

All of my life I have grown up in the Methodist church. From the time that my sisters and I were young we were taught about God. Despite learning about God, we became Easter-Christmas people and then we stopped going altogether. When I was in middle school, the new pastor of Culpeper UMC at the time was going through the attendance rolls and noticed that we were members but hadn't been to church in awhile. He called up my mom and invited her back to the church on her own time. Letting her know that the doors were always open.

Following this conversation, we went back to attending worship regularly. Slowly, my sisters and I got involved with children and youth ministry and choir. Throughout middle school and high school, I struggled with being a teenager and a person of faith; but nothing was more taxing than my sophomore through senior years. In those three years, I faced some of the hardest doubts and faced fears that at the time I thought was going to break me.

I shied away from God and began to only go to church because I had obligations to uphold. I didn't stay any longer at meetings or services than I had to and unless I was singing with the choir, I wouldn't willing go to services. Here is where things begin to get interesting. It may not seem like it, but I am an introvert. I don't like to go outside of my comfort zone and volunteer for things. Yet, around the middle of my freshman in college, I began to find my way back to God.

My doubts had begun to subside, and I began to listen to my heart to find the path that God was leading me on. I volunteered to be a small group leader for middle school girls and to serve as a volunteer for the youth group. I did this until I left for Randolph-Macon for my junior and senior year. Changing schools and moving away from my mom and sisters was a very big deal for me. I was anxious about the move and being able to find friends.

I tried to settle into a routine my first couple weeks there. I even tried the local Methodist church on campus to try and find some normal in my life. After getting a less than welcoming response from the local church, I retreated to secluding myself in my dorm and began to spiral. Thank God, for a transfer social that was a part of my welcome week at school. It was there, that I met some of my closest friends who introduced me to Intervarsity Christian Fellowship.

It was through my time with this group that I applied to be a Calling 21 intern for the Virginia Conference. Doing some of the same things that I am doing this summer, but in broader strokes. I fell in love with working with kids and teaching them and helping them build the foundational relationship with God. It was during

this internship that I decided to go to Wesley Seminary and pursue my journey through ministry.

Seminary brought its own ups and downs. It was during my first two and half years, I lost my grandfather and I found out that I have an anxiety disorder. The fall of my last year my anxiety was so high that I was having two or three panic attacks a day and I was barely keeping my grades up. I made the difficult decision to pull out of school and I had made up my mind that I was done pursuing ministry.

I was full of anger and doubt. I didn't trust God to provide for me and I was hurt that I was suffering, and I couldn't hear or feel the peace that worshipping God gave me. I was trying to test God to see if our creator really would provide me with the tools to get through my rough patch.

The beginning of our Old Testament passage for today is a continuation of what's happening in Exodus 16 with the gathering of manna. In Exodus 17, those who had come out of Egypt are continuing to grumble and complain that there aren't sufficient essentials to help them survive; specifically, they were complaining about the lack of water. The people are complaining to Moses, Moses being uneasy and unsure how to handle the situation, he turns to God.

God instructs Moses to go to the rock at Horeb and strike the rock with the staff and the water will flow so that the people can drink. Although Moses follows God's command, the people are still unsure of how to proceed and who they can trust. The people accuse Moses of bringing them out of Egypt just to have them killed. Aligning Moses and God with what Pharaoh was doing to them. Even though God has continued to **BE** present and provide them with the essentials of food and water. This passage of Exodus is showing the continued growth of a relationship of trust with God. Just like Em had to learn through her fears about the closet monster and as we question and have fears during our faith journeys, God will always respond with flowing and life-giving water for our soul.

As our soul grows in relationship with God, we are called to share that relationship with others. In fact, Jesus told his disciples “go and witness to the uttermost parts of the Earth.” When Philip was called to go to Gaza through the wilderness, Philip came to an Ethiopian church where he encountered a Eunuch. It is important to note that Eunuchs were excluded from participation in Temple rituals and not permitted full rights as proselyte (or one who has converted) into Israel's community.

The Ethiopian church was viewed as a community that was not only geographically far away but also ethnically and culturally far away. Add to this that not only was the man in our passage from Ethiopia but he was a part of a community that is marginalized; thus beginning to fulfill Jesus’ command. In verse 30, Philip hears the man reading aloud.

It was common during this time for people to read aloud when whatever text is being read is not in one’s native language. Upon hearing this, Philip asks if the Eunuch understands what he is reading. Giving the opportunity for help to be sought out rather than imposing help on the man. When the man asked Philip to explain the verse to him, Philip used this invitation from the man to be a guest in the man’s learning rather than an intruder. Philip begins with the verse and continues to speak to the man about the good news of Jesus.

As the two men move forward in their journey, they come across a body of water, prompting the Eunuch to ask “what is to prevent me from getting baptized.” Although it is not mentioned, we can assume that the importance of baptism was shared with the man and given how arid this area of land would have been, it is no coincidence that the men came across a body of water. For the Spirit was involved in making sure that a person from a marginalized community was welcomed into a community of faith.

As we come to our third week in the book of Acts, we have been prompted to think about what God does. From our two scriptures this morning, we can see that God will provide us with the necessary tools to better ourselves. To be a part of a community and be an advocate and a voice for those on the margins, to push through our fears of messing up and spread the good news. We can do this by getting involved in something in our faith communities or being a part of something that better the local, national, and global community.

We are called to share the Gospel to the outer edges of the world. Together through our faith and trust that God will provide us with the necessary tools of faith, hope and love, we can be a spout of the living water to those who are in times of doubt and unrest. During this time of COVID19, our way of life has been shifted. It’s frustrating to not be able to shake someone’s hand or give them a hug. We have had to change the way we shop for groceries and we even sent our kids home to finish school online.

We moved church services out of the church buildings and on the web. We have all been removed from our comfort zones and had to adapt on the fly. The one thing that has been consistent is the love and compassion that God has for us. Despite our struggles and fears, God is a constant. Giving us the opportunity to grow and push our way outside the four walls of the church. Just as the people of Egypt were tested through lack of food and water and how the people then tested God to provide, we have been pushed to continue and expand on our faith despite the challenges set before us. We are to share the good news of Jesus Christ and to be a voice to those who need it most. God has offered us a challenge to adapt and recognize that we are called to something bigger than ourselves.

Endnotes:

1. The Sermon Writer Biblical Commentary- Acts 8:26-40;
<https://sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/acts-826-40/>
2. Working Preacher- Mitzi J.Smith; Commentary on Acts 8:26-40;
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1235
3. Working Preacher- Amy Erickson; Commentary on Exodus 17:1-7;
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1067