

A MOST UNLIKELY EVANGELISM

Acts 8:26-39

Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen. Today we consider the Word of in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter eight, beginning with the 26th verse, as follows:

Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert.²⁷ So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship,²⁸ was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet.²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go near and overtake this chariot."³⁰ So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?"³¹ And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him.³² The place in the Scripture which he read was this: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth."³³ In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth."³⁴ So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?"³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him.³⁶ Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?"³⁷ Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."³⁸ So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.³⁹ Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing. This is the Word of God.

In the Name of Jesus Christ, the Savior in Whom we believe, and Whom we preach to others, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Some events that take place in life are so astonishingly unlikely as to be nearly unbelievable. And yet they happen. Several years ago, two women arrived in the maternity ward of a large Tulsa hospital, and each gave birth to a baby boy. The births were about four hours apart. "Not so unlikely," you say. But it turns out these two women were already acquainted. For they had met on the same day exactly two years previously, when they had both given birth to baby girls, in the same hospital, one hour apart. Another example - some of you are bridge players - what do you think the likelihood is of being dealt a hand that contains all thirteen spades in the deck? Mathematically, the odds are one in 630 billion. And yet bridge expert Oswald Jacoby reported that it happens relatively frequently, about a dozen times a year in the U.S. alone.

Incredibly unlikely things seem to happen with regularity in our world. But, as Christians, we don't expect our *evangelism* to be one of them. You know - the way we reach out to others and share the Gospel. We all know we're

supposed to do it, and we all want to do it. But I think we sometimes get the wrong picture of evangelism in our head, as if my personal outreach is always going to follow some conventional, predictable pattern. Well, our text for today challenges that kind of thinking. It demonstrates to us that the only thing predictable about witnessing Christ, is that there's nothing predictable about it! That's why our theme for this morning is:

A MOST UNLIKELY EVANGELISM

The Holy Spirit sends you:

- I. To the most unlikely places,
- II. To the most unlikely people,
- III. With a totally unlikely message,
- IV. Producing astonishing results!

Personal evangelism is part skill, part art. It is taught by the Holy Spirit. Some of you have been doing it for a long time, and are pretty good at it. Some may be just starting out. The first thing you find out about sharing the Gospel is that the Holy Spirit often sends you **to the most unlikely places**. Philip was one of the early evangelists who were scattered throughout the ancient near east when the Christians were first persecuted in Jerusalem. He had been working and preaching in Samaria, the region north of Jerusalem, which was unlikely enough all by itself. For as you know, Jews like Philip normally had nothing to do with Samaritans. But now the Holy Spirit gave him what must have seemed like an even more unlikely assignment: *An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."* And then the interesting comment *This is desert*.

We're simply told that Philip *arose and went*. And it may be that he got up without a question in his mind and proceeded where the Spirit led him. But I wonder. I wonder if Philip might not have been a little exasperated by this. I wonder if he might not have said in his mind, "NOW WHAT?! Samaria's not an unlikely enough spot to do evangelism, now you're taking me to the middle of the desert? This is DESERT!" And you may find yourself feeling the same thing sometimes about your personal outreach with the Gospel. "Lord, this is desert! How can I possibly share the Gospel *here*, where I work, where I go to school, where I spend my time? It's just really unlikely that I'm ever going to find an opportunity to witness about Jesus here. This is desert!"

But ours is A MOST UNLIKELY EVANGELISM. No matter where you are, there's one thing you can be sure of: you wouldn't be there unless the Lord had work for you to do. Like Philip, Scripture says the Holy Spirit has your work all lined up for you. *For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.* -- Eph 2:10.

And here's something else. The Holy Spirit not only sends us to the most unlikely places to evangelize, He often sends us to (what may seem to us to be) **the most unlikely people**. Who did He send Philip to? *A man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet.* "A eunuch of great authority" indicates a very high official in the court of the Ethiopian queen. This was a VIP. But he was a black man, an African, and how strange do you think that was for Phillip? Philip had probably just gotten used to the idea of sharing the Gospel with people who weren't strictly Jewish, and now God wants him to speak the Gospel to this foreigner? It must have seemed a most unlikely person to evangelize.

But he shouldn't have been surprised, and neither should we. For ours is A MOST UNLIKELY EVANGELISM. The Holy Spirit often sends us to the most unlikely people, people we never would have guessed would be likely recipients of the Gospel. It could be the person you're sitting next to on a plane, the person who bags your food at the grocery store, or the person who sits across the aisle from you at work. You just don't know, and it really doesn't matter, does it? One Christian writer said, "Of those of whom we know nothing else, we do know this, that they have souls." They have souls. All the people you meet in the course of your day, unlikely as they may seem, are candidates for the Gospel, for they all have souls. Christ died for them.

