

Right Place, Right Time

Have you ever had one of those instances where you were in the right place at the right time? Back in 2010, on Shrove Tuesday at our community pancake supper, a little girl about 7 came up to me as the night was winding down.

“Scuze me”, she said “do you do baptisms?”

I smiled and replied that I did.

She then said “Good, ‘cos I wanna be baptised!” “

Wonderful, when do you want to be baptised?, I asked.”

“Um, how ‘bout now?”

I looked over and saw one of my parishioners close by, who motioned me over. She introduced me to this little girl and told me she was her Aunt Emilie. They had been asking about how you “join the church” as she was at that age where she wanted to know more about God, and faith, and such. I invited her, her older sister, her dad and Aunt Em upstairs to see the Worship Space at the Church, show her the font, and explain what baptism is.

I told her we were entering Lent, a solemn season in the Church, and that would give us time to study together and prepare her to be baptised.

“Is that something you’d like to do? Be baptised at Easter?”

She nodded enthusiastically.

Her sister then said “I wanna be baptised too”.

And so we began to plan for their baptisms to happen on Easter Day. I began a wonderful relationship with two little girls who wanted to be baptised.

Today’s reading is from the Acts of the Apostles, written by the Lukan community. The story begins with an Ethiopian Eunuch, sitting in a chariot, reading from the Prophet Isaiah. The hero of our story, Philip the Evangelist, was given a message from God, likely an angel who told him to “Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went.” (Acts 8.26, NRSV)

Philip sees the Eunuch and the angel or spirit tells Philip “Go over to this chariot and join it.’ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah.” (Acts 8.29) We’ll return to the story in a moment.

The eunuch is described as “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.” (Acts 8.28/9, NRSV)

A eunuch, in case you’re wondering is a castrated male, either born that way or castrated before maturity. Boy sopranos used to be castrated as it was believed their voices would not change if they were castrated. A eunuch was treated with great respect and usually given great responsibility. It was believed that a eunuch was a man above reproach -- one who was ultimately trustworthy. This particular eunuch is from Ethiopia, unfortunately we do not learn his name. He was in charge of the entire treasury of The Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians.

“A “Candace, queen of the Ethiopians” is mentioned in the Bible when the apostle Philip meets “a eunuch of great authority” under her reign and converts him to Christianity (Acts 8:27-39). In this passage, as in other ancient works mentioning the Candace, the royal title has often been confused with a personal name.” (from World History.com The Candaces of Meroe) This particular Candace, Queen of the Ethopians would have been Amantitere who ruled from 25-41 BCE.

“The title Candace is the Latinized version of the term Kentake or Kandake in Meroitic and may mean “Queen Regent” or “Queen Mother” but could also mean “Royal Woman”. Although the term seems to have originally referred to the mother of the king, from around c. 170 BCE it was also used to designate a female monarch who reigned independently.” (from World History.com The Candaces of Meroe)

Now, back to the story. This Ethiopian Eunuch has been to Jerusalem to Worship and is on his way home...we are not told exactly where is home. He’s reading the Book of Isaiah and suddenly this man approaches him and asks if he knows what he’s reading.

Being a student, the Ethiopian man replies “How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.” (Acts 8.32, NRSV). He is a willing student and recognizes Philip as a teacher. The passage the Ethiopian is reading is Isaiah 53.7-8, which reads:

‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open 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 asks Philip if the Prophet Isaiah had written this passage about himself or someone else. Then Philip proceeds to talk to the Ethiopian all about Jesus, which we, as twenty-first Christians trace back to first being mentioned in Isaiah. Remember back to many of our Advent readings? A shoot from Jesse’s stump? The key of David?

And so Philip tells the Ethiopian all about the lineage and Good News of Jesus who has recently been crucified and resurrected. The Ethiopian gets very excited at the prospect of baptism. “As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’” (Acts 8.37, NRSV) And so, once Philip agreed, the Ethiopian ordered the chariot driver to stop and he and Philip went to the water source, a natural spring fountain, possibly believed to be the Dhirweh fountain.

The Ethiopian was baptized and as he came up from the water Philip is described as being “snatched away”. This left the Ethiopian unperturbed as he went on his way back to the Chariot and on his way home rejoicing.

What if the angel or spirit had not told Philip to go to that road?
What if the Ethiopian had not invited Philip into the Chariot?
What if they had not found the water source?
What if those two little girls had not come to St. Peter’s for pancakes on Shrove Tuesday, 2010?

I just happened to be in the right place, at the right time, as Philip had been for that Ethiopian Eunuch.

Now, those two little girls, Grace and Emma Sowa were baptised on Easter Sunday 2010, and their Dad, Richard Sowa, renewed his baptismal vows. They received their first communion on that day.

As I was working with the girls in preparing them for Baptism I learned that their mother, Loretta, was very ill, and her grandmother Nev, with whom they lived, was housebound. Neither of whom had been baptised. At Grace and Emma's suggestion, as I was preparing them for baptism, I also began working with their grandparents Nev and Bill, and their Mother Loretta in preparing for baptism. Because Mom was so ill and Grandma was housebound, they were unable to attend Emma and Grace's baptisms at the Church.

And so, two days after I baptised them, I returned to their home and baptised Bill and Nev. We then went up to Loretta's room and baptised her from her bed, with Grace and Emma standing as her sponsors, and together we shared in their mother's and grandparents' first communion.

Loretta died in July 2014, and as we were walking from the funeral chapel to the funeral cortege I sang Amazing Grace a capella, as per their dad Richard's request. These two young women, then almost in their teens, both spoke at their mother's funeral. They spoke of their faith in God, and the assurance they had that their Mother was now in heaven with Jesus. They spoke of how much they would miss their Mom and one day they would see her again.

As it was with Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, so it was for those two little girls and me. There is no such thing as coincidence, in everything, there is a spark of the Divine; there is a moment of grace; there is the appearance of God.

And so, for your homework this week, please ask yourself,
When was your last encounter with the Divine?
When was the last time you found yourself in the right place at the right time?

I suspect it happens far more often than we realise. Amen

The Reverend Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent
Knox United Church & Christ Church Anglican
Fernie, British Columbia

Acts 8.26-40
Easter 5 - 2 May 2021