



***Multiply!***  
**“HOW WILL THEY KNOW?”**

Rev. Laurie Haller  
First United Methodist Church  
Birmingham, Michigan  
Scripture: Acts 8:26-40

*Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was 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; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside 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 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 eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 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?” He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.*

As part of the sermon this morning I asked if two confirmation students would be willing to speak about how God has touched them by angels at First Church and encouraged them to deepen and also multiply their faith. You’ll hear the words of Chris Acciaioli now and Jacob Packard later.

My name is Chris Acciaioli and I am in 7th Grade. I have been involved in this church’s music ministry since I was five and have always loved to sing. One thing that I have been able to be a part of is Choir Camp. One week every summer I get to grow in God’s faith with my friends while having a blast singing and doing fun activities. God impacted me through Choir Camp because of the fact that, at Choir

Camp, all ages interact. Very rarely can a college student be friends with a fourth grader, but at camp this is not uncommon.

God has influenced me through Choir Camp because I never would have thought that I could grow to be such good friends with people who are so much older than me. One of my favorite parts of Choir Camp is the campfire we have every night. It is while I am surrounded by my camp family, a fourth grader on my right and a college student on my left, that I feel closest to God.

What Chris has shared is that his faith has been multiplied many times over because of choir, and especially because of the many angels around this church who have encouraged his faith through singing.

I don't need to remind you that the Scriptures speak much about angels. The Bible doesn't try to prove the existence of angels. The Bible assumes they exist and that the reader couldn't possibly think otherwise. Angels played a strategic part in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament, an angel appeared to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Angels sang "Glory to God in the highest" to the shepherds out in the fields. They ministered to Jesus after his temptation, and they were standing outside the tomb after the resurrection.

Human beings need angels. We always have. Now I don't know whether angels are physical creatures, spiritual beings, ghost-like things, theophanies or figures of speech. But I do know this: angels represent God breaking into our lives.<sup>1</sup> And when God breaks into our lives through people or circumstances, we can't help but multiply our faith in the lives of others.

An angel of the Lord appears one day to Philip. Philip is one of seven men in the early Christian church who were given responsibility by the apostles to see that the poor and the widows in Jerusalem were taken care of. You see, the church was multiplying so rapidly that the apostles could no longer do everything themselves.

When Philip began his ministry, the early Christians in Jerusalem were left alone, and their ministry flourished. Thousands of people were converted, and the Christian community multiplied. All of that changed, however, when Philip's colleague, Stephen, was stoned to death. This began a period of persecution for the Christians.

The result was that many Christians left Jerusalem and fled to the country and to Samaria, which was off-limits to Jews because the Samaritans were considered unclean, having intermarried with non-Jews. Mind you, the Christians did not deliberately go to Samaria to convert the heathen. They were fleeing persecution. However, the Holy Spirit went with them, and they began to preach.

The book of Acts says that Philip was the first Christian to go beyond the bounds of Palestine or Israel and minister to non-Jews. And guess what? Amazing things happened! Unclean spirits came out of those who were possessed, people were healed, and there was great joy. Instead of asking, "What am I doing here among these Samaritans?" Philip said, "The fields are ripe for the harvest."

Then, after all this success, an angel tells Philip to get up and go toward the south, to the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. In other words, the angel asks Philip to travel into the desert, to leave civilization, the known world. It would be like an angel telling you to move to the Upper Peninsula, or go to South America, or India or even Kansas, maybe.

Mind you, this isn't an upward move. This isn't a promotion. There is no jump in salary. Philip is sent by an angel into the desert, but he is a man of faith. He knows it is God breaking into his life, so Philip is obedient. He goes. And what happens? Someone multiplies faith, and another is converted. Someone is an angel, and another's life is changed because of his witness. But which is which? Who is the angel here and who is converted? I wonder.

Luke tells us that along the way in the desert Philip comes upon a man, an Ethiopian. We're told that he is secretary to the treasury of the Candace dynasty of Ethiopia. In other words, this fellow is very important and influential. He's also a eunuch. Eunuchs in the Bible were usually castrated males or those incapable of reproduction due to a birth defect. It was also a common practice in ancient times to castrate men who tended the royal harem.

It's apparent that this man has somehow come under the influence of Judaism. The Ethiopian eunuch is either a God-fearer—that is, a prospective Jew, someone who attends the synagogue and reads the Hebrew scriptures. Or he is a proselyte—that is, someone who actually accepts Judaism and has already been circumcised.

In any case, the eunuch has come a very long way from Ethiopia in Africa to Palestine to attend worship in the temple in Jerusalem and receive further instruction in the law. He's making a pilgrimage, traveling some two thousand miles to Jerusalem. If he travels thirty miles a day, it's more than a two-month undertaking, one way. The eunuch and his entourage negotiate the great wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula before finally arriving, sun-burnt, dusty and weary, at their destination: Jerusalem.

And here is the terrible, painful and shameful truth at the end of this arduous journey. When they arrive in Jerusalem, the Ethiopian eunuch, who has undertaken this great pilgrimage for the express purpose of worshipping at the Temple, will be barred from entrance. They won't let him in.

Did this eunuch know that the Jewish law strictly forbade eunuchs from entering the assembly of the Lord, according to Deuteronomy 23:1? Did he realize that his sexual abnormality would likely cause him to be turned away from the temple after traveling all those miles from Africa? We don't know exactly what happened in Jerusalem. What we do know is that the eunuch takes it all in and seeks God anyway. Then he starts back home but keeps reading the prophet Isaiah on the way.

