, the officer swims across a raging river and runs to deliver his message on foot.

In this week’s reading, Rick Warren compares the five purposes of our lives—Worship, Fellowship, Discipleship, Ministry, and Evangelism—to the five pentathlon events. Noting that the pentathlete’s goal is to achieve balanced success in each of the five events, Rick encourages us to give similar attention to balance among God’s five purposes in our lives.³

Our focus this morning is on the fifth purpose of our lives, evangelism. What’s the first image that comes to your mind when you hear the word “evangelism”? One of the things I remember is an evangelist who approached my table at the Southern Baptist Convention in Dallas over thirty years ago. He was wearing a bright blue sport coat, a white shirt, a red tie, and white trousers, and he sported white patent leather shoes on one end and a bodacious toupee on the other. He walked up to our breakfast table at the hotel and loudly asked, “Brother, do you know Jaeeezus?”

Happily, most vocational evangelists aren’t like that fellow, but you’ve seen plenty of guys like him on TV and in other places, have you not? Although such stereotypes tend to get in the way of our feelings about evangelism, “evangelism” is really nothing more than the Greek word for “good news”; and “evangelists” are persons who bring good news. The idea of evangelism is that once I’ve met Jesus and learned about the Good News—that God loves me, forgives me, and has a purpose and plan for my life—God wants me to tell other people about this discovery, so they can meet Jesus, too.

During our forty-day Journey, we’ve been reminded that God’s purpose in each of our lives is to so shape our character that we’re willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with God. And we’ve been reminded that God’s purpose on earth is to populate this planet with persons who of their own free will choose to join their lives together in a community of relationships that only God can build—the Church. This is not “Mission Impossible.” This is “Mission Inevitable.” This has been God’s plan even before Creation began, *and it’s going to happen*.⁴

The amazing thing, the wonderful thing, the truly *exciting* thing about this plan is that God has given us—to you and me!—the opportunity to be a part of its completion. The Bible tells us that God “*wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth*” (1 Timothy 2:4), and our

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 13, 2016.

² www.modern-pentathlon.com/history.html

³ Rick Warren, *What On Earth Am I Here For? The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), p. 303.

⁴ Rick Warren, sermon, “You Were Made for a Mission.”

mission is to “tell the truth” in all the ways and in all the places where God sends us or allows us to go. Telling the Good News—“evangelism”—is something every one of us is expected to do.

After all, Jesus gave us a “Great Commission,” not a “Great Suggestion” (Matthew 28:18-20), and we will be held accountable for how we carry it out (Ezekiel 33:8): *Jesus told his disciples, “I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:18-20).

That’s our commission, and our text in Acts 8 gives us some help in understanding how God intends for us to carry it out. Let’s look at it again: *Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and he met the treasurer of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under the Kandake, the queen of Ethiopia. The eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and he was now returning. Seated in his carriage, he was reading aloud from the book of the prophet Isaiah.*

The Holy Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and walk along beside the carriage.”

Philip ran over and heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

The man replied, “How can I, unless someone instructs me?” And he urged Philip to come up into the carriage and sit with him (Acts 8:26-30).

We don’t know how the angel and the Spirit spoke to Philip. Philip may have seen and heard the angel as we normally see and hear things, and as happened many times in the biblical record. But it may also be that what Philip experienced was what I call a “spiritual prompting.”

A “spiritual prompting” is a sense that we’re supposed to say or do something that we hadn’t been intending to say or do. Such a prompting comes to us through the “still, small voice” or the “gentle whisper” of God’s Spirit (1 Kings 19:12), alerting us to the arrival of a “divine appointment.” With experience, we learn to recognize the Spirit’s whisper through the practice of prayer and through diligent study of Scripture. There are many spirits in the world; but the Spirit of God will never direct us to do or say anything that is inconsistent with God’s written Word. When the prompting matches the Word, I pay attention.

As I was making my way back to church from the hospital one afternoon several years ago, I had the sense that I should stop at a particular store. I did in fact have business in that store, but the significance of the prompting was that I needed to conduct that business now—so I did. And when I entered the store, I “just happened” to meet someone with whom I discovered that I had a divine appointment. Both of us recognized it as such, though neither of us had intended or expected it.

It’s really quite exciting to live in such a way, and however it came to him, Philip received a spiritual prompting to head to the Gaza Highway, heading south. One important thing to notice about Philip, as well as about Paul, and about Jesus Himself, is that they didn’t set up shop in church somewhere and expect people to come to them. The New Testament model is that we take the Good News to people where they already are.

So it was that Philip came upon a diplomat who was reading the Bible while being driven along in his government limo. Philip boldly came alongside—as in the *Grey Poupon* commercials, perhaps—and asked the official whether he understood what he was reading. If you come upon someone reading something with religious significance, you can generally count on the fact that you’ve begun a divine appointment. And it’s always fascinating to watch what happens after we make the first move

“How can I” he said, ‘unless someone explains it to me?’ So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: ‘He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.’

“The eunuch asked Philip, ‘Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?’

Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus (Acts 8:31-35).

