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"Reason for Hope: Character of God"

Acts 8

Good morning! My name is Deb Kielsmeier. For those of you who don't know me, I am the Pastor for Membership and Outreach, and I'm delighted that you are here on this holiday weekend. We are working through a series that we started this spring called A Reason for the Hope. This is our third Sunday. The title comes from a Scripture passage in 1st Peter that says, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have but do this with gentleness and respect."

So two things in that verse: "Be prepared to give an answer" if someone asks you, and the second thing that I think is *equally* as important is to "do this with gentleness and respect." I believe that *how* you share your answers with people who ask you about your faith is just as important as what you actually say. Let me say that again. How you say it and how you act when you share your faith is as important as what you say.

I would like to share with you from today's Scripture passage. It comes from Acts, Chapter 8. It has some examples of how someone shared his faith in a way that was just compelling and winsome. It actually not only changed one man's life but, at least by tradition, that man brought the church to Africa and the Coptic church was born. So what I'd like you to do is to grab your pew Bible if you have one. If you haven't been here before, we like people to write in their pew Bibles. So you can just grab your pen or pencil and I'll tell you where to mark them up. Or if you brought our own Bible, that's fine. We are on page 1,633. The Scripture reference is Acts 8:26. I'm just going to read this to you. It won't be up on the screen, but if you want to follow in your Bibles, please do. Hear the Word of God.

"Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means 'queen of the Ethiopians'). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it.'

"Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. 'Do you understand what you are reading?' Philip asked. 'How can I,' he said, 'unless someone explains it to me?' So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: 'He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer

is silent, so He did not open his mouth. In His humiliation He was deprived of justice. Who can speak of His descendants? For His life was taken from the earth.'

"The eunuch asked Philip, 'Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?' Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told Him the good news about Jesus." We know the passage goes on to say that the eunuch was baptized fully into the church. He was a God-fearer with the Jews because He had been worshipping at Jerusalem, but a eunuch was not fully included into the people of Israel, and *here* he was fully baptized as one of God's children and, as tradition says, he brought the church to Africa.

Okay, I'd love for us to just look at how it was that Philip was so effective in his witness. If you've got your pencils or your pens, go to verse 29 where it says, "The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it'" and underline the word Spirit. I've got to tell you, the Holy Spirit is *everything* when it comes to us sharing our faith. The Spirit was at the beginning and in the middle and at the end of this encounter of Philip with the eunuch.

This is the way that Philip was. He was sensitive to the nudging of the Holy Spirit. Did you see that? First, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, and I don't know if you are like me. I don't have too many angels of the Lord appearing to me. I don't know how that happened, if it was in a dream, but Philip was obedient. He went to the desert road. But then as he was walking, he knew that the Spirit was nudging him to go up next to this eunuch who was riding in a chariot. How did he know that? How did he know that he should go up and walk alongside of that chariot?

For me, I think it's easy when I begin my day to just sort of operate on a horizontal plane. The decisions I make are pretty much based on what's happening around me, the people I talk to, what I'm doing. I'm on this kind of a plane. But Philip, can you see how he was sort of inviting the Spirit into the conversation rather than just having a running commentary in his own mind about what was happening around him? He was listening to what the Holy Spirit was telling him and where the Spirit was nudging him, and that is something that we can do as well. We don't have to be apostles to invite God into our daily conversation.

I have a friend who, when he gets up in the morning always prays, "God, today show me who it is that I should talk to. Show me if there is someone who just needs a word of encouragement, if there is someone who just needs a smile. And then as you go about your day, let's say you are at work, at the grocery store, at your kid's soccer game, you can continue doing that. "God, is there anyone here that You want me to speak with?" It doesn't have to be a crusade that you are on, but just someone who needs a word of encouragement. Oftentimes people do that when they walk into Starbuck's. "Lord, is there anything you want me to do or say?" but nothing happens. That's fine, and they can just go about their day. But sometimes you'll feel that prompting. I kind of give you this as a word of encouragement. Try it this week. See if God doesn't prompt you even if it's just a smile or a question, to go up to someone and encourage them. That's what Philip did. When the Spirit prompted him he was obedient.

Here's the other thing I wanted to say about the Holy Spirit. I really believe this is important for us to get. If you have loved ones who are far from God and your heart just aches for them, sometimes you feel like it's up to you to share your faith with them and somehow try to get them to come back to faith. You feel tremendously responsible for that person's spiritual life. Lay that one down at the feet of God. It is not your responsibility. It is the Holy Spirit's responsibility. No

one can cause anyone to come back to God or to lay their life before Him unless the Holy Spirit draws them. That does put us in a position, though, where our prayer life and our prayers for our loved ones are more important, but no one that I know of has ever been manipulated or cajoled or argued or by guilt entered into the Kingdom of God so you don't have to worry about that. But do *pray* for your loved ones. Then it's the Holy Spirit's job.

