

Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



Acts 8:26-39 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. ²⁷ And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." ³⁰ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." ³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" ³⁷ ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

Some events that take place in life are so astonishingly unlikely that they are nearly unbelievable, and yet they happen. When I was younger, we had a copy of the Guinness Book of World Records, 2004 Edition, which I liked to page through. And more fascinating to me than all of the feats of human strength or skill or anything like that, was the section on incredibly unlikely events. There was the National Park Ranger, Roy Sullivan, who was struck by lightning seven times over the span of 35 years. Supposedly, the odds of being struck by lightning even once is 10,000/1, which means that the odds of being struck by lightning seven times is 10-Octillion to one. Pretty unlikely, but it happened.

Or there was the 10-year-old girl in the United Kingdom, who in 2001 released a balloon into the air with a note tied to it in search of a pen pal. All the note said was, "Please write to Laura Buxton," which was the girl's name. And that balloon floated 140 miles across the country and landed in the yard of another 10-year-old girl, who was shocked to find *her* name written on the balloon note, for her name was also Laura Buxton. I would put the odds of that happening at impossible, and yet it happened.

Incredibly, unlikely things seem to happen with regularity in our world. Some of them are simply astonishing. But, as Christians, we don't expect our evangelism to be one of them—the way we reach out to others and share the our faith. We all know we're supposed to do it, and we all want to do it. But I think we sometimes get the wrong picture of evangelism in our head, as if my personal outreach is always going to follow some conventional, predictable pattern. Our text for today challenges that kind of thinking. It demonstrates to us that the only thing predictable about witnessing Christ is that there's nothing predictable about it! That's why the theme we'll be considering is:

A Most Unlikely Evangelism – The Holy Spirit sends you **I**. To the most unlikely places, **II**. And the most unlikely people, **III**. With a totally unlikely message, and **IV**. Produces astonishing results!

Today, we've been discussing the fruits which are borne out in our lives as a result of being connected to that branch called Christ. And one of those important fruits is personal evangelism—sharing your faith. Any of you that have attempted that before might have noticed that the Holy Spirit often sends you **to the most unlikely places**.

Philip was not one of the Twelve Apostles, but he was a disciple of Christ and one of the early evangelists who were scattered throughout the ancient Near East when the Christians were first persecuted in Jerusalem. He had been working and preaching in Samaria, the region north of Jerusalem. This was unlikely enough all by itself, for if you remember, Jews like Philip normally had nothing to do with Samaritans. But now the Holy Spirit gave him what must have seemed an even more unlikely assignment: ***“Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”*** And then the interesting comment, ***“This is a desert place.”***

We're simply told that Philip arose and went, and it may be that he got up without a question in his mind and proceeded where the Spirit led him. But I do wonder if Philip might not have said in his mind, “Now what?!” Samaria's already a somewhat unlikely spot for Him to practice evangelism, now you're taking me to the middle of the desert?

You may find yourself feeling the same thing, sometimes, about your personal outreach with the Gospel. “Lord, this is desert! How can I possibly share the Gospel here—where I work, where I go to school, where I relax? It's just really unlikely that I'm ever going to find an opportunity to witness about Jesus here.” That's part of that predictable pattern that we usually expect our personal evangelism to follow. We associate church with God's Word, and everything else in our life we often think as being a totally different world than our church life.

But ours is a most unlikely evangelism. No matter where you are, there's one thing of which you can be sure: You wouldn't be there unless the Lord had work for you to do. Like with Philip, Scripture says the Holy Spirit already has your work all lined up for you. The Apostle Paul writes, ***“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”*** (Ephesians 2:10)

The Holy Spirit not only sends us to the most unlikely places to evangelize, He often sends us to what may seem to be **the most unlikely people**. To whom did He send Philip? ***“An Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah.”***

This was a man of great authority, an official in the court of the Ethiopian queen. This was a VIP. He was also a man from the continent of Africa, and you have to imagine that this was an out-of-the-ordinary recipient of Phillip's personal evangelism! Philip had probably just gotten used to the idea of sharing the Gospel with people who weren't strictly Jewish, like the Samaritans who had some Hebrew blood and looked like him and talked like him, but now God wanted him to speak the Gospel to a foreigner from another continent! It must have seemed a most unlikely person to evangelize.

But he shouldn't have been surprised and neither should we, for ours is a most unlikely evangelism. The Holy Spirit often sends us to the most unlikely people—people we never would have guessed would be likely recipients of the Gospel. It could be the person sitting next to you on a plane, the person who bags your food at the grocery store, or the person who sits across the aisle from you at work. You just don't know and it really doesn't matter, does it? One Christian writer said, ***“Of those of whom we know nothing else, we do know this, that they have souls.”*** They have souls—all the people

you meet in the course of your day, unlikely as they may seem, are candidates to hear the good news about Jesus Christ because they all have souls. Christ died for them too.