At this point the Holy Spirit tells Philip to go over to this man's chariot. Now we need to realize that Philip may never have encountered anyone quite like the eunuch. In the Greco-Roman world, the word "Ethiopian" was a generic term often applied to Africans, people with black skin. Here was someone from the edge of the known world, exotic, dark-skinned.

But Philip doesn't see a man whose skin is darker than his. He doesn't see a foreigner. He doesn't even see a eunuch, someone who is different. In being obedient to the Spirit, I suspect Philip often found himself in the oddest of situations with the most surprising sorts of people. As always, Philip sees here a child of God. He sees an opportunity to witness and is open to however the Spirit moves.

Luke says that Philip overhears the eunuch reading scripture. Now you and I overhear many things in the course of a day and are taught that the courteous thing is usually to keep our mouth shut and not insert ourselves into anyone else's business. But the Holy Spirit specifically tells Philip to go over to the chariot.

He says, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The eunuch's reply shows frustration. He says, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" Apparently, no one had taken a personal interest in this man. He's traveled all the way to Jerusalem from Africa and is leaving with questions still unanswered. Was he discounted, ignored and scorned because of his dark skin? Or was he simply dismissed as not worthy and acceptable because he was a eunuch?

The eunuch senses right away that this man has answers. He invites Philip up into his chariot and shares the verses he is reading from Isaiah chapter 53. He asks Philip, "Who is Isaiah talking about, himself or someone else?" And Philip begins to witness. He talks about the prophecies in the Old Testament and how Jesus is the suffering servant, the fulfillment of the promises of God. The eunuch listens and responds.

Then they pass some water. Remember, they're in the desert where water is very scarce. The eunuch says, "Look, here's water! What's to prevent me from being baptized?" Nothing. Not one thing. Because in the waters of baptism there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, royalty nor commoner, male nor female, eunuch nor non-eunuch. So they stop: Philip, the Jewish Christian, one of the seven, and the eunuch, an influential Ethiopian court official who is considered unclean. Philip baptizes this new believer in the name of Jesus Christ and then is taken away by the Spirit.

As for the eunuch, he goes on his way rejoicing, multiplies his faith and changes the world. You see, Christian tradition says that this eunuch took Christianity back with him to Ethiopia. Philip came upon a man who, because of his stature and teaching, may well have been the very first faith multiplier on the continent of Africa. There are 543 million Christians in Africa today. Philip had no idea what that angel had in mind for him. But Philip was faithful enough to sense that God needed him to be on that road to Gaza.

Still, I wonder. Who is the one converted here? I wonder if, when the Spirit guides Philip to that road in the desert, the Spirit is actually guiding him to his own conversion. Could it be that a banned outcast's determination to understand the scriptures, hear about Jesus and then be baptized becomes a turning point in Philip's own life? Could it be that the eunuch is teaching Philip about tolerance, grace and the unpredictability of the Holy Spirit, the fact that the Spirit blows wherever it wills?

Who is the angel to whom? Who is being converted by whom? Who is the faith multiplier here? It's not always clear, is it, because the Holy Spirit has a way of turning our preconceived notions

upside down. I can't help but think that Philip's life was changed as well as the eunuch's, for we dare not limit the power of the Holy Spirit.

What we're talking about is the principle of multiplication. Both Philip and the eunuch became faith multipliers, influencing others way beyond what anyone might expect because they were open to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. In the same way, you and I multiply our faith and build God's kingdom by doing three things. First, we listen to the Holy Spirit through the angels that are all around us to help and guide our journey. Second, we multiply faith by becoming angels ourselves and sharing the good news with children, youth and adults and all those who are hungry for hope and meaning. And third, we multiply our faith by empowering others to respond and become angels themselves. "How can I know, unless someone guides me?" the eunuch asks.

How have angels changed your life? How have the witness love, grace and encouragement of others transformed your heart? Listen to the words of Jacob Packard.

Hello everyone, my name is Jacob Packard. I am currently in confirmation, so I can continue down the path of Jesus. I was baptized in Nardin Park and moved to this church. I have amazing people in my life, and I try not to take them for granted. But enough about me. Let's talk about my faith, and how I multiplied it. When I went to this church, something amazing happened that's called: CHOIR!

It might seem silly that my faith was increased a whole lot by singing. I tried one year, then I stuck to it. It was lots of fun, and I got to sing about God. The best part was I got to show my face to the whole church. But when I sing, I feel present with God. I feel like God's standing right next to me and calling for me. Choir is what helped me feel close with God. It might help you, too, or maybe not. But there are a lot of ways to multiply faith at this church. I did it, so why can't you? Thank you.

Will you, too, like Jacob and Chris, dare to respond to the angels all around you who are encouraging your faith journey? Do you realize that every day there are people in your life who are just waiting to experience God's love through a word of encouragement, a gesture of kindness or a comforting hug? Do you know how many angels were on the scene last Friday to help Joan Benner after the tragic death of her beloved Dwight?

How will your children know unless you teach them? How will your neighbors know unless you share God's love with them? How will your colleagues know unless you model the grace of Jesus Christ to them? How will our world know unless we become angels for those who are oppressed, distraught, discouraged, depressed, rejected and hopeless?

Whenever you and I multiply our faith in the lives of others, they in turn can't help but become faith multipliers themselves, and the kingdom of God grows like wildfire. Will you dare to become an angel by multiplying grace, hope and generosity in the lives of others? Will you hear the voices that cry out, "How can I know Jesus unless someone guides me?" and then share the story of God's love in Jesus Christ? Will you humbly allow your own attitudes and faith to be converted by the witness

of others? How will they know that Christ is alive in you and me unless each one of us is a faith-multiplying angel?

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<sup>1</sup>. *Entertaining Angels*, J. Ellsworth Kalas, 1995.