

5.2.21 Er5 Equipped for God's Agenda

- Both this Sunday and next Sunday, we hear in the book of Acts that God has an agenda FOR the world... and that God equips the church to carry out that agenda IN the world
- The Acts of the Apostles, which is really a continuation, or a second volume of the Gospel of Luke – the Acts of the Apostles declares God's agenda just a few verses after the book of Acts begins with the risen Christ telling his disciples: *"...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. [1:8b]"*
 - So what does God's agenda to equip and send witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth look like?
 - In today's story, an angel told Philip, one of the twelve, to go to a road that was headed south out of Jerusalem, and when Philip got there, the Holy Spirit pointed Philip to toward a large chariot
 - Sitting in this chariot was an Ethiopian official from the queen's court, who had just left Jerusalem after worshipping there
 - He was wealthy enough to have at least a chariot driver
 - He had a position of high authority
 - He had been rendered unable to have children
 - And he was also an Ethiopian – that is, he was black
 - In other words, this Ethiopian fellow and Philip didn't look at all like each other, and their lives had very little in common
 - But the Ethiopian was reading the prophetic book of Isaiah, and so Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading
 - But now listen... listen to what the Ethiopian said, *"How can I, unless someone guides me? [8:31]"* So this man invited Philip to get into the chariot with him, and this is what the Ethiopian was reading:
 - "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.”

- Then the Ethiopian asked Philip, “Is Isaiah talking about himself, or someone else?”
- And with that, Philip told the Ethiopian everything he knew about the prophet Isaiah, and that Isaiah was looking ahead to Jesus Christ
- Then seeing some water along the road, the Ethiopian immediately asked to be baptized... and Philip baptized him
- Finally, the Spirit of God snatched Philip away, and the Ethiopian went back to his country rejoicing!
- It’s a great story, and one I hope that you either know, or now will remember, but neither the Ethiopian nor Philip is the main character in the story – God is
- God’s agenda to send witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, God’s angel telling Philip to go to the road outside Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit of God prompting Philip to approach the stranger, God’s scriptures which were a riddle to the Ethiopian being opened and taught by Philip to point to the death and resurrection of Jesus, and finally God’s Holy Spirit being poured out in Holy Baptism... ALL THIS WAS God at work
 - God had equipped Philip with the Spirit and the scripture, the words and the water
 - Within a short time after Christ’s death and resurrection, after the Ethiopian returned home, he no doubt was telling everyone in the queen’s court who would listen about the wonderful love that had been revealed to him in Jesus Christ
 - AND THAT’S how God’s began to send and equip witnesses to go from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth
- Now here WE are, twenty centuries later, and half a world away from Philip and the Ethiopian
- But despite the time and distance that has passed, God’s agenda is still the same...
 - ...to send and equip disciples to be witnesses in every corner of the world, so that the scriptures which are NOT easy to understand can be opened and taught, and so that Christ’s saving death and resurrection might be made known

- And still, years later, with the water and word of promise, God continues to bring all kinds of people into the church of Jesus Christ
- By the way, what does the church in Ethiopia look like these days? You may be surprised to know that there are more Lutherans in Ethiopia than there are Lutherans in the ELCA, and when we go beyond the Lutheran community *to the whole church*, there are over twice as many Christians in Africa as there are in North America
- Because God has spread the Good News of Jesus Christ throughout the world, today we send missionaries overseas to work with the church that is already there, and sometimes they send missionaries here to us – and meanwhile, the rest of us only need to look around us to see our mission field
- You see, so often, we think that the mission field is ONLY some place far away, but the mission field ALSO begins just beyond the doors of our church building
- Compared to Christ's cross and empty tomb long ago and far away, Schuylkill County, and millions of places like it throughout the world, are the ends of the earth
- But thanks be to God – God has brought the Good News of Jesus Christ even here, and even to us
- And in fact, Jesus has now called us to be Christ's witnesses in this neighborhood
- But we are not the primary character – God is STILL the primary character in the story of God's unfolding agenda to the ends of the earth
- God continues to equip us with the Holy Spirit, and the scriptures, and the sin-forgiving and life-giving story of Jesus Christ, and the gift of Holy Baptism, so that all kinds of people in our neighborhoods – people with whom we may not have much in common, people who may not look like we, or people who may not even speak the same language that we do, may come to know and love the God who in Jesus Christ, poured out the gift of forgiveness and life from Jerusalem long ago, to now and all the ends of the earth