**A Divine Encounter**

**First Baptist Church, Albemarle**

**April 29, 2018**

She had struggled with depression, anxiety and panic attacks most of her life even as an adolescent. Life was hard and filled with angst. It was a constant struggle and she couldn’t figure out why her life was out of kilter.

Having somewhat survived adolescence, she met the man of her dreams. They got married and had two children early on. Yet, the stress of having two small children in addition to crippling depression and anxiety put her in a dark place in life. Looking back, the doctors had misdiagnosed her condition as clinical depression. Later, she was diagnosed as bipolar.

In the darkest of times, she contemplated with suicide when the emotional pain was too much to handle. She researched ways to end her life and secretly made plans. Though she loved Jesus and her family, life was too difficult to handle.

One day, she mentioned to her husband that if something would ever happen to her, she wished for him to remarry and rebuild a thriving family. He knew she was in a dark place emotionally and feared the worst. The look on his face would haunt her for the rest of her life.

Mustering up her faith and strength, she reached out to her pastor who encouraged her to check herself in to the emergency room. She followed the pastor’s plea and soon realized how divine an encounter it would be.

At the ER, the doctor discovered that she was pregnant. Her body defied the .01% chance to become pregnant while having an IUD in place. The news of a possible 3rd child flipped her world upside down and gave her yet another purpose to get healthy. It was a series of divine encounters that saved her life and the life of the 3rd child. In her mind, there is no doubt that these were just chance encounters. It was the hand of God at work to bring life that is abundant.

In today’s text, we meet Philip or sometimes known as the Evangelist who also experienced a divine encounter. Philip was one of the seven deacons chosen to care for the poor of the community in Jerusalem. After Stephen, a fellow deacon, was stoned to death, Philip went to Samaria to preach the gospel. There, he was used by God to perform miracles in order for many to call on the name of the Lord.

One day, Philip heard the angel of the Lord direct him to an off-the-beaten-path that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. There he met an Ethiopian eunuch who was the chief finance officer (CFO) under the queen, Candace. It is very unlikely, virtually impossible, that he would himself have been Jewish. On top of that, he was a eunuch. (see Deuteronomy 23:1) These two things combined would have made him an outsider of all outsiders.

Somehow, something about the Jewish God and the Jewish way attracted him, as it did with many in the ancient world. The Bible says that Philip encountered the eunuch as he was returning from worshipping in Jerusalem, reading the book of Isaiah. He was reading aloud from Isaiah 53 but did not understand who the prophet was writing about.

Isaiah 53 (NIV)

Who has believed our message

and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot,

and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,

nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

3 He was despised and rejected by mankind,

a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.

Like one from whom people hide their faces

he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

4 Surely he took up our pain

and bore our suffering,

yet we considered him punished by God,

stricken by him, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,

he was crushed for our iniquities;

the punishment that brought us peace was on him,

and by his wounds we are healed.

6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,

each of us has turned to our own way;

and the Lord has laid on him

the iniquity of us all.

7 He was oppressed and afflicted,

yet he did not open his mouth;

he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,

and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,

so he did not open his mouth.

8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away.

Yet who of his generation protested?

For he was cut off from the land of the living;

for the transgression of my people he was punished.

9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked,

and with the rich in his death,

though he had done no violence,

nor was any deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer,

and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin,

he will see his offspring and prolong his days,

and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

11 After he has suffered,

he will see the light of life and be satisfied;

by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,

and he will bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,

and he will divide the spoils with the strong,

because he poured out his life unto death,

and was numbered with the transgressors.

For he bore the sin of many,

and made intercession for the transgressors.

N.T. Wright, a scholar and theologian, says that it is important to understand how the early church read the prophets. The early Christians were aware of the Hebrew scriptures primarily as a great narrative. This story stretched from God’s creation of the world, the disaster of human rebellion, the promise to Abraham, through Moses, David and the prophets. The question at hand was how does this story reach its climax?

Isaiah wasn’t being cryptic about Jesus who was still a few hundred years away. Rather, he was meditating deeply on the fate of Israel in exile and the promises of God that remained constant despite the failures of his people. Gradually, Isaiah saw the figure of a Suffering Servant who would do for Israel what Israel could not do for itself. Isaiah saw a Servant who would bear his own body the shame and agony of the world’s wickedness and suffer a horrible death for the sake of his people. What Isaiah saw was the one who would bring Israel out of exile with a blessing of a new covenant and a new nation where even the outsiders like the eunuch would be welcomed.

It wasn’t until the followers of Jesus recognized that Jesus was the Suffering Servant that God had promised that it all made sense. Looking through the lens of the cross of Jesus, Isaiah 53 now made sense to Philip and many others. And on that faithful day, the eunuch also understood that Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise of a Messiah. God’s story reached the climax in Jesus! It is no wonder that the eunuch was so excited to learn of Jesus from Philip that he wanted to be baptized on the spot! The death and resurrection of Jesus is not only God’s story but now, it was his own personal story!

We can’t miss the underlying message of this story either. We find this miraculous story at a time when the early church was building some momentum and the gospel was beginning to spread to the “ends of the earth.” The story of the eunuch becoming a follower of Jesus is a reminder to us that wherever we go, whatever culture we encounter, whatever situation of human need, sin, exclusion or oppression we may find, the message of Jesus is compelling. It is up to us to faithfully respond to the nudging of the Holy Spirit that we might experience a divine encounter.

We must follow the example of Philip and get up and go! Luke tells us that an angel of the Lord told Philip to get up and go south toward Gaza. Philip didn’t ask any questions. He didn’t overthink about all of the “what ifs.” He didn’t wait to make sure that he heard the same message a second time. He simply got up and went. By being obedient, he had a divine encounter.

When is the last time you heard God tell you to “get up and go?” It happens more often than we think. You are sitting in a restaurant and you see someone you know, and you have this feeling you should go and speak with them. You see a student sitting in the cafeteria by herself and get this urge to go sit with them but you’re afraid of what your friends might think. You get this sense you should call someone you haven’t spoken with in a while. We should simply “get up and go” and be obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes, our obedience lead to deeper relationships. Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the eunuch reading from Isaiah. When Philip asked if he understood what he was reading, the eunuch invited him to sit in the chariot and explain what he was reading.

At times, when we get up and go, we are invited to sit beside people and guide them through whatever they are facing. This is what we do for one another each and every day as a family of families. We invite one another into our struggles so that we don’t have to carry the burden alone. We rely on each other and graciously receive the help of others because we know there are moments in life where we cannot do it on our own.

During our work in Puerto Rico, we met Juan and Vivian. Juan, who built the house himself at a younger age, was physically unable to do any of the repairs because of back surgery. It was difficult for he and Vivian to rely on others to rebuild their home. They had to swallow their pride and allow others to help. How many times have we found ourselves in similar situations? It is much easier to give than to receive. Being on the receiving end is humbling yet, this is what being in community is all about. There are times to give and there are times to receive. So, we live together in the family of faith willing to walk alongside one another in the good times and bad.

Today’s story has a strange ending. Scripture says that when they came out of the water after having baptized the eunuch, the Spirit of the Lord took Philip away and he reappeared in Azotus where he traveled about, preaching the gospel on the way to Caesarea. This is a reminder that our work is not complete after a particular encounter. No, God has more in store for us. I believe the next encounter is just around the corner. Therefore, we remain ready and alert. We remain steadfast in the Lord. We listen for the Spirit of God to speak and when we hear the still, small voice, we get up and go! We never know what divine encounter we might experience!