

Bristol Lutheran
Easter 4
May 7, 2017
Acts 8:26-39

Salim Makki meet Jorge Mario Bergoglio.

It was a strange encounter. Two people, from opposite ends of the world. One is devout Muslim, the other Christian. One grew up in Dearborn, Michigan...the other in Buenos Aires, Argentina. One a football player at the University of Michigan...the other a humble servant of the people. Two people, with nothing in common...except they are in the same place, at the same time, with the chance to meet face to face.

Jim Harbaugh, the coach of the Michigan football team – recently took his team to Rome for a team building experience. It was more than a sight-seeing trip...because coach fostered the spirit of competition, with everything.

One day he instructed his kids that if they while in Rome they would have a chance to meet Jorge...and if any of the players wanted to be up front, and shake his hand – they had to write an essay on what this opportunity means to them. The best two essays would win that chance.

Why would a 20 year old kid, who loves football, is a devout Muslim, on a trip to Rome, waste his time with an essay to meet Jorge Bergoglio?

Here is a snippet of what Salim wrote:

Jorge is sincerely one of my heroes. In a time where Muslims have been scrutinized and wrongly identified with violence, he has defended Islam and stated that not all Muslims are violent. He has continued his support of Islam by washing the feet of Syrian Muslim refugees and calling for mutual respect during the holy month of Ramadan. A true hero defends and helps the hopeless, and that's why this man is a hero.

How could that essay not be a winner?

Sometimes strange encounters happen. Unexpectedly, we entertain angels, servants, fellow disciples –and children of God, in uncertain places, unaware of what is happening around us. Unaware of how God is using us – where the Spirit is sending us, pushing, pulling, guiding, challenging.

Salim of course knew Jorge – but Jorge did not know Salim, or the impact that he had on Salim's life – though they never had met.

Philip had no idea about the Ethiopian Eunuch on his way back from Jerusalem, with the scroll of Isaiah in his hand.

It is strange encounter, to say the least. The Ethiopian – a high ranking official, highly educated, in charge of the Queen’s treasury, in his chariot with a chauffeur (because it would be hard to read the scroll and drive at the same time), who is a foreigner in a foreign land. As a eunuch, either born with a sexual defect or castrated, he would be outcast in Jewish culture.

Two men differing in race, religion, education, economic status, sexual identity – and God brings them together in a moment of grace, love, acceptance, and unity.

Philip, was chosen as a deacon by the disciples, and deacons had specific and important jobs, wait on the tables to ensure everyone is fed equitably. That’s it. Philip had hoped and prayed for a broader job description. The Spirit said – ok!

Just FYI...careful what you pray for, because you may get it.

Can you imagine, Philip running alongside this chariot, breathlessly asking an audacious question (do you know what you are reading?) and jumping in. Scary maybe for Philip, but more so for the Ethiopian. We have to remember, they are in the middle of nowhere and roads during ancient time are usually dangerous and lonely places. Not to mention it was a bit rude of Philip. But the angel urged him into this ministry.

Philip meet the Ethiopian Eunuch...and see what God does.

As they are talking, out of nowhere, miraculously, water appears – in the desert mind you. And what prevents this baptism from happening...nothing.

For years we have tried to make requirements for baptism, often strict and full of law, and not much grace. But these strangers in a strange land, share in this God moment called baptism – with no pastor, no confession of sin, no creed statement of belief, no age requirement, not parental promises,

no pre-meeting with the pastor, no sponsors, no church community...it is first and foremost God, claiming this Ethiopian eunuch as God's child, through the hands of deacon Philip. I suppose it is witnessed by the chauffeur, or maybe he was baptized as well. Because God's saving power will not be restrained!

God creates out of nothing...and nothing will get in God's way from showing up. Nothing prevents God from choosing us, claiming us, using us to be the Christ's church caring for one another and proclaiming peace, justice, and love in the world .

That is the gift celebrated with Lesley and her family. Even though she is very young, and will make mistakes, and we will break our promises –God never stops blessing her, loving her, and giving her as gift for this world.

That is true wherever God calls us. To different ministries, at different times. Pulling us from one place to the next. The Spirit drew Philip to the chariot, and then snatched him away after the baptism. And the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing, because of the God moments they shared together.

Nothing stops God from bringing people together – in unexpected ways, for uncertain times, to do ministry together. And God will call us to places we never expected. Maybe the Spirit pushes us to turn to a stranger and ask for their help, or to ask if they need help.

God has gone ahead of us, knows our future. God has visited the places we are sent. God sets the stage, for our strange encounters, when ministry becomes more than the narrow job description Philip was given. God moves where we least expect God to move, and nothing prevents God from moving through the hearts of all people, as we share this gift of life.

Salim Makki meet Jorge Mario Bergoglio...

...otherwise known as Pope Francis.

A Muslim football player from Michigan, meets the Pope.

God has a way to show up in unexpected ways.

Gracefulness. Thankfulness. Immersion. Inclusion. Acceptance. Unity.
Working for a world together. Or in the words of Jim Harbaugh, "A world that includes everybody."

God is working. Through Lesley, through you, through me,
Philip and the eunuch, the pen of football player, or the
words of a Pope. Nothing stops God, and God never stops.