So, Philip was sent by the Holy Spirit to an unlikely place and an unlikely person. But strangest of all was the content of the message he was sent to bring. Ours is a most unlikely evangelism, thirdly, because we are sent **with a totally unlikely message**. Picking up at verse 30. ***"So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."***

The Ethiopian had a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He had been to Jerusalem to worship, so he was probably what was known as a "proselyte of the gate," that is, a foreigner who had converted to Judaism. He had evidently purchased the scroll of Isaiah and was poring over it as he traveled, trying to figure out what it meant. The passage he was reading came from Isaiah 53—a very famous chapter—verses 7-8. How strange it must have seemed to him! How unlikely! The gods of the world's other religions were ruthless and proud, so what could the prophet be speaking about when he describes a sheep going meekly and silently to the slaughter? What sort of religion did he get himself into?

Have you ever seen a tv program or documentary on slaughterhouses before? I've seen a few, and even though they're necessary, there's something kind of bone chilling about the process of turning livestock into food. On one side of the slaughterhouse you have pens full of living, healthy cattle, and on the other side are trucks, hauling away the processed meat. The process is inevitable and relentless; it's efficient too. Once the animals start down that last chute, there's no going back, and there's no question about what's going to happen to them. And I would propose that this is the exact condition that we sinful human beings, are in, by nature. The Bible says that ***"all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God"*** (Romans 3:23), and ***"The wages of sin is death"*** (Romans 6:23). Left to ourselves, we and all other human-beings would be headed down that last chute to the dreadful and inevitable fires of Hell, the deserved punishment for those who sin against God.

And then something totally unlikely happened, and this was the message that Philip brought to the Ethiopian that day. Beginning with the very passage he was reading at that moment, Philip told him about the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He shared with him the incredibly good news, the totally unlikely Gospel of Jesus Christ. He shared with him the same message I'm sharing with you, namely, that ***"God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him"*** (2 Corinthians 5:21). Instead of sending us down the chute to the slaughter, God in His grace and mercy sent His Son, Jesus, instead! He was the Lamb sent to the slaughter in our place, who meekly bowed his head and walked on under the weight of His cross, all the way to Calvary. There He died to redeem us. What parent would sacrifice his own child to save someone else? Well, that's exactly what God did for you! Paul says ***"When we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*** (Romans 5:6-8)

It was, and remains a most unlikely evangelism. That same wonderful message with which the Holy Spirit sent Philip, He sends with you too. You are to proclaim to others the same blessed message that has saved you! The message that salvation is available through faith in Jesus Christ, that He is the substitute for sinners, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Was Philip's task hard? Well, when you think about it, it was the Holy Spirit who did all the work! He gave Philip the opportunity, He sent Philip out there, He gave him the message, and He worked faith in the heart of the Ethiopian. Like the text says, all Philip had to do was open his mouth and speak! And that's your job too. It's not complicated. It's as simple as Jesus' instructions: ***"Go and tell what great things God has done for you."*** (Luke 8:39) You may think, "What will that do?" By yourself, nothing. But with the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word, there's nothing that can't be accomplished! Unlikely as it may seem, you will very often find this message **producing astonishing results!**

And we find such results here in our text. When they came to some water, the Ethiopian said, ***"See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing."***

This was about the most unlikely convert to Christianity a person could ever imagine. Then again, ours is a most unlikely evangelism. So, we shouldn't be surprised when it brings such astonishing results. When you share God's Word with people, just watch, because miracles are likely to happen! To this day, I still find myself astonished at the unlikely people that the Holy Spirit brings to faith. You can probably think of some pretty surprising examples in your own experience; and by the way, we see once again that the Holy Spirit always works this astonishing miracle of faith through the Means of Grace—the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. He kindles faith in the Ethiopian's heart through the Word of God, and seals and confirms him as a member of the Kingdom of Christ by the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Unlikely message. Astonishing results!

And did you notice? When Philip left him, what's the last we hear about the Ethiopian? He went on his way rejoicing! We can understand that, can't we? When you leave the church parking lot today, I fully expect you to "go on your way rejoicing." If you're not, it means you weren't paying attention. For this Good News is for you, too! You, too, have been delivered from death and Hell, just like the Ethiopian. In another passage a little later in Isaiah, he describes our blessed condition, saying, ***"You shall go out with joy, and be led out with peace; The mountains and the hills Shall break forth into singing before you, And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."*** (Isaiah 55:12)

Speaking of things that are unlikely: yesterday was the Kentucky Derby, and it reminded me of the very unlikely winner of the 1913 Kentucky Derby, a horse named Donerail. Donerail was a bay colt who went to the starting gate at the ridiculously long odds of 91-to-1. Most racing insiders thought he shouldn't have been there in the first place. But unlikely as it was, Donerail won by half a length. If a person bet a thousand dollars on Donerail that day, they would have taken home the astonishing amount of nearly one-hundred thousand dollars.

Now, I submit to you that you're involved in a venture even less likely than that, but whose payoff is guaranteed. It's your personal Gospel outreach. It's a most unlikely evangelism for you'll find the Holy Spirit sending you to the most unlikely places and to the most unlikely people with a totally unlikely message—salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. But that is where the unlikelihood stops, for where that Gospel is preached—by pastors in the pulpit, by neighbors across the fence, or by employees sitting across the break table at work—there God will accomplish His results, and those results will often be absolutely astonishing! May God grant that it may be so in each of our lives. Amen.