But let see, we do have a part of this. Here is the cool thing. When we are attentive to the Holy Spirit and God is on the move, it is amazing how God will invite us into the process. That is the adventure, and that is where the fun starts to happen. So let's see what Philip does. He is prompted by the Holy Spirit. He runs up next to the chariot, he hears, he listens—that's key. He finds out that the Ethiopian eunuch is reading the prophet Isaiah. Now if someone is reading aloud a prophet, you probably go, "Hmmm, you're probably interested in spiritual things." That's a good assessment. The Ethiopian was coming back from the temple, so Philip knew he was interested. He knew that he was not putting up a wall, and he asked him a question.

I'd like you to do that. Go to verse 30 where it says that Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet and asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" So just go ahead and underline asked. Holy Spirit-driven, you listen and you ask questions. That is really good to know. If you ask someone questions, they will know that you are interested, and then if you listen to them with gentleness and respect, the conversation will open up.

We have a very good friend who lived for six years in Jerusalem. He was working for World Vision there. He had a Muslim friend whom he just loved, and they would go out all the time for coffee or for tea. They did that for an entire year. The whole time my friend simply asked him questions. "Tell me about Islam." "Tell me about your faith." "Tell me about your spiritual practice." "Tell me why this is so important to you." The conversation-- it was a wonderful spiritual conversation-- lasted for a whole year. This man never tried to change his Muslim friend's mind, never tried to convince him otherwise, but just respectfully listened to what he had to say. He wanted to learn about his friend's faith.

After a year, it turned. And the Muslim man began to ask him, "Tell me about *your* faith. I want to hear about what Jesus is all about and what Jesus did, and why you love Jesus." "Where does the hope in your heart come from?" Do you see how that works? People aren't necessarily going to want to listen to the hope that is within you unless they know that you are interested in what they have to say as well and, again, you don't do this just because someone is a project or you want to manipulate them but so that you can share the hope and the life that you have come to know.

Okay, verse 31. Here is the last thing to underline. "'How can I,' he asked 'unless someone explains it to me?' So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him." Underline invited. That is huge. Philip was invited into the conversation versus storming into this man's life, forcing himself into the conversation.

I don't know how many of you fly regularly. What is it about airplanes? You sit next to someone for three hours and you wonder, shall I talk to them or not? This is always a little bit of a quandary for me. About a month ago I was chatting with a young woman sitting next to me, and we were exchanging pleasantries. She asked me a little bit about myself, and I told her I was a pastor. Believe me, this can either totally shut down a conversation when people find out you are a pastor, sometimes they begin to apologize for having sworn so much or whatever they just

shared with you, or it can open it up. With her she said, "Wow, tell me, you being a woman, how is it that came to be a pastor?" This was the opening. She was interested. She wanted to know, and so I was able to share my story with her, and a little bit about how God had moved in *my* life so that I wanted to serve Him as a pastor. Remember, the invitation....

So let's think about this. It is Holy Spirit-driven, prayer is huge, ask good questions, and listen respectfully, not to manipulate but to love. Then when you are invited into the conversation, give the reason for the hope you have within you. That is what we are talking about in this series, a reason for the hope.

It is good to have an answer, but I just want to tell you this. It is very important that if you do not have an answer to a question that you do not shut down and decide, "I'm not going to talk about my faith or my experience with God because I don't have all the answers." Believe me, nobody has all the answers! The seminary professors don't have all the answers. The people who write the commentaries don't have all the answers. But you do have an answer! You do if you have the Holy Spirit and the person of Jesus Christ through that Spirit living in your life. If God has made a difference in your life, that is what people need to hear. So don't wait until you have every i dotted and every t crossed. Go ahead and share the joy that you know, and the best way is, to share your story because people don't really argue with your story. You don't have to have great comebacks or get into a debate about your story because your story is your own experience, isn't it? And so it is a wonderful thing to be able to share with those who invite you in.

There are the two books we'd suggest you read. The books discuss commonly asked, difficult questions about Christianity: one is called *Letters from a Skeptic* by Greg Boyd. The other one is called *I'm Glad You Asked*. Both are available at Pathway Bookstore. Read through these if you want to go into more depth or detail. To be honest, I think they are good for the kinds of questions we have as well.