Philip was sent by the Holy Spirit to an unlikely place and an unlikely person. But strangest of all was the content of the message he was sent to bring. Phillip's and ours is A MOST UNLIKELY EVANGELISM, thirdly, because **we are sent with a totally unlikely message**.

Philip ...heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?"³¹ And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him.³² The place in the Scripture which he read was this: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth."³³ In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth."

The Ethiopian had gotten hold of a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He had been to Jerusalem to worship, so he was probably what was known as a "proselyte of the gate." That is, a foreigner who has converted to Judaism. He had evidently purchased the scroll of Isaiah, and was poring over it as he traveled, trying to figure out what it meant. The passage he was reading came from Isaiah 53:7-8. How strange it must have seemed to him! How unlikely! The gods of the world's other religions were ruthless and proud, so what could the prophet be speaking out when he described a sheep going meekly and silently to the slaughter? What sort of strange religion was this?!

I wonder if you've ever visited a slaughterhouse. Necessary as they are, there's something chilling and dreadful about the process of turning livestock into food. For on one side of the slaughterhouse you have pens full of living, healthy animals. And on the other side trucks, hauling away packaged meat.

The process is inevitable and relentless. Once the animals meekly start down that last chute, there's no going back, and there's no question about what's going to happen to them. I would submit to you that this is the exact condition that we sinful human beings find ourselves in, by nature. The Bible says that *"all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,"* and *"The wages of sin is death."* Left to ourselves, we like all humans would be headed down the dreadful and inevitable path to hell, the just punishment for those who sin against God.

But then something totally unlikely happened. And this was the message that Philip brought to the Ethiopian that day. Beginning with the very passage he was reading at that moment, Philip told him about the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He shared with him the incredible good news, the wonderful, totally unlikely Gospel of Jesus Christ. He shared with him the same message I'm sharing with you this morning: that *"God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."* That instead of sending us down the chute to the slaughterhouse, God in his grace and mercy sent His Son Jesus instead! He was the Lamb sent to the slaughter in our place, who meekly bowed His head and walked on under the weight of His cross, all the way to Calvary. There He died to redeem us. What parent would sacrifice his own innocent child to save someone else? Yet that's exactly what God did for you! Paul says *For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.⁷ For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die.⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* -- Romans 5:6-8.

It was, and remains A MOST UNLIKELY EVANGELISM. The same wonderful message that the Holy Spirit sent Philip with, he sends you with, too. You are to proclaim to others the same blessed message that has saved you! The message that salvation is available through faith in Jesus Christ. That He is the substitute for sinners, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Was Philip's task hard? Well, when you think about it, it was the Holy Spirit Who did all the work! He gave Philip the opportunity, He sent Philip out there, He gave him the message, and He worked faith in the heart of the Ethiopian. Like the text says, all Philip had to do was open his mouth and speak! And that's your job too. It's not complicated. It's as simple as Jesus' instructions to the man He healed in Luke chapter 8: *"Go and tell what great things God has done for you."* -- Luke 8:39. You may think, "What can I accomplish?" By yourself, nothing. But with the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word, there's nothing that *can't* be accomplished! Unlikely as it may seem, you will very often find this message **producing astonishing results!**

Someone pointed out that by this time that chariot was getting pretty crowded! Because by now it contained not only Philip and the Ethiopian, but Isaiah the prophet, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus as well! The Ethiopian heard the message about Jesus, and he believed it. The Holy

Spirit worked faith in his heart through the Word spoken by Philip. When they came to some water, the Ethiopian said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?"³⁷ Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."³⁸ So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.³⁹ Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing.

This was about the most unlikely convert to Christianity a person could ever imagine. Then again, ours is A MOST UNLIKELY EVANGELISM. So we shouldn't be surprised when it brings astonishing results. When you speak the Gospel to people, stand back, because miracles are likely to happen! To this day, I still find myself astonished at the unlikely people of my acquaintance that the Holy Spirit has nevertheless brought to faith through the Gospel. You can probably think of some pretty surprising examples in your own experience. And by the way, we see once again that the Holy Spirit always works this astonishing miracle of faith through the means of grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. He kindles faith in the Ethiopian's heart through the Word of God, and seals and confirms him as a member of the Kingdom of Christ by the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Unlikely message—astonishing results!

