

Get Up and Go
May 2, 2021

Acts 8:26-40 (KJV)

²⁶ And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert. ²⁷ And he arose and went: and, behold, a man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem for to worship, ²⁸ Was returning, and sitting in his chariot read Esaias the prophet. ²⁹ Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot. ³⁰ And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? ³¹ And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him. ³² The place of the scripture which he read was this,

He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth: ³³ In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth.

³⁴ And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man? ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus. ³⁶ And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? ³⁷ And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. ³⁹ And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip was found at Azotus: and passing through he preached in all the cities, till he came to Caesarea.

Get up and go.

If you were to ask, “what are some of the most important words in the Bible,” these would probably make the list. Some version of arise and go, get up and go, or just go, is issued by God in just about every book of the Bible. They're not always easy words. Abraham is told to go from the land of Ur to a land that God will show him. Moses is told to return to Egypt to lead God's people out of slavery. The voice of God comes through Deborah the Prophet and tells Barak to go and defend God's people, even when they are outnumbered. It comes to Samuel and tells him to anoint David as king while the current king is still on the throne. It comes to Jonah and tells him to go to Nineveh and Jonah tries in vain to resist. It comes to Isaiah and Jeremiah and even Mary and Joseph - telling them to get up and go to Egypt.

If you are familiar with the Bible, by the time you get to the book of Acts you are not surprised by all this unexpected movement initiated by God. The “get up and go God” is always doling out new assignments. The “get up and go God” doesn't allow you to stay in one place for long. There's movement involved in this relationship, often more movement than we might choose on our own. Sometimes that movement is directed

toward individuals. Other times that movement is directed toward the community itself. The church in the book of Acts is constantly forced to renegotiate its boundaries - expanding from Galilean Jews only to Galilean Jews and proselytes; those who had converted to Judaism. And then to Hellenist Jews and then to Samaritans, and then to law-keeping-gentiles and then to anybody who is called by the spirit.

The spirit calls the church to move again and again and again, enlarging its welcome, enlarging its community. The “get up and go God” doesn't let the church or its members stand in one place for very long. The spirit tells Phillip to get up and go and Phillip is probably not surprised. By this time, he is used to all the movement involved in God's community and its people. “Get up and go,” the spirit tells him. “Receive further instructions when you get there” And all through the book of Acts, people don't question this “get up and go” approach, even though there are very good reasons not to live like this. Not if you want to accomplish anything, hold down a job or practice any kind of accountability to others. Not if you want to set appointments that you intend to keep, check off assignments that you decide to set on your own. Not if you plan out your days with lists that you intend to check off and calendars that you intend to follow. There are good reasons to cling more tightly to the control of your day and stay focused on goals instead of on what is put immediately in front of you. And yet that seems to be the practice of the church community in Acts and the individuals who are part of it, “get up and go.” It's almost as though we need a little jarring from time to time to keep us from getting too comfortable. A little jarring to wake us up to the power of the gospel, to knock off the cobwebs - to keep us attuned to the change that God is always bringing about in our lives and in the church. We need a regular shake up as individuals and we need it together as a church. The shakeup going on in today's story involves both an individual and a community.

Phillip is sent to what used to be a Philistine town, chatting with a member of the African Royal elite. Chances are, this Greek speaking Jew from the Holy Land has never before found himself chatting with a dark-skinned African eunuch. An ordinary Jew from Jerusalem chatting with an upper-crust member of the African wealthy elite. That's how Ethiopian reads in the culture of the New Testament times. Not a person from what we know today as the nation of Ethiopia, but a person of dark skin from the African continent, who according to most scholars would have captured the imagination of Greek readers. Not a person to be despised, but a leading member of a wealthy court. A person most Greeks would have rarely encountered.

The African official is reading Isaiah. Phillip shares the good news. “What prevents me from being baptized,” the Ethiopian eunuch asks Phillip? Phillip remains silent but there are any number of answers that would come to mind.

“What prevents you from being baptized?” Well, to start, the Bible. Right in Deuteronomy 23, Eunuch and foreigners are specifically excluded from the community of God. Isaiah 56 contradicts Deuteronomy 23 which only says to me that there is ongoing disagreement within the community of faith over who should be included and who should be kept out.

“What prevents you from being baptized?” Well, church order. As far as we can tell, Phillip doesn't know the status of this Ethiopian eunuch. Is he a Jew? Is he even a believer? Given his level of Biblical knowledge, probably not. All we know is that he's come to Jerusalem to worship. At this point in the story, the church in Jerusalem hasn't yet ruled on the status of eunuchs or Ethiopians or non-Jews.

“What prevents you from being baptized? Well, plenty. But Phillip doesn't think twice. As soon as the eunuch spots some water by the road, the one who wants to be included in the church is included. The foreigners are in. The eunuchs are in. Later the gentiles are in. The church's boundaries are muddied on the banks of some

unknown body of water by the “get up and go God,” who won't let the church or its individuals stay in one place for too long. The “get up and go God” who seems to enjoy jarring us from our tightly held schedules or our self-made stabilities, to shake us with this joyful frightening movement of the spirit that always seems to be a few steps ahead of us.

We forget that in the church. We forget that the spirit isn't as interested in church order when it impedes the power of the gospel that is intent on redeeming the entire world. The spirit will disrupt the boundaries set up by tradition. The line set down in church doctrine. Yes, even the lines that we believe are established by holy scripture itself, to push the church to receive the community of Jesus, that always seems to stretch the church beyond the boundaries that we construct.

Now I know that that's a dangerous thing to say in these times. It's dangerous to insinuate that the church's interpretation of scripture might change unexpectedly from previous ways of reading the same text. I know it's dangerous to insinuate that the church's view might be enlarged beyond where it's been in the past for no other reason, other than the unexpected movement of the spirit. I know it raises all sorts of questions about why we have church order, how scripture should operate in the life of the church, I know that it raises more questions than it brings answers. But you know that is where the spirit always pushes the church - beyond our comfort zones, beyond our regulations, beyond our understanding, beyond our control. The church that is faithful does its best to cultivate within its own life the ability to respond to the spirit's disruptive presence by going with it, by following where the spirit leads. That is what Phillip does. The spirit tells him to get up and go and that's what he does; he goes to a place he's likely never been before to meet with the kind of person he's likely never met with before; to change the community in a way it's never been changed before. He trusts the spirit and maybe, just maybe, if the church today trusted the spirit like that, we could face our current travails and challenges with less fear and more joy. Less fear about what we are losing and more joy about where the spirit is leading us next.

Phillip didn't have time to process his most recent experience with the eunuch. The spirit snatched him away to the next assignment. But I can imagine that Phillip must have found himself awed in awe, to become the latest participant in the church's unfolding story, delighted to be on the receiving end of some of God's most transforming words to us as individuals and as a community. Get up and go. Trust the spirit to tell you what you need to do or to know when you get there.

AMEN