

"Be a Friend in the Faith"

Have you ever asked God for a sign? Have you ever prayed God would show the way or that God would give you an answer. There are times when we need God to be clear about what we're supposed to do or where we're supposed to go? One of the foundation stones of faith is our belief that God is involved in life. More than just positive thoughts about God's activity there are times when we want proof that God is directly involved in what's going on. Sometimes our need for this assurance feels like we're making a deal with God. Those of my generation will remember Monty Hall. Monty was the host of a popular game show called "Let's Make a Deal." The show was revived a number of years ago with the same premise as the original. Contestants are given the choice of what's behind a door or curtain. It's not as easy as it sounds. The stakes get higher when the player is presented with more options. Do you want what's behind door number one or door number two, or would you rather take the cash or do you want to say "No" to all of that and go with what's behind the curtain? The hope is to win the prize while avoiding what can be a real zinger or gag gift. In life, we want to minimize the zingers so our deals with God are more straightforward. "God," we'll say, "if you will do this I promise to do that." We start bargaining so we can be sure God has our best interests in mind. "God, what do I need to do to be sure of what you are going to do?"

The problem in trying to make a deal with God is that this is not how God works. The bible is clear about it. God is not interested in deal making. Instead, the bible teaches, God is in the covenant making business. A covenant is very different from the "you do this and I'll do that" way of faith. God's covenant is based on relationship. The earthly mission of Jesus revealed that the covenant God establishes with us is based on love. God is involved in our lives, not because of what we do or don't do, but because God loves us and will always be with us. Our faith describes this as a blessed assurance. In other words, we can build our lives upon this truth. God's love is like an everflowing stream and it flows for us in the midst of everything we do and wherever we are. Instead of making a deal with God, Jesus invites us to be in relationship with God, where we can be confident that God is involved in every aspect of life. We say we want a sign that God is active in our lives. Jesus is that sign. When we say "Yes" to him we become open to experiencing the guiding hand of God in all of life.

With this before us, think with me back to the event of Jesus' death on a cross. The disciples and the other followers of Jesus felt God's presence in powerful ways all the while he walked and talked with them. When he was crucified, when he died on the cross, their loss was especially deep because it felt as if their access to God through him had come to an end. The great joy of Jesus' resurrection was how his followers experienced not only that he was still with them but how their connection to God through him was just as real as it had ever been. This joy comes through in our reading this morning from the Book of Acts. Let us be reminded that the writer of this book is the same writer who gives us the Gospel of Luke. In the gospel, a risen Jesus appears to the disciples and assures them that the Holy Spirit will fill them with power and connect them to what God is doing in the world. All through the Book of Acts the Holy Spirit shapes the life of the Christian community. This is the promise Jesus gave and in today's story the Spirit guides and directs the life of Philip, positioning him to carry the message of Jesus into the world. Just to be clear, the Philip of our story isn't the Philip who was one of the original Twelve. This Philip was chosen by the Apostles to be a leader among the early Christians. We don't know a great deal about him except that he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Let's take note. We don't find Philip asking God to show him a sign. He wasn't looking for an answer. For Philip, every aspect of life was an opportunity to serve. He was open to whatever way God would use his life and, in the story, God works through Philip to bring the hope of faith into another's life.

What was it that enabled Philip to respond to the way God was working through him? First of all, Philip was spiritually "tuned in" to how God. Again, this is different than asking God for a sign in a specific situation. Philip constantly looked and listened for what God was doing. As a result, Philip perceived a messenger from God telling him to head south, far beyond the familiar territory of the city of Jerusalem. The bible says it was a wilderness road. Church, this is a great jumping off point for a parallel sermon, in the sense that there is always some risk involved when we respond to God. There's always some aspect of a "wilderness road" waiting for us when we willingly open ourselves to move beyond our comfort zones. Well, we'll leave that sermon for another day. The focus for today is knowing Philip was told to go and, with the intentionality of one who is looking and listening for God, Philip goes. It is on that distant road that he meets up with a man from Ethiopia. The man is an official of the queen's court and he's heading home after visiting Jerusalem, having made the long pilgrimage from northern Africa to the holy city. Again, this would be a great jumping off point for yet another sermon. The Ethiopian was not your run-of-the-mill Hebrew sympathizer. His skin was dark. His culture and language was foreign. The scripture tells us he is a eunuch, which means his sexual identity would have excluded him from participating in the life of the

temple. Despite his pilgrimage to Jerusalem this Ethiopian would have been excluded from the faith community. We can easily understand the sermon that could spin off from here. Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian makes a clear connection to our life and times. Here is a powerful message of how God works through Philip to bring an outsider into the community of Christ's love and grace. That's a message worthy of our reflection. But for today we'll stay focused on how God, who is a God of relationship, works through the relationship established between Philip and the Ethiopian. The fact is, Philip probably wasn't thinking about social issues or about what was right or wrong regarding religious law. Philip was simply open to God. His openness created the opportunity for him to be a friend in the faith. Philip's readiness to walk alongside the Ethiopian culminated in his baptism and his assurance that he had a place within the fellowship of Christ.

We want God to show us a sign that God is involved in life when the truth of the matter is God continually positions our lives to be a friend in the faith to others. What we're saying is we can be a sign for someone else. I'm wondering if we've missed the point along the way by talking so much about the importance of **having** faith. The true work of the Holy Spirit in us isn't just that we'll have faith but that we will **share** the faith. Sharing faith doesn't mean we have to preach. Philip is our model. Sharing faith is looking and listening for the ways God positions us to walk alongside another who is ready to experience God in a deeper way. The idea isn't to knock people over the head with the bible. The idea is to notice when the door opens to share our faith and to gently step through that door. This may happen when a friend or family member is facing a difficult time. We're there for them, just like we always, and our support can lead to sharing the assurance of faith with them. "I want you to know," we can say, "I'll hold this situation in my prayers." Faith shared is an open door. Or maybe it would go like this. "I know it's hard," we might say. "You know," we could go on, "I've experienced the difference it makes in trusting that God is with me. God's with you, too." Our words don't have to be complicated. Sharing faith opens the door. Coming alongside a friend or family member is ready for God offers a context for us to affirm what's important. "Don't forget," we can say, "God loves you" or, "God is with you. Let's remember that together."

Whatever words you share they will be yours. The important thing is to recognize the opportunities that make faith sharing possible. This is our takeaway this morning. God doesn't just make it possible for us to have faith. God makes it possible for us to share faith. May we look and listen for the ways this will happen in as we move through the days of this week. There just may be a friend who is waiting for our openness to be a part of their journey.

In Christ's name. Amen.