So we are teaching-- this is a teaching series--and there is a question that comes up whenever we deal with the Old Testament. The eunuch was reading from the prophet Isaiah, right? That verse pretty clearly spoke about Jesus so Philip had a great segue into talking about how Jesus went to His death, "silent like a lamb before His shearer." But what I find is that often when people come to me with questions about the Old Testament, it is not about the vast majority of literature in the Old Testament that depicts a God who is loving and kind and peaceful, but it's about that little strand of violence that we see in the Old Testament.

I have got to say, it is difficult when you see a God who first created the world and then destroyed it with a flood, saving only one family. Or you see a God who tells the Israelites to go into Canaan and just massacre the Canaanites. Those Scripture passages are really hard, and they do tend to bar the door for some people who just can't seem to figure out. How do you reconcile this?

I'll tell you right up front, I'm not sure I can totally reconcile it so I'm not sure that this sermon is going to be completely intellectually satisfying to you. I am going to venture into it anyway because that *is* one of the huge questions you get about the Old Testament. The new atheists basically have been saying that religion is the thing that poisons people and if we didn't have religion we wouldn't have all these religious wars, Crusades and Inquisitions and so on going on. There is some truth to that but here are questions for us: Does the Old Testament sanctify

religious wars, genocide, and so forth? If it does, how do you reconcile that with Jesus' teaching?

Okay. Jesus, we know, was the Prince of Peace. He taught these things. Luke 6:27, which will be up on the screen so you don't have to flip around, Jesus said, "But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." That is Jesus' message. Jesus would rather die for His enemies than kill them and condemn them. He hung on Calvary, being tortured and executed, and the people who were executing Him, He asked God to forgive because, He said, they didn't know what they were doing.

Then when Jesus' apostles tried to jump into kind of a violent strain, for example, there was a time when Jesus and His disciples were in Samaria, and the Samaritans were not receiving them well. Let's put it this way, the disciples said, "Lord, should we call down fire from heaven and zap them all?" which *did* happen in the Old Testament by the way. Jesus said, "No, no." He rebuked them. "That is not how My Kingdom comes."

Then do you remember Peter? When Jesus was being led off the Mount of Olives from the Garden of Gethsemane to go to His death, His disciples drew their swords, and Peter lopped off the ear of one of the Roman guards. Jesus said, "What are you doing?" He picked up the ear and healed it and said, "Those who live by the sword will die by the sword." Jesus' message was radical in terms of the Kingdom coming through love and self-sacrificial pouring out, *not* by violence.

I'm going to go through some different strands of how scholars have tried to reconcile this. If you are interested in this conundrum, there's a great book that Greg Boyd is putting out soon called *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*. Boyd is the author of *Letters from a Skeptic* – another book we recommend.

There are three things you can do. The first is to dismiss the Old Testament, which is kind of what I want to do; I just want to take a big marker.... There was a movement in the early church called the Marcion movement that said the New Testament negates the Old Testament. It just doesn't work. They wanted to cut out huge swathes of the Old Testament and some of the New Testament as well that didn't line up with what Jesus was saying. Marcion was considered a heretic and since we have always embraced the Old Testament as divinely inspired Scripture, largely because Jesus did. Jesus quoted it as Scripture and respected it. We don't want to just throw out that whole part of the Scripture.

There *is* some validity in this in that the Israelites were a very ancient people. They understood God as their national God, a God who was for them and against others. Eventually we find out that this God used them to bring the Gospel to the whole world, to bless everyone, but their world view was somewhat limited as to how they understood God and how they understood God to work.

You can debate that with me, this is a debate, but here's what I find helpful when I think about this Old Testament testimony and the New Testament witness of Jesus. I believe that **all Scripture is indeed divinely inspired** and I hold to that but not all Scripture is equally weighted or authoritative. I know you agree with me because there are a lot of women in here who don't have their heads covered and there are a lot of men here who are listening to a woman preach

so you must have struggled a little bit about Scriptures saying that women should always have their head covered and women shouldn't teach.

I believe that there are certain Scriptures that are textually bound. They were meant for a certain people at a certain time, and they definitely spoke to those people, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they are not inspired or that they don't have something for us today. Listen to what Jesus says. John 5:36, "I have testimony weightier than that of John." John was considered a light that came into the world, but Jesus says, "My testimony is weightier." In many ways Jesus went beyond Scripture and reinterpreted it, didn't He? He affirmed the Old Testament, said it would not pass away until everything was fulfilled, but then He held on to it and reinterpreted it.

