

Stop That Chariot!©

May 21, 2017

Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates

Acts 8:26-39

Isn't that story of the Ethiopian Eunuch a wonderful story? It's full of so many images. Before this, Luke – the author of Acts – tells how Saul was persecuting believers but how many people were coming to know salvation through Jesus because of how the Holy Spirit was working through the disciples.

Peter, John and Philip who were in Samaria and performing many miracles. After this, Peter and John continued on but an angel told Philip to go off a different way – down a desert road. Philip could have questioned it, perhaps thinking he heard wrong, but he didn't. He just obediently went where he believed he was being directed. And this is one of the images I love. Philip is walking along, sees this chariot going down the deserted road, hears the Holy Spirit tell him to go to this chariot. So, Philip runs over and runs along beside the chariot.

Can't you picture this Ethiopian who is riding along, reading from scripture, suddenly realizing a man has come from out of no where to run along side the chariot. Imagine his surprise when Philip asks "do you understand what you're reading?"

And the Ethiopian seems more than happy to stop the chariot and let Philip climb in and interpret what he had been reading from the prophet Isaiah. Of course there was no New Testament yet that told the story of Jesus and salvation. But Philip used this passage that prophesied what the Messiah would be like to tell this man about Jesus, about the cross and forgiveness of sin, about God raising him from the dead; about God's love for the world and how through Jesus' death and resurrection, he too could have forgiveness and life eternal. And he must have also told him about Jesus' command to baptize in his name because suddenly, there in that lonely desert road was water.

This man, who had been seeking some new truth from the scriptures, heard the good news and became a believer. And when he saw the water he asked, "what is to prevent me from being baptized?" And he and Philip went into the water and he was baptized.

Beautiful images, right? But what is so significant here is that this man – even though he had a top position in the queens court, he was still considered unworthy to come into the temple because he was a eunuch. I don't know any other way to say it except to just tell you that he was castrated. That was done against a man's will so he would have no other loyalty but the person he was a servant to. He would not have his own family to be devoted to.

And he was not considered to be worthy of being in the temple, even though we are told he had gone to Jerusalem to worship. He must have had some faith. Perhaps he was a Jew.

So, to hear the news that he too was loved by God and could be saved, could be baptized, was surely good news indeed. And we are told that as soon as he came up out of the water, Philip was taken by the Holy Spirit away to another place. Another great image! This man is baptized, he is lowered down into the water and raised back up by Philip but then turns around and he is alone.

But Luke tells us he went on his way rejoicing. And although the scripture doesn't say it, tradition and other writings assume he went home and spread the good news of Jesus Christ and salvation to others.

This is a perfect evangelism story isn't it? It has all the elements there –

A Seeker – someone who is searching for more, who senses God chasing him, wooing him, but who needs someone to help him understand. That's the Ethiopian.

A Servant – one who is so in tune to what the Holy Spirit is leading him to do and who is ready to obey and allow the Spirit to work through him. That's Philip, of course.

The Scripture – God's Word is full of truth and good news. It is always relevant, always the most important part of leading a person to know Jesus and the salvation he has made possible for us through the cross and his resurrection.

And then there is Salvation – the wonderful good news that God loved us – every one of us – so much that he sent his only Son to show us God's mercy and love; to give his very life for us – taking on the sin that we ourselves are guilty of; dying in our place - the death that we deserve; rising from the dead and promising that we too will rise to be with him.

And other important factors are the Holy Spirit that is constantly with us, leading us, wooing us, helping the servant to interpret the Scriptures so the seeker will hear and understand.

And we have the water – a place to be baptized as Jesus commanded. And in that baptism we see a dying with Christ – dying to ourselves and our sinful lives; rising up – washed clean and becoming a new creation in Christ.

Jesus said to his disciples, as he was ascending into heaven after his resurrection, “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” And so we baptize in obedience to his command.

We, who are Protestants, believe there are two sacraments: The Lord's Supper and Baptism. Jesus clearly tells us in scripture that we are to do these things. We say that the sacraments are “outward, visible signs of an inward, invisible grace.” We see, smell and taste the bread and the wine. We see, hear and feel the water of baptism. These are visible signs to us. What we don't see but we believe is happening is what God is doing inside with his grace and love.

In baptism, we profess that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. And each time someone comes here for baptism and makes that profession of faith, we all are witnesses and we also should be recommitting ourselves, renewing our own profession of faith. In that way, even if we were baptized as infants we are remembering our baptisms.

After baptism, I especially love the liturgy that says that we are a child of the covenant, sealed by the Holy Spirit. I love that image of the seal of God. I think of the seal that was my DeHaven families own special seal. It was a stamp that was put on documents or contracts, used like a

signature. When that seal was stamped on something it meant it belonged solely to the DeHaven family.

In baptism, this is what we are saying is the inward, invisible grace – we are being sealed by God. We have God’s stamp put on us. We are claimed by God and we belong to him alone. We are his.

Today, I have the great honor of baptizing two people. I will baptize Hadleigh Maeve – Mandy and Josh’s sweet baby girl. And they will be answering the question for her; professing faith for her that will be in place until the day comes when she will have the opportunity to confirm her faith as they claimed it for her.

But it is a great and wonderful thing to also baptize Hadleigh’s daddy, Joshua. Josh and I had a conversation the other evening and what I found was a man who was that seeker. God had been chasing him, bringing him to the point of finally hearing the good news that God loves him and wants to give him forgiveness and love and life in him forever.

Josh had his ears open and his heart right there too. And he became a believer in Jesus Christ, wanting to be baptized. And I am thrilled that I have the privilege of getting to do it.

One other thing. When we ask for the name to use in baptism, do you ever wonder why we don’t use the last name? Just the first and middle name?

We go back to belonging to God. We are all being brought into the family of God. We are one big family. I would say – Frederick Ellsworth – child of God. Abby Hope – child of God. Child of God is the last name, the identification of us all.

Philip saw the chariot and obediently ran to help. “Stop that chariot!” he might have yelled out. The seeker was hungry to understand the scriptures – the Word of God – the good news of Salvation. The Holy Spirit was at work and it led to baptism – even for one who had been told he was unworthy. Salvation is for all. For God so loved the world.

And so I ask you this – how many chariots have you stopped? How many chariots do you suppose you have missed? How can you – how can we all – become more in alert to the chariots we may be led to? Amen