

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
August 30 & 31, 2014  
Steve Wiens  
Run Toward the Chariot  
Acts 8:26-40**

Well, good morning, CPC. How are you? It is so good to be back here. It was exactly 11 years ago that this 32-year-old guy, who was a little broken and a little beaten up, came to join the staff here at CPC and I had the first of what would be many lunches with John Crosby. What I found here, was not only grace to be myself, but encouragement to be more. Then, four years after I came on staff, I was sent out to join a different church to be the Associate Senior Pastor at Church of the Open Door where I stayed for seven years. Now I'm back to be sent out on another adventure. It is breathtaking for me to be here in this place where there are so many faces I recognize, people who have prayed for me and blessed me over the years, and I am thrilled to be here. Thank you! Thank you!

Well, I grew up, maybe like some of you, believing in God like maybe you believe in electricity. You know it's there when you need it but you just really don't want to have a real direct encounter with it. Amen? And so it was that I spent most of my life going to church and being surrounded by God, but really staying asleep to what God was doing in my life and what God was doing in the world. I ended up at a little college in St. Peter, Minnesota and, when I wasn't in class, spent most of my time drinking like I was trying to win a challenge, until the summer of 1992. I was really exhausted, I think, from living like that and growing up in the church. I knew I needed to do something different so I decided to work at a Christian camp that summer, like most college kids do.

The first camp I applied to rejected me, which if you know anything about Christian camps, they are desperate for counselors. So confidence soaring, I applied to a different camp that accepted me. I went to the staff training and I met some friends. I never had had Christian friends before and I met some people who were amazing and gracious to me. On Friday night at the last thing of staff training, we gathered around for Communion and it was at that Communion time that I was jolted by that electricity I had walked away from my whole life. God met me in a searing demonstration of forgiveness and mercy and I understood for the first time that God liked me and God loved me. Even in the middle of all my hiding and all of my acting out and all of my running, God liked me and loved me and wanted to send me out to do beautiful things for Him in the world. So, 22 years ago, I started to try to wake up to God's presence in my life and God's presence in the world.

I want to tell you a little bit of that story and I want to ask a question. What does it mean to wake up to God's activity in your life and in the world? What does it mean to actually want to have an encounter with that electricity that's all around us at all times, the presence of God? I believe from the bottom of my heart to my toes that this is true, that the God who created the universe is

actively involved in repairing and restoring every single person and every single square inch of this planet to this day. I believe that to my toes. Sometimes in the church, we use this amazing little phrase, and I think we mean well but we say, "Oh, man, God really showed up!" You know, after a sermon or after a song maybe or after an event that was amazing. What we are trying to say is *wow!* But terminology creates theology, if you didn't know that, so when you say something like "God showed up," you're also sort of implying that God was asleep during something else until we did something amazing. And then God, like a startled grandparent maybe, said, "Oh, hey, I like the way they sang that song. I'll grace them with My presence" instead of us believing God is always at work and maybe from time to time, we show up. Amen?

So what I want to talk about this morning in the minutes that remain is, what does it mean to wake up and show up to what God is doing in your life and in the world? The text that I want to invite you to read with me, I'll read it to you but you can follow along, is from the Book of the Acts, chapter 8, verses 26 through 40. It's the beautiful story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. The context is that Jesus has died and risen again and has poured His Holy Spirit out on the church so the church can be built and go out to bless the world in the Name of Jesus. That is what has been happening and people are coming to Christ, many, many thousands of people, and they are getting healed of diseases and sicknesses. But then persecution comes on the church and the people are scattered from Jerusalem to all different places of the world. This looks like the worst defeat in all of history but it actually turns out to be the very plan God uses to spread Jesus throughout the whole world and Philip is one of those people who gets sent out. I will read this story to you and it's beautiful.

**26** Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip,

I wish it was this clear to me.

"Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place.

Those are exactly the places you want to go, aren't they? No!

**27** And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship **28** and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. **29** And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." **30** So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" **31** And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. **32** Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. **33** In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." **34** And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?"

Then Philip looks at the eunuch and it's like he is vibrating there in the chariot that day.