Here is another one. Hebrews 1:1, "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, Whom He appointed heir of all things and through Whom also He made the universe." This is what I believe we need to lock in. Jesus trumps any previous revelations of God. Jesus trumps them. Lock that one in, and I will come back to it. So we can kind of look at Old Testament Scripture in a way that holds Jesus as the definitive revelation of who God is.

Okay, there is another thing you can do besides just dismissing Old Testament. **You can try to blend the two.** You can say the Old Testament God who is largely gracious and loving but with a violent streak is a valid revelation, and you can say that Jesus is a valid revelation. You can either hold both of those which is hard because then you are never sure which God you are waking up to. Is it a capricious kind of angry God or is it a grace-filled loving and forgiving God? Or you can try to synthesize them, kind of bring them together somehow. Augustine did this, kind of where he tried to hold them both. The problem with this is that you kind of pull the rug out from what Jesus was saying. and it can become a little less radical, can't it? You can justify violence and Holy Wars by trying to blend both of these witnesses, but I would caution you against doing that. Don't let me persuade you though. I want the Scripture to.

So I'm going to read you some Scriptures about Jesus and the revelation that He is. Colossians 2:9, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form." Wow! The fullness of God lives in Christ. Hebrews 1:3, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation." In the Greek the base of that word is *character*. Jesus is God's character, "the exact representation of His Being, sustaining all things by His powerful Word." Jesus is the exact representation of the Father.

John 14:8-9, "Philip asked, 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.' Jesus answered: 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father.'" And then finally, John 10:30 "I and Father are One." Jesus trumps all previous revelations of God. You look at Jesus. You see His Father. So with these two truths, Jesus seems to endorse the Old Testament. He is the definitive revelation. How do we walk in that?

The third impulse is to **try to reinterpret what was happening in the Old Testament** so it's like you're over here and you're thinking, God is good, God is gracious, God would rather die for us than see us condemned. Now how do I understand the God who ordered the conquest of Canaan? How do I understand the flood? What people have done in the past is, they reinterpret what is happening over here in light of what they know of God's character, holding on to the fact that God is good.

Now again, going back to the early church origin, do you think that this is new? People hit this right away when they were trying to figure out what to do with Jesus in the early church. But origin decided, maybe what we can do is just spiritualize all those battles so it's really a deal where it is good against evil and actually, you probably do this if you are reading through some of this stuff, and you are thinking, how the heck does this apply to my life? You might begin to think of the battle of good against evil in your own life, but you know what? These Books were written down not according to *our* standards of historical accuracy, but they *were* written down as the historical *story of Israel*. It *did* happen. There might be a lot of hyperbole. There might be exaggeration, but historically there is a sense that these things did happen, so we can't just dismiss it all and say, oh, it was just spiritual.

But I think what we can do is say, you know what? There is something else going on here that I don't know. Down here on earth with my puny brain, I don't get it. I know God is good. Maybe this was a lesser evil that stamped out something that would have been so horrific and chaotic that we would have all been annihilated. I don't know, but that's where I land on this. I hold on to the goodness of God and say, whatever was happening, God must have had a reason, and eventually the Kingdom has come and the Gospel has been spread.

The bottom line is that Jesus reveals the character of God, and Jesus always needs to be the lens through which you read the Scriptures because He is the definitive revelation. Now if you think you don't wear glasses when you read Scripture, that you have a completely rational open mind, let me assure that is not the case. We can't help it. We just have assumptions. In seminary we call this hermeneutics. It is how you interpret things. If you read Old Testament scripture through what we know about Christ, this is called a Christocentric hermeneutic. Big words but they mean Jesus is the key to understanding the Old Testament. Jesus is the key to understanding the character of God and who our God is. If you want to know what God is like, keep your eyes on Jesus. He is the essence of the Father. And if you want to know what God's heart is like, look at Calvary. Look at the love that He poured out for you.

So in conclusion, if I were asked, "Hmmm, what about that Old Testament God?" I'd probably say, "You know, that is really a hard one for me, and it's really hard for me to explain. I can try to, but if you are really interested, I have some good books." In the end, I don't have all the answers. I struggle with it. But what I *do* know is the One who is the answer and that is Jesus. Jesus would rather die for His enemies and forgive those who killed Him than condemn them, and that, friends, is good news. That is the God that we know. Would you pray with me?

Lord, God, I am just so excited that we are talking about how we can share our faith. I am really excited that it is basically a Holy Spirit thing, and we don't have to argue anyone into the Kingdom. We don't even really have to have all the answers, but what we do need to do is love You and trust that You are good and that Your Holy Spirit would move, both in our hearts and in the lives of those we love. Would You use us? We pray this in the strong Name of Jesus. 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.