

The Value of the Assist
Exodus 2:1-10; Acts 9:26-28; John 1:43-51
Trey Davis
Ridge Road Baptist Church, Raleigh
March 13, 2022

The ACC men's basketball tournament took place this week, so we have officially entered March Madness (or, depending on who you pull for, March Sadness). I remember a fairly lengthy time in my life when the basketball played during this month was utterly consuming. There were a few years between school and kids where I would take the first two days of the NCAA tournament as vacation days, set up different games on multiple TV or computer screens and binge basketball until my eyes and brain were bulging with what I had taken in.

The best parts of those days were the buzzer beaters, the last second shots that swung the outcome of a game in ways that were unexpected. 1983: the Cardiac Pack over Houston. 1992: Duke beats Kentucky in overtime when Christian Laettner hits The Shot. 1998: tiny Valparaiso takes down Ole Miss in the first round when coach's son Bryce Drew hits a three at the buzzer. There is a long, long list of games that can be summarized in one sentence, and every college basketball fan who saw them remembers those moments immediately from just a few words.

When the players who hit those shots are interviewed after the game, they always say something like, "It's the moment you dream of as a kid shooting hoops in the driveway, hitting that last second shot to win the game."

It's the stuff that dreams are made of. In our dreams, we're always the ones taking—and making—the buzzer beater.

* * *

Today we look at three different scenes from our scripture: one from Exodus, one from Acts, and one from John. The first of these, the story from Exodus, is probably the most familiar: Moses as a baby placed in a basket of reeds and set in the river. We frequently know this as a story about Moses—much of Exodus is presented as the life story of Moses, and this introduction to the baby is the narrative that launches that saga for most of us.

Except that...if we were looking for the most interesting and dynamic character in this story, it wouldn't be Moses. Despite being the only named individual in these verses, Moses is actually barely a character at all. He's really more like an object, passed around from one set of hands to another but incapable of making any decisions or evolving as a human being in this scene.

If Moses isn't the main character of this passage, then it raises the question of who is, and there are three potential answers here, all unnamed women: the mother, the sister, or the princess. There's a good argument to be made that the mother is the central character: she initiates the action in the beginning and comes back around at the end of the story, providing a sense of resolution. There's also a decent argument to be made for the princess, as she is the one with the most power and therefore the one capable of determining the outcome for everyone else. If Disney has taught us anything, it's that usually the princess is the center of the story. But I really like reading this story with an eye fixed on the sister.

Moses' sister, whom we will later learn is named Miriam, is the one who makes decisions where we can really see her mental gears turning. We don't know why the mother puts baby Moses in the river—perhaps to save him, but perhaps just because she cannot bear to be around if he is taken from her and killed. But we know exactly why the sister has gone to the river (apparently on her own accord): “to see what would happen to” Moses.¹ In this moment, Miriam is a spy, taking in information so that she can navigate tricky situations in the future.

Then the Pharaoh's daughter appears and discovers the baby; here, Miriam shifts from being spy to being puppetmaster. Despite having the authority to do whatever she wants, the princess seems putty in Miriam's hands. Miriam intervenes as soon as Moses is identified as Hebrew, offering to help by finding a nurse while simultaneously eliminating any possibility of an option where baby Moses doesn't survive. Then she cleverly fetches Moses' mother, so that in the end, she has orchestrated a scenario where Moses' mother will get paid to raise him. Miriam is a genius.

I like reading this story with Miriam as the main character not only because she's so clever but also because she seems to be the one on which everything else hinges. Without Miriam, this story completely falls apart.

* * *

Hold onto those thoughts and consider the passage from Acts, a passage which occurs just after Saul's Damascus road conversion. Saul—converted so freshly that he is still known as “Saul” rather than “Paul”—travels to Jerusalem and attempts to connect with the disciples, but they are understandably wary and want nothing to do with him. Enter Barnabas, who vouches for Saul, mentors him, and allows him to have his place among the other earliest Christians. It is a passage with themes that will repeat later in Acts until Saul/Paul eclipses Barnabas and shapes the church for centuries to come with his prolific writing.