**35** Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. **36** And as they were going along the road they came to some water,

and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" **38** And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. **39** And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. **40** But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

I think we get three ideas from this story of what God is doing in your life and in the world. The first idea is this: **Know what it is that you do.** Know how God has created you uniquely to bless the world. Have you ever been at coffee with someone else, maybe a friend you have known for years, and have you ever asked this question, "Hey, I want you to really think about this. What is it that you think God has wired me up to do that might do good in the world?" That is sort of a juicy question to drop out there at Perkins at 6:30 a.m. next Friday, isn't it? Or maybe even to your spouse or your kids.

I think if you read the Scriptures, Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and other places, you will find out that God has created you with unique giftings and passions so that you can be a blessing to the world. I think we see this right there in Philip. In the very last verse we read, we see that Philip preached the Gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea. I think this is what Philip was uniquely wired up to do. I love this story because Philip is just playing with it, "Go south down this deserted road," like you do, right? I mean, I would pray about that for a little while, right? I would ask some friends about that. Do you think it's a wise idea for me to go down south down a deserted road in the middle of nowhere? "No!" Well, God told me to do it. "Well, you might want to think about that for a little while." But Philip just went.

Then this chariot rattles by carrying this Ethiopian and the Holy Spirit whispers what to Philip? "Run up beside that chariot." So Philip relies on his instincts and goes and this is what happens. "Hey, what are you reading?" "Uh, Isaiah." "Do you understand what you are reading?" He says this because he wants to explain it to him. No one has to bend Philip's arm, twist Philip's arm, for him to be able to talk about Jesus. This is what he does. It is what he loves doing. So when the Ethiopian eunuch says, "Oh, I'm reading something but I have no idea who it is about," Philip is like, "Could I sit down and talk with you?" Philip will never retire from doing this. It's what he loves to do. So he sat in the chair with the eunuch and explained the beautiful good news of Jesus. "That passage you were reading, about the lamb being slaughtered, that is Jesus who was slaughtered for our sins."

Here is what is so fascinating about the Ethiopian eunuch. He had just returned from a journey to where? Jerusalem. This man was not Jewish. He was a eunuch, which means that he was a double-outcast. He never would have been allowed to go into the temple at Jerusalem. Never! Yet he goes to Jerusalem and he purchases a scroll of Isaiah which would have been very expensive. And as he is clattering back toward Ethiopia down the south road, he is reading because he is starving. He is starving to be accepted and God sends Philip, who loves to explain who Jesus is. This is how God works! Amen? God, I believe, is doing a new thing in all of us. He is doing a restoration work in all of us and wants to use the very thing that you are wired up to do.

So as I said, seven years ago I left CPC to be Associate Senior Pastor at Church of the Open Door. I preached a lot and read a lot and one of the ideas that we began talking about was that I would be the next Senior Pastor at Church of the Open Door when Dave Johnson retires. He's

been there for 34 years, an amazing preacher, an amazing leader, but at some point he will retire and so we started talking about succession. As months led to years, I began to have a growing sense in my spirit that perhaps that wasn't the road God wanted to lead me on. That was really scary because that's what we had been planning. So I brought Dave into that conversation and I brought the elders into that conversation because at first I thought, well, maybe I'm just feeling fear and fear is normal. I need to press through it.

After having conversations and talking about it, it wasn't fear that led them to say "Let's go into a time of discernment, Steve, and figure out how it is that you are wired up uniquely in the world." The elders paid for me to go through this intense life coaching process and this is what came out. What I am uniquely wired up to do in the world is create environments where people can wake up to God's activity in their lives and in the world, especially people like the Ethiopian eunuch, who didn't grow up in church, who don't understand what God is doing in their lives and in the world. I'm uniquely wired up to create environments where people can hear about God. That is what I love to do. That is what I will never retire from. That's why I write. That's why I preach. That's why I lead.

