

"Journeying to the Digital Wilderness: Encountering Christ Beyond the Church Walls"

Sermon on Acts 8:26-40 by Sarah TevisTownes

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The full Chapel Service is available to watch at https://youtu.be/5txVLNlyMIQ?si=x4AUUoVpmWxLd-_e

Thank you again for having me. My name is Sarah, and I'm a local church pastor as well as a digital pastor on TikTok and Instagram where I have over 225K followers.

Today, I want to talk to you about what it looks like to prepare for the incarnation of Christ in the world by getting out of our own way (and maybe getting out of the church a little more often).

I'm known now as a TikTok pastor, but I was a reluctant evangelist.

I was definitely a preach-with-your-actions-not-words kind of Christian.

I didn't even want my sermons online! What if someone misunderstood them and criticized me or the church? God forbid we get a bad Google review...

But like Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch who went into the water together and emerged transformed, I experienced a conversion of sorts in the wilderness.

When the pandemic hit, digital tools became an invaluable way to stay in touch, so during that first year of intense isolation, I ventured onto social media—not to talk about Jesus, at first, but to have some fun and let off steam.

The church administrator and I, the only staff in the church building that first year, started bonding over silly videos we saw. Almost as a dare, we convinced each other to make some videos of our own.

Mine weren't about Jesus (not at first). My earliest videos were about service dogs.

I found a community of other people online with disabilities and medical alert dogs and I built an audience there. Once I had enough followers to live stream, I figured - why not get to know some the fans? But the more I interacted live, the harder it became to keep my pastor job a secret.

When I finally got up the nerve to confess what I did for work, the reaction surprised me. I thought my audience would ditch me. I mean, who likes Christians...? But instead, the questions started pouring in.

“Wait, women can be pastors?”

“Why does the Bible seem to blame people’s disabilities on their sin?”

“Are there examples of people with disabilities serving God?”

“What about people who are outcasts for other reasons?”

“Can non-binary and trans people follow Jesus?”

“What does the Bible have to say about homosexuality?”

“Is hell real?”

“Will you pray for me...?”

They begged me to do some more progressive Christian content, so I said sure. Why not?

For those unfamiliar with TikTok, I’m going to show you a quick example of the kind of videos I’m talking about. And if you’re studying for a theology final with atonement on the list of topics, maybe this will help.

And a shout out to Father Mathew Moretz on YouTube for the original idea to use Peeps to explain atonement.

(The referenced video is available here: [https://www.tiktok.com/@disorganized.religion/video/6944105618051452166?q=atonement peeps&t=1708723295150](https://www.tiktok.com/@disorganized.religion/video/6944105618051452166?q=atonement%20peeps&t=1708723295150))

The video itself was fun, but it also sparked conversations in the comments and live streams that revealed the presence of God in unexpected ways.

People were *ravenous* for connection... and hope... and meaning... and spiritual grounding.

Thankfully, with a little searching, I found other clergy experimenting like I was, and we organized to build a progressive Christian movement on the platform.

3 years later, there are over 300 of us serving the digital community on TikTok, where our videos have over 380 MILLION combined views.

My channel alone regularly reaches more people each month than there are members in the entire United Church of Christ.

So why aren’t these millions of converts not coming to our churches?

Some are! (But it’s still a small percentage)

The folks who watch my videos tend to be the people who, under normal circumstances, hear the word Jesus and RUN in the other direction...not because of a lack of faith. Not because of some flaw in their character. And not because their local church doesn't have contemporary music or a good Sunday school program!

They run because they've encountered Christians.

Christians and our institutions ARE known for our positive contributions like building hospitals and schools, but we're also known for shaming and blaming people who are poor or living with disabilities.

As we observe World AIDS Day, it's good to remember that at the height of the AIDS epidemic, some Christians became known for bringing people food, and fighting for legislation to protect same-sex relationships. Christian pastors and volunteers became known in small circles for hugging those no one would touch and for holding people physically and spiritually through some of their darkest days.

But Christians on a large scale were known for loudly proclaiming hate and blame against the LGBTQ+ community. Even "progressive" churches let people down by remaining silent and not standing up against the stigma and hate leveled against our siblings with AIDS.

We may be known for our love, but we are also known for participating in racism and genocide, and for shutting out anyone who doesn't fit the heteronormative, white-supremacist version of what "normal" looks like.

We here in this service know a liberating God who loves and heals and transforms lives, but you can also understand why folks don't trust that they'll find that God in the church.

Imagine a farmer who raises bees inviting someone over who's been hospitalized for bee stings. The farmer can say - "The honey's so good! My bees are calm. They're not like those OTHER bees." But that's a big ask. The risk's just too great.

People have been stung over and over again by Christians and our churches, and **we can't just put a rainbow flag or black lives matter sign on the door and expect people to come in.**

If we want to share the Good News, like Philip, we have to go to into the wilderness and meet people where they are.

AND be willing to humble ourselves and be guests, not hosts for a change.

Philip is the identified teacher in our story, but he's really the guest of the Ethiopian eunuch. They're not in Philip's house or in the temple. They're outside on a wilderness road and Philip's

on foot. The eunuch is sitting in a chariot surrounded by an entourage. If the eunuch gets tired of Philip's preaching, he has a quick escape plan!

It can feel incredibly vulnerable to open yourself to the Word and the Holy Spirit the way the Ethiopian eunuch did. **The safety of his chariot gave him an extra measure of comfort that allowed him to be curious and seek out Divine meaning and connection.**

I've seen this happen in the digital space too.

On TikTok and Instagram Reels, people scroll through videos and live streams on their own terms from their own space. They can stop and watch a pastor smash peeps and talk about atonement or they can keep scrolling.

They're driving the proverbial chariot.

And for people healing from religious trauma, having agency in the space they're exploring spirituality is particularly important.

The Ethiopian eunuch, in his own chariot, feels safe enough to ask questions, and as a result, he connects to the passage from Isaiah and recognizes himself in it—someone who's experienced humiliation and been deprived of justice, someone who's been denied descendants.

And he asks - "Is this talking about the author or someone else?"

And Philip says - "Let me tell you about this Jesus guy...how he went out of his way to spend time with and honor people who others feared and rejected. How he lived out the promise of restoration in Isaiah 56 which says that eunuchs who follow God's word will have a place with God forever and their offerings WILL be accepted. Let me tell you about how Jesus didn't marry or have descendants himself, but how he saw all of humanity as his brothers and sisters. Let me tell you about how despite his humiliation and suffering, he was able to defeat sin and death and show us all a path to new life."

And the eunuch not only begins to recognize himself in the scripture and in the promises of God but in the person of Jesus Christ himself.

It's at that point he stops the chariot and asks - "Is there anything standing in the way of me being baptized? Is there anything standing in the way of me joining this Living Body of Christ?"

After hours of talking about the life and love of Christ, Philip is not