

“Interruptions”

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
on Sunday April 29, 2018 (Easter 4)

Scripture Reading: Acts 8: 26-40
(Rev. Catherine Somerville)

I love the comment that God must surely smile in delight when we human beings start to make plans. We are going along, following the plans, putting one foot in front of the other, and then something unexpected sideswipes us. In the briefest of moments, everything changes, and you didn't even see it coming. Many years ago, I learned that my job as a minister is all about dealing with the interruptions people encounter in their lives.

Following September 11, 2001, the stories that haunted me the most were the ones of the people that didn't make it into work that day. Their usual routine had been interrupted and the way they dealt with the interruption changed the course of their lives. An alarm did not go off, as it did every other morning. A missed train into the city, led to taking the next one and coming in late. An email arrived that the meeting had been cancelled. The people who told these stories reeled with the knowledge that if not for that interruption, they would have been among the dead. Their lives were changed in the blink of an eye.

I can't help it, but when I come across an accident scene, I always think: "Wow, that could have been me, if not for the phone that rang just as I was putting on my coat, or kitty escaping out the door, which necessitated running all through the neighbourhood looking for her." That could have been me.

The story of the eunuch and Philip strikes me as an interrupted encounter, which ends up leading to a whole new way of living. Philip had a dream to get up off the couch, double back from the way he was headed, and go to a certain deserted road heading towards Gaza on the Mediterranean coast, and there, he was told to wait. Along comes a high court official in his chariot, the Chief Financial Officer to the Queen, no less, and he is reading a sacred scroll aloud.

Just as an aside, back in this time, people would read aloud. It was only with the development of the monastic movement in the fourth and fifth centuries, that people started to read quietly to themselves. This Ethiopian official is reading Isaiah, the most forthright and prophetic book of inclusion. He is wealthy enough to ride in a chariot, educated enough to read Greek, devout enough to study the prophet Isaiah, and humble enough to know that he cannot understand what he is reading without help. He is also hospitable. He is struggling with a passage and no doubt he is thinking something like this: "Is this only about Isaiah and his situation, or is this passage meant for people like me as well, people who are humiliated, excluded, the ones for whom justice appears to have been denied?" No doubt, he is wondering if God was speaking to him and to his own experience of being an outcast in Israel.

When Philip approaches, the Ethiopian invites the talkative pedestrian to join him in the chariot. For a modern parallel, imagine a diplomat in Ottawa inviting a pastor who works in a downtown street mission to join him in his late model Lexus for a little Bible study.

This story is thick with the presence of God's spirit. Philip tells him about the one who has broken down barriers. He talks to him of Jesus, of life and freedom. This is the best news of all, for it changes the man's perspective and it changes his plans and leads him in a whole new way, a way far beyond his wildest dreams. We are told that he is baptised, and that he continues on his way rejoicing. This joyful return is a theme that runs through Luke and Acts: the joy of recovering the lost sheep, and the lost coin, and the wayward son, the joy of outcasts hearing good news.

So, here is what this story makes me wonder: What would our lives be like if we were to surrender control of our own travel plans for even an hour? Where might the Spirit send us? And how many of our accidental encounters with other people are really divine appointments?

I am not a particularly intuitive person, but sometimes when I am in the midst of the busyness of a day, I get a feeling, usually it's a person's face that pops into my head, and I have the sensation that I need to go and visit. I show up, usually feeling a bit silly, thinking that the person who answers the door is going to tell me that this is not a good time for a social call, and instead I am greeted with words like, "How did you know I needed to talk with someone right now?" How did I know?

Today, we are being invited to consider living without all the loose ends being tied up. We are being invited to ponder the real meaning behind the unexpected encounters that happen when we are busy making plans, those delays, and all the things that take life off the rails. Delays and derailments can make you crazy. But there is another way, and maybe that is what this scripture is trying to convey to us today, that the way of the interrupted encounter is really God's way. This is the way where we look for the lesson and the learning that lies just below the surface. Do you suppose that this might be how God is inviting us to live into the newness of life that is God's dream for all people?

In just a moment, the Memorial Gifts committee will be leading part two of the Message time. They will be giving us the gift of remembering, as they recall the saints from this congregation who planted seeds of faith, and how those seeds are blossoming and bearing such good fruit in the world today and into the future.

If there is a tie between the two ideas of interruptions and remembrance, it lies in the fact that the loss of a loved one is the biggest interrupted moment we'll ever face. When someone dies, your equilibrium is lost. You don't know where to turn. After the initial shock, grief sets in. You shed tears. You tell stories. You ask questions of why and how.

And those of us who count ourselves among the blessed, realize that we are not alone and we accept the support of others from the community of faith. We plan a service and celebrate a life, and then in time, many people make decisions that they want to do

something to honour the person who lived. The only way we can offer gratitude for a life well lived is to pay it forward. And so, many people give gifts, some to our church, some to huge, important causes in the world, because they want this life to be recognized, and they want to make a positive difference, a legacy.

Marian McKnight is one of the special people here, and one day she shared the most incredible bit of wisdom with me; "When I die, I would rather people know what I lived for, than what I died from." What she means is rather than people making donations to the things that take a person's life, like heart or cancer or diabetes, all good causes, no question, but see it as an opportunity to give to things that the person lived for. In Marian's case, she lives for church and the arts, music and dance and healthy living. She has decided to honour those things in her own legacy planning. In just a few moments, we are going to be hearing stories of how so many people have decided to respond in gratitude to the greatest interruption of their lives.

Our lives are filled with interruptions, and yet, we are called to reconsider the ways we view the delays and the derailments, and, as people of faith, to dare to see God's hand in the centre of it all. We have the choice to view the things that block the path, and interrupt our best laid plans with the mind of Jesus Christ, knowing that his light is here, pushing back the darkness and the uncertainty that life throws our way. We can say this because we believe that in life and in death, and in life beyond death, God is with us and we are not alone. Thanks be to God.