The official was reading one of Isaiah’s prophecies about the Messiah, though he didn’t know that’s what it was. The eunuch’s question, “*Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?*” is a poignant one, because he was thinking—indeed, he was hoping—that these verses might possibly have been written about him. Here’s why he thought these words might have been written about him

The text tells us that this official was a eunuch, or a man who had been castrated. This was frequently the case in those days for men who were assigned to care for the women in the royal harem. When the text talked about “being led as a sheep to the slaughter,” about humiliation, about having no descendants, the words struck a painful nerve and reawakened a deep longing.

Philip listened carefully to the question—which is a crucial way to begin such a conversation—and then he began with that very passage to tell the official the Good News about Jesus. Someone once criticized Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher, saying “All of your sermons sound alike.” Spurgeon replied, “That’s because I take a text anywhere in the Bible and make a bee-line to the Cross.” That’s what Philip did, too.

When God takes you to your next divine appointment, will you be able to “make a bee-line to the Cross”—to tell that person how to become a Christian? If you’re prepared, God can use you, too, as a “midwife of eternity,” the greatest privilege that you can ever experience. But if you’re not prepared to tell someone how to become a Christian, then you’re consciously or unconsciously steering every conversation away from Jesus rather than toward him, because you really *don’t* want anybody to ask you that question.

And if that’s your situation, is that really how you want to live your life? If you don’t know how to tell someone how to become a Christian, you may even find yourself hiding or compromising your faith so that no one will ask you about it. That’s no fun. That’s not abundant life. That’s a drag.

My friend, if you want your spiritual life to take on new luster, new adventure, new power, take the time to learn how to “answer the Question.” There’s no one right way to explain the Good News. Several kinds of “Good News brochures” are always available in the church office. Put some in your purse or briefcase, become familiar with them, and you’re on your way.

You also have the *40 Days* version of a “Good News Brochure” inserted in your worship order. This BASE brochure uses an acronym to explain the process of being “born again” (John 3:3). All you have to do is have this with you, read it to the person with whom you have a divine appointment, and then leave it with him or her. If you want to go to the next level after that, put a small New Testament in your purse or briefcase, and learn a brief method of sharing the Good News—which I’ll be very glad to show you!

As Philip and the Ethiopian rode along, *they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look! There's some water! Why can't I be baptized?" He ordered the carriage to stop, and they went down into the water, and Philip baptized him* (Acts 8:36-38).

After Philip had baptized the Ethiopian official, he found himself suddenly transported twenty miles away to another appointment: *"When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea"* (Acts 8:39-40). And you thought "Beam me up, Scotty" began with *Star Trek*!

Some years ago, one of our members in another congregation was at the edge of death, but then returned. During that unusual experience, she learned that fifty-seven people were already in heaven because of the influence of her life. Fifty-seven! Is anybody going to be in heaven because of you?

Jesus told us to carry the Good News to Columbia, to Howard County, to Maryland, to the farthest reaches of these United States, and to the very ends of the Earth (Acts 1:8). Let me quickly suggest a few more ways to do this.

If our idea of evangelism is the fellow I met in Dallas in the white shoes and the Trump toupee, most of us want to get as far away from evangelism as we can. But evangelist Jose Zayas makes this enterprise much more attractive when he asks, "What do you already love to do? What are you already involved in? What excites you? What are you passionate about? Do those things for the glory of God by finding people who like to do those things and loving them."

"Pray something like, 'God, give me the time and the resources to get engaged in this activity, and I will find people who don't know you and establish **common ground**.' Pray bold prayers.

"**Common ground** leads to conversation, and conversation leads to connection. If people don't know I care about them, they're not going to talk with me, and they're not going to connect with the [Good News] so that ultimately they might [become born again]. Faith often comes in stages; it doesn't always happen overnight. Stick with your friends through those stages."⁵

Did you get that? **Your fifth purpose, evangelism, doesn't involve any more meetings at church.** Evangelism has to do with Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, quilting clubs, bridge clubs, shooting clubs, bowling leagues, soccer teams, bicycles and kayaks—all kinds of fun stuff. The important thing is to spend time doing things with people who aren't already followers of Jesus . . . on purpose.

The other main thing to do in carrying out your part of the Great Commission is to give generously to evangelistic ministries through our congregation or through the Baptist World Alliance. These gifts help to send others to tell the Good News in places you and I will never see.

Jesus told us that *"everyone who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or property, for my sake and for the Good News, will receive now in return, a hundred times over, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and property—with persecutions. And in the world to come they will have eternal life"* (Mark 10:29-30). Do you know how much "a hundred times over" is? That's very nearly 10,000 percent.⁶ **Ten thousand percent!!!** Where

⁵ Jose Zayas, "The Evangelism Habit," in *Decision*, November 2004, 30.

⁶ 100 is 9,900% more than 1.

else are you going to get such a return on your investment? I can tell you: nowhere. **This is the best deal in the universe!**

Jesus also told us that *“If you insist on saving your life, you will lose it. Only those who [give] their lives for my sake and for the sake of the Good News will ever know what it means to really live”* (Mark 8:35).

Don't trade your life for temporary things. Tell the Good News, my friend. Tell the Good News!