

I see a choice that's popping up in front of me in the readings we heard this morning. Philip hears an angel tell him to "get up and go." And the readings from the Gospel of John and the First Letter of John say that we must stay, or abide in Jesus and be the branches of the vine of our Lord Jesus Christ. Should we stay or should we go?

Let's start with Philip. Philip was an apostle, appointed by the original disciples to be a deacon along with Stephen. Philip had been preaching in Samaria. Large crowds followed him, and he had great success in converting Gentiles to the faith. Many, many people were being baptized. In our story today the Holy Spirit tells Philip to leave all of that behind and take his ministry on the road. He is told by the Spirit to go south on the wilderness road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza. In other words, he was sent out into the boondocks.

Did Philip object? Or was he actually getting a little burnt out in Samaria? We don't know. We don't hear any details about this. All we know is that he went. Maybe it's that God does not want us to get too comfortable in one place – physically or spiritually.

The man Philip met on the road to Gaza was not like the men and women to whom he preached in Samaria. This man, an Ethiopian, undoubtedly was dark skinned, and only labeled for us as the Ethiopian Eunuch. We can observe a few things about him in the text we are given. He had charge of the entire treasury of his queen we are told. And he had come to Jerusalem in a chariot to worship. He is quite well-to-do and an important man in his kingdom. I wish we knew his name.

We can infer some things about him too, even without knowing his name. If he had come to Jerusalem to worship he must be a God-fearer, that is, one who would like to be a Jew but cannot. He would not have been allowed to convert to Judaism because the laws of the Jews prevented anyone with a mutilation such as his from becoming a Jew. We also can infer that his faith was not perfunctory. He wanted to know more. He was studying Scripture; reading Isaiah aloud, in fact.

Anyway, the Holy Spirit led Philip over to the Ethiopian. Ah, now we know something even more about the man. He can read and so is educated as well as wealthy and influential. I wonder what Philip thought of him. He was willing to climb into the chariot with the man, so he must have been curious about why the Ethiopian was so interested in learning about the Hebrew faith.

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he opened not his mouth.” (*Isaiah 53:7 and Acts 8:32*) Christians believe that this suffering servant that Isaiah writes about is a Jesus-like person. This is a perfect opportunity for Philip to tell the Ethiopian about the good news of the resurrection of Jesus and the life that Christians are called to live.

The Eunuch sees that the Christian life is what he is called to, and then says, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (*Acts 8:36*)

Here is Philip whose ministry has been one of convincing, converting and baptizing people in Samaria. And who should appear before him, thanks to God’s Spirit, but a man who wants baptism! The Ethiopian wasn’t allowed to become Jewish, but he could become a Christian. The Spirit is open and willing to all people and all walks of life.

We should, all of us, **go**. We can head south from Jerusalem going into the wilderness too. Not literally but virtually. We then will be ready for our chance encounter with whomever the Holy Spirit puts in our path. God asks us to be awake and alive to the possibilities that show up in our path, or even in our email inbox.

We see the “go” part of the readings now, but what about the “stay” part of the message? Jesus has called us to abide in him like the branches abide in the vine. *“Stay with me. Remain here with me. Watch and pray.”*

Those are the words to a well known Taize chant that is sung in Holy Week. Jesus asks the disciples to stay with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. **Mein-a-te**. This Greek word means to stay, to remain, to abide. Also, in an interpretation, it means to live with. Our Bible translation uses the word abide in our readings today. Jesus is asking us to stay, remain, abide and live through him.

So, when we abide (or live in Jesus we are like branches which cannot live on their own but must be nourished by the stem and the roots of the plant. The sap produced in the roots and stem flows up to the branches and keeps them alive. Jesus means us to see that he is the root and the stem of the plant that sends the sap...our life blood which is love... to course through our veins and enliven us. (*At this point in the sermon I cut off a rose that is in the flower arrangement next to me. But I tell the listeners that I have a use for the rose. I will not go to waste.*) If only we can **stay** in Him we will have the strength to **go** where he sends us.

As you probably guessed, the choice I posed at the outset of this little sermon is a false choice. We are to **both stay** and **go** with Christ’s Spirit inhabiting us, filling us with love, sending us out to bear fruit, leading and guiding us.

Is the goal of the Christian life then to go, like Philip, and convert as many people as possible? Maybe. But mostly, we are to love others because we have been filled with love. We **stay** with Christ in love and we **go** with Christ in love.