

Traveling to desolate or far-off places is easier if you are with someone you know and trust. But even the best companions cannot guarantee security, as unplanned events can always cut you off from home and loved ones. More difficult is when you have no choice but to travel alone due to the loss of income, a loved one, or the limitation so facing. Everyone fears having to travel through life alone!

Our reading introduced us to a disciple named Philip. Fearing for his life, he escaped Jerusalem, as a man named Saul was persecuting anyone who accepted Jesus as Messiah and Savior. An encounter with an angel changed his travel plans, which led to an encounter with another lonely soul. He met a wealthy, court official from North Africa, who was also leaving Jerusalem where he had gone to seek God. He left with more questions than answers and although his life was in God's hands, he felt alone.

Philip was also alone; cut off from Jerusalem and other disciples like fruit cut from a vine. His family, friends, safety net, and familiar life seemed far away. This was a trip made out of fear for his life. He was hiding. Afraid! He was traveling alone. On the other hand, the Ethiopian had never been connected to people of faith and longed to be attached. Neither of these lonely travelers were comfortable with their status in life.

Consider how often we feel this way, and how this is one of the more familiar themes of life! Two unattached strangers met in the wilderness where there were few props (and certainly no internet or cell phone connections.) They were as alone as Jesus had been in his confrontation with the devil as he began his ministry. As they were to find out, even though they felt alone, neither really was. That is the point of the Gospel which Jesus started over and over again!

In John 15, Jesus said he was like a vine to which we are attached like branches. If we remain with him we have nourishment, support, and life. No matter what, we are never alone. Just as in the season of winter (such a cold, lonely time) branches look dead, and yet as they are attached to the vine, trunk, or roots, they will be kept alive!

Even when we feel alone, faith assures us we are not. Jesus is like a mother's umbilical cord that miraculously keeps an unborn child alive when the outside world cannot see any life at all. In the same way, Jesus fills us with his life, even when we feel alone!

Philip was alone but carried life with him. An Ethiopian was alone but was surprised to learn he wasn't after all. God's powerful love is greater than any earthly distance, disappointment, or empty moment of life. Both of these men found what they never expected. Their fears and loneliness were replaced with the fullness of peace that is beyond human understanding.

How similar their journeys were to ours. How often do we seek to escape, or do all we can

to find a solution to whatever makes us feel alone? How does it feel when our only choice seems to be to hide or avoid? How scary is it when we feel as if we have to go at it alone? What is it like to lose a job, feel underappreciated, or not receive the love and attention you crave? What is it like to lose a spouse, or have a child grow up and disappear? What is it like to lose a best friend? How much of life is, in fact, full of traveling alone?

A favorite book of mine is called "Desert Solitaire." It was written by Edward Abbey who spent several summers as a ranger at Arches National Park in Utah. Each summer he would spend months, all alone, high in a fire tower. His only connection with the outside world was a radio. His job was to be a lookout for the beginning of a forest fire and report them before they got out of control. He would radio the coordinates of a lightning strike so airplanes could drop water or firefighters could be brought in and the forest could be saved. He willingly accepted a lonely post, for the sake of keeping an entire forest safe.

If we live by our gifts alone, disappointment can be great. AS we live with and share the life God has filled us with, victories are endless. What direction is God's angel asking you to head off in? What witnesses have been near you that you have possibly ignored? Whose lives will you touch, and which lives have touched yours?

Sometimes, even with great faith, we wonder about those empty times of life. How come, even though I believe, I sometimes feel alone? Always remember that in our own seasons of life, what sometimes seems lifeless and dead, like branches in the winter, really isn't. There is life in the roots of our faith, as Jesus reminded in his parable about the vine. That is the core of the Gospel which changed Philip, and Ethiopian, and you and me!

Because God's love flows through us, we can never be alone or without his power, promises, and peace. And just as what happens in the plant world, even pruning or the dormancy of winter's sleep (which appears devastating) actually allows for any living thing to become even stronger and more fruitful.

By faith I am like an aqueduct in the desert where the waters of life are not only for me but flow through me to others. I am like tubing from an oxygen tank for a patient gasping for air. Philip and that Ethiopian thought they were all alone, but Christ brought them together to remind them that would never be the case!

Who has God brought to me, or to whom does he send me? Who will I live for?

Neither traveler in today's text planned to be anything but alone. Like them, we might not get to choose who touches or tastes Christ's love through me, but when my connection is Christ, his love lives in me. The fruit of his spirit is his life in me. As I live for Christ there can be no disappointment. God's grace means no one should ever need travel along again. Faith is the surrender that insures this is a fact, and not just a promise.

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