Like Miriam, Barnabas is pretty savvy. The scripture doesn't elaborate on what exactly he says or how he says it, but he must be eloquent and persuasive to swing the room of disciples when their lives are on the line. Simply retelling the facts doesn't seem like it would be enough; Barnabas must know how to put just the right spin on the situation. Also like Miriam, it seems like this story falls apart without Barnabas in the middle of it, even if it is more tempting to view this as Saul's story.

* * *

And that scripture brings us to this week's disciple, Philip. Philip is another of the disciples who doesn't get a whole lot of press, but he does show up in the scripture more than one might realize. It's just in very small slivers.

Out of all of the mentions he gets in scripture, the gospel reading this morning perhaps best illustrates Philip's character. In this story, Jesus encounters Philip and calls him as a disciple immediately. Philip responds not only by following Jesus but also by recruiting Nathanael to join in as well. Most of the rest of the story then focuses on Nathanael.

¹ Exodus 2:4

This is how Philip will appear throughout our scripture: he is the connection between Jesus and others. In one of the versions of the story of the loaves and fishes, he appears not as the solution to feeding the masses but rather as part of the process. He serves as a connection between Jesus and a Greek community who seeks Jesus, and he opens the door for Jesus to teach at the Last Supper. Every time Philip shows up in our scripture, he primarily serves as a connection between Jesus and someone else. He is the bridge.

* * *

There isn't a lot of glory in being a bridge. When people talk about the buzzer beaters I mentioned at the start of this sermon, they typically focus on Lorenzo Charles, Christian Laettner, and Bryce Drew. Those are the players who hit the game-winning shots. Because we're in the Triangle, I'm sure that most of you can also name Dereck Whittenburg, who set up Lorenzo's dunk, and that you can probably identify Grant Hill as the guy who threw the ball to Laettner. But I'm equally confident that you don't remember that a guy named Jaime Sykes inbounded the ball for Valparaiso, and a player named Bill Jenkins caught the pass and dumped it off to Bryce Drew who hit the shot.

I wish I could show you that play, because a description doesn't really do it justice. Sykes is inbounding, and he does that job well, but the clock isn't running while he does his part—he has plenty of time to gather himself before he unloads the pass. Drew hits the shot, and it's definitely not a gimme, but his feet are set and he's essentially unguarded. But the middleman, Jenkins, is the one who really blows me away, showing some incredible athleticism. He elevates between two defenders to catch the ball, then twists his body in midair and passes it again around another defender before he even hits the ground. It is an unbelievable fraction of a second of basketball.

And yet, he's not the focal point. Again, there's not a lot of glory in being the guy who passes the ball. It's not the thing young players dream about in their driveways. It's a critical, desperately important role that, more likely than not, goes unnoticed.

* * *

The Bible is full of stories about these characters, individuals who appear briefly and are easy to overlook but serve as crucial connections for the overarching story of the Christian faith. The three we mention this morning—Miriam, Barnabas, and Philip—are just the tip of the iceberg. Examining these three characters in conjunction, however, highlights several commonalities that speak to how we might also fulfill this crucial but overlooked role.

It would be easy to assume that these characters are relatively passive, that part of how they slip into the background is by remaining stagnant while others take the wheel...but that isn't the case. Instead, they're decisive and quick to take action. Miriam doesn't wait for someone else's plan to rescue Moses but instead comes up with her own. Barnabas inserts himself into the group of disciples on behalf of Saul instead of waiting for the disciples to come to him for a recommendation. And Philip moves so quickly that the text doesn't even describe him as choosing to follow Jesus: Jesus says, "Follow me" and Philip's immediate reaction is to go find Nathanael. These are people of action. Their actions aren't showy or elaborate or prolonged, but they are dynamic and vibrant.