There was a time last fall when I was out on a run and I got a whisper from God. This doesn't happen very often. It was kind of mysterious. It wasn't an audible voice but it was a sensation I had in my spirit that was undeniable. It was a jolt of electricity that said, "Steve, would you be willing to abandon your plans to be the next Senior Pastor at Church of the Open Door? Would you be willing to start a new church for people who have given up on church?" I just gasped as I was running. The main thing that came to me was Genesis, which means beginning. I went home and wrote it on a post-it note so I wouldn't forget this moment. It began some conversations. What would it be like for a church to be born in the Twin Cities, for it to be a community working for new beginnings in the world? That little post-it note has stared at me every day since October 28, looking at me on my desk, reminding me of what God is calling me to do.

Over the course of time, I started thinking about, well, who are people who might join me on this, because you can't start a church with five people. That's my family. I mean you just can't. Hopefully it's a few more people than that. I'm a leader and I love to get things done. And people who love to get things done, typically are a little love-deficient sometimes in the way that they treat people in their desire to get things done. So God brought me a friend, someone I've known for years and that was Steve Haines, who is one of the most beautiful lovers of people you will ever meet. [Slide shown.] Already, after just a couple of months working of together, we have had some conversations where he has taught me how to love better: how to love God better, how to love myself better, and how to love others better. Steve Haines has this gift and what he does is love people. So Steve is our Associate Pastor.

One of the things we are working on right now is job descriptions. It is so fun to create job descriptions. One of the things we are thinking about for Steve is, "Steve, what about if your job description was to create environments where people learn to love each other really, really well?" What do you do? What is it that you are never going to retire from? What is it that you love so much that you think it can't count for God's Kingdom? It's too fun.

Sitting next to Steve is my friend Rick. He is also a part of Genesis. We are about to leave for a sailing trip. We're going to sail up in the Apostle Islands. What Rick does is, he is a shepherd. He knows how to take young men and form them into really wise men who love God. On this

trip, there are going to be about ten boats and Steve and I are the other men will get to learn from this shepherd named Rick.

So if you want to wake up to what God is doing in your life and in the world, the first idea from Philip is this. Know what it is that you do. It is essential that you know the answer to this question, so my plea to you would be to ask someone who knows you and loves you, “Hey, what do I do that uniquely blesses the world by God?”

The second thing, the second idea, that I think we learn from this text if you want to join God’s work of making all things new, if you want to wake up to God’s activity in the world is, **assume that you are always in the middle of a restoration project**. Do you ever watch these TV shows where they take an old dilapidated house that’s completely broken down and then someone is the leader of the restoration project and they turn it into this gleaming, beautiful, new but old creation? I love watching some of these shows. When I watch the leader of the restoration project go to work, when I see him or her, I know they love doing this. They love taking something broken down and making it beautiful. I believe this is a picture of God. God loves to do this. I mean God will never retire from taking broken down things and making them beautiful.

So the next time you are having breakfast with your friends at 6:30 in the morning at Original Pancake House down the street, you can assume that each one of them is in the middle of a restoration project initiated by God and that you are being invited to join it. And do you know what that also means? That *you* are in the middle of a restoration project as well! When you hear news beaming out of Ferguson, Missouri and you want to hide your head because you have absolutely no idea what can be done, you need to know that right here and right now in Ferguson, Missouri, there is a restoration project happening and it’s being initiated by God and God is inviting people to join in all different ways. The same is happening in Damascus. The same is happening in Gaza and all over the world. In St. Louis Park, even, and right here in Edina.

Assume that you are in the middle of a restoration project and assume that you are the first restoration project that needs to be worked on. Amen? That will keep you humble. I think we see this in Philip. Philip knows he is a restoration project so he is fine leaving the center of the action in Jerusalem, heading down south on a deserted road. He is fine saying, “Hey, I’m not the star of this show. I’m heading down south, who knows where. He runs into the Ethiopian eunuch who is also a restoration project, who is a double-outcast, about to be one of first outside-of-Judaism converts to the faith. We are each in the middle of a great restoration project that God is initiating and the question is, do you know what you do so that you can join it?