And did you notice? When Philip left him, what's the last we hear about the Ethiopian? *He went on his way rejoicing.* He went on his way rejoicing! We can understand that, can't we? When you drive out of the church parking lot this morning, I fully expect you to "go on your way rejoicing." If you're not, it means you weren't paying attention. For this Good News is for you, too! You, too, have been delivered from death and hell, just like the Ethiopian. In another passage a little later in Isaiah, he describes the blessed state of redeemed believers just like you: "*For you shall go out with joy, And be led out with peace; The mountains and the hills Shall break forth into singing before you, And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.* -- Isaiah 55:12

Speaking of things that are unlikely: horseracing is a business that lives or dies by likelihoods, better known as "odds." In the history of horseracing, it would be hard to find a more unlikely hero than Donerail. Donerail was a bay colt who went to the gate of the 1913 Kentucky Derby at the ridiculously long odds of 91-to-1. Most racing insiders thought he shouldn't have been there in the first place. But unlikely as it was, Donerail won by half a length, and a person who bet a thousand on him that day would have taken home the astonishing amount of nearly one hundred thousand dollars. Wouldn't it be great to have known that ahead of time! Well, I'd submit to you that you're involved in a venture even less likely than that, but whose payoff is guaranteed. It's your personal Gospel outreach. It's A MOST UNLIKELY EVANGELISM - for you'll find the Holy Spirit sending you to the most unlikely places and the most unlikely people, with a totally unlikely message - the Gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. But where the unlikelyhood stops. For where that Gospel is preached - by pastors in the pulpit, by neighbors over the back fence, or by employees sitting across the break table at work - there God will accomplish His

results. And those results will often be absolutely astonishing! **God grant that it may be so in our lives, AMEN.**

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 31:10-14** "Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, 'He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock.' ¹¹ For the LORD has ransomed Jacob and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. ¹² They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall be like a watered garden, and they shall languish no more. ¹³ Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. ¹⁴ I will feast the soul of the priests with abundance, and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness, declares the LORD."

^{ESV} **Romans 1:14-17** I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. ¹⁵ So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. ¹⁶ ¶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – July 2, 2017

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 490 *(Red Hymnal)*

"Pour Out Thy Spirit from on High"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. *(Brown Hymnal)*

The Scripture Lessons: *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

The Old Testament Lesson: (Jeremiah 31:10-14) We rightly see Christ throughout the Old Testament. We know this to be true because the inspired New Testament writers routinely quote Old Testament prophecies as having been fulfilled in or by Jesus Christ. So also with our Old Testament lesson this morning. Where some see only a reference to the return of Israel from the Babylonian Captivity, we here recognize a prophecy regarding all who are brought to faith in Jesus.

Psalm 100 (Supplement page 35) *(Brown Hymnal)*

The New Testament Lesson: (Romans 1:14-17) Our second lesson reminds us that God has placed no bounds or limits on our witnessing. The reason is self-evident: *all* should be told what Christ has done for *all*. The debt of every sin was paid on Calvary's cross, which means the same message applies to every man, woman, and child ever born. We are saved by God's grace through faith in the sacrificial death of our Savior Jesus Christ. We live eternally not by works, but by faith.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. *(Brown Hymnal)*

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 398 *(Red Hymnal)*

"Renew Me, O Eternal Light"

The Sermon – Text: Acts 8:26-39 *(Printed on the back of this bulletin)*

"A Most Unlikely Evangelism" (Professor Paul Naumann)

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 780 *(Brown Hymnal)*

"Dear Lord to Your True Servants Give"

The Offering followed by the Prayers

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn - 507 *(Red Hymnal)*

"Spread, Oh, Spread, Thou Mighty Word"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance – Sunday (30) Ave (46)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship/Coffee Time
Next Sunday	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship w/Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship/Coffee Time
	-11:30 a.m.	– Quarterly Voters' Meeting

CLC News – Teacher Quinn Sprengeler has returned the call to Redeemer of Cheyenne. Pastor James Albrecht has returned the call to St. Luke's of Lemmon. Holy Cross School of Phoenix has called Teacher Ross Kok. Immanuel of Mankato has called Pastor Mark Tiefel. Messiah of Eau Claire has called Teacher Amy Mielke. Teacher Nathan Wales has returned the call to Faith of Markesan.

Church Council Notes – Four of six Council members, plus the Pastor, were present for the Wednesday meeting. The Council accepted the resignation of Vice President Mark Redlin, who is moving to Eau Claire. The Voters will elect his replacement at the Quarterly Meeting next Sunday. The Council is recommending to the Voters that we use approximately \$6,000 of our current General Fund balance to pay down our CEF mortgage. They are also recommending that we initiate a drive to retire the balance of our mortgage by December 31 of this year. St Paul is scheduled to host the WCDC in May of 2018. The Council approved the purchase of a parenting series for the Church Library. The Quarterly Voters' meeting is scheduled for next Sunday, with a brief Church Council meeting to follow.

Our Thanks – We offer our thanks to Professor Paul Naumann for bringing us the Word of God this morning. As most are no doubt aware, Professor Naumann is married to Loren's sister Carol. After many years in the pastoral ministry, Professor Naumann just completed his first year of teaching at Immanuel in Eau Claire.

In Our Prayers – Debbie Ude, wife of Immanuel Professor John Ude, was carried home by her Savior on Thursday following an as yet unidentified illness. Funeral services are planned for 4pm today in Eau Claire. Contact information for Prof. Ude is available from the Pastor.