They are also bold. Miriam puts herself at risk simply by approaching the Pharaoh's daughter and initiating a conversation with her. She is bothering a royal, intruding on the princess's personal time and space. And she is suggesting that the princess violate the Pharaoh's law by protecting a Hebrew baby. Likewise, Barnabas puts his reputation on the line by advocating for Saul, and he also risks the future of the church by giving Saul—known at the time primarily as a persecutor—entry into the disciples' inner circle.

The risks of Miriam and Barnabas are apparent, but Philip's is a less obvious gamble. Jesus approaches Philip and issues a straightforward command, "Follow me." Philip responds favorably—we know that he does follow Jesus, that he describes Jesus just two verses later as "him about whom Moses and the prophets wrote." So he clearly sees something in Jesus that moves him, inspires him, motivates him. But instead of soaking the moment in for himself, he immediately shares it with another.

We are not inclined to share the things that inspire and motivate us. We frequently keep them to ourselves, afraid that others won't understand why we are moved. We believe, somehow, that the things that we treasure the most will lose some of their value if we share them.

When I was in high school, one of the most frequent weekend activities was to go to the video store and rent a movie. We'd go as a group, walk through the aisles and pull boxes off the shelves, then collect them and compare them and eventually choose one to take home. It was always a little unnerving to show others what you'd selected. Sometimes, this was a date night, and that really ratcheted up the pressure, but even with your friends, it was a bit of a challenge to show them something you liked and hope that they liked it too. I suspect there were a few movies that I adored that I never suggested to the group for fear of having my choices laughed at or shot down.

That was just with VHS tapes. It's not hard to imagine the pressure when we're talking about faith, about our understanding of Christ. For Philip, it is risky to invite someone else into his faith like this. Jesus could be more madman than Messiah; Philip has only heard two words from him. It is a risk we are often loath to take.

Part of what Philip risks he indeed loses, something that is accentuated in the verses detailing Jesus' conversation with Nathanael. When Nathanael gets an audience with Jesus, he starts asking questions. First he asks them of Philip, skeptical that anything good can come out of Nazareth; then he asks them of Jesus. Nathanael uses his moment with Christ to solidify and advance his faith. Philip, on the other hand, uses his moment with Christ to go get Nathanael. He passes on the chance to have a one-on-one with Jesus.

Philip's is a role of sacrifice. He sees that there is something to be gained, a greater good...but he also sees that someone must be willing to lose their personal benefit for that greater good.

As a result, this is a role that requires humility. Philip demonstrates this immediately. Barnabas is known throughout the book of Acts for his generous spirit.² Miriam humbles herself before the Pharaoh's daughter even as she orchestrates Moses' salvation. The characters who are willing to serve in these unassuming roles understand from the outset that their roles will not result in their own triumph. They are willing to work for something bigger.

* * *

² Wall, Robert W. 1996. "The Acts of the Apostles," *New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 10. Abingdon: 153.

It's been over 20 years since Valparaiso defeated Ole Miss. Bill Jenkins—the man who caught the inbound pass and then quickly passed it again—now works in marketing for a company called Epsilon.³ He is living a normal life, one where basketball probably only shows up as often as it does for the rest of us.

But in March, while CBS airs the tournament, he sees his younger image again, rising up between the defenders, catching, twisting, releasing, and celebrating. He may not hear an announcer identify who he is, but that doesn't seem to matter. He says he never gets tired of it, says, "Every time I watch it, I get the willies, dude."⁴

There may not be a lot of fame in making the assist...but the greater good it leads to can consist of immeasurable, unfathomable, spine-tingling joy and excitement. It can still be the stuff that dreams are made of. It can still give you the willies.

³ Radcliffe, J. R. (2018, March 14). *Twenty years after he played part in iconic NCAA moment, Glendale's Bill Jenkins still loves the annual reminders*. Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. Retrieved March 12, 2022, from <https://www.jsonline.com/story/communities/northshore/sports/2018/03/14/twenty-years-after-he-played-part-iconic-ncaa-moment-glendales-bill-jenkins-still-loves-annual-remin/424323002/>

⁴ Ibid.