The third idea, straight from the text, if you want to join God’s work of making all things new, if you want to wake up to this electricity that is all around us and actually have an encounter with God, is just this, **do the next right thing**. So what do we do about Ferguson? What do we do about ALS? What do we do about the sicknesses in our own lives? What do we do about our own sin? What do we do about the evils that are happening all around the world? We can get really down by that, right? I mean, it’s overwhelming. But what if we just did the next right thing. For Philip it was just to head south down this deserted road. It didn’t make a whole lot of sense but the Holy Spirit whispered that and so that’s what he did.

When I read this text, I wonder why didn't God tell him the whole story right then? "Hey, Philip, there is this Ethiopian eunuch. He's going to be rattling down the road in his chariot. He's going to be reading the Book of Isaiah. You're going to get the chance to share Jesus with him. It's going to be really, really incredible and awesome." I mean, Philip would have gotten excited! But then Philip would have faith in a story that has already been told versus having faith in a God who says, "You've got to trust me. I'm doing something new and I'm inviting you to join Me and I want to know if you're in regardless of what happens. I want to know if you're in regardless of if you meet this Ethiopian eunuch or not."

So what's the next right thing for you as you think about your own life? Last night after the service, several people came to me with kind of knowing looks in their eyes and said, "My whispers are not like your whispers. You are starting a church but my whisper is we just quit our business. We are starting something else and we don't know what to do and we're down this deserted road." Well, all I can tell you is that when I was on that run and God breathed that word to me and Genesis came to mind, that was just the seed of an idea at that point and I was so scared.

I began to pray about where we were going to meet and all these places popped up and then then burned up. Then one of my friends said, "Have you ever thought about the Jewish Community Center in St. Louis Park?" I'm like, "You know we're a church, right?" Well, here's where we ended up meeting. [Slide shown.] This deserted road at the dead end of Cedar Lake Road right by West End and this tabernacle we set up is this beautiful home for us temporarily. Steve Haines is the worship leader among other things. [Slide shown.] Isn't that a great picture? That's Steve at our first service. We didn't know how many people were going to show up at our first service, but here's who showed up. [Slide shown.] It was packed and all throughout the whole service, I wept. Not because it would have to be packed for it to be successful. It was just like, "Lord, all I want to do is join Your work of making all things new. All I want to do is keep saying yes to the whispers that You bring in my life." Some I'll get wrong. Some I'll get right, but this is what I want to give the rest of my life to. Sometimes it will result in a packed room. Sometimes it will result in an empty room. Success is saying yes to the invitations that God has for you because you are wired up to do something unique in this world because everything is a restoration project and all God is asking you to do is do the next right thing. Amen? Amen!

Let me read this prayer to you by way of closing our time together. It's from an amazing book called *Guerrillas of Grace* by Ted Loder. So receive this prayer. You might want to close your eyes so you can just let this all the way in. If you fall asleep, consider that a gift from God.

O God, let something essential happen to me, something more than interesting or entertaining or thoughtful. O God, let something essential happen to me, something awesome, something real. Speak to my condition, Lord, and change me somewhere inside where it matters, a change that will burn and tremble and heal and explode me into tears or laughter or love that throbs or screams or keeps a terrible, cleansing silence and dares the dangerous deeds. Let something happen in me which is my real self, God.

O God, let something essential and passionate happen in me now. Strip me of my illusions of self-sufficiency, of my proud sophistications, of my inflated assumptions of knowledge and leave me shivering as Adam or Eve before the miracle of the natural—the miracle of this earth that nurtures me as a mother and delights me as a lover; the miracle of my body that breathes and moves, hungers and digests, sees and hears; that is

creased and wrinkled, shrinks in hurt, and swells in pleasure; that works by the most amazing messages of what and when and how coded and curled in every cell and that dares to speak the comforting word.

O God, let something essential and joyful happen in me now, something like the blooming of hope and faith, like a grateful heart, like a surge of awareness of how precious each moment is, that now, not next time, now is the occasion to take off my shoes, to see every bush afire, to leap and whirl with my neighbor, to gulp the air as sweet wine until I've drunk enough to dare to speak the tender word: "Thank you" or "I love you" or "You're beautiful" or "Let's live forever beginning now" because "I'm a fool for Christ's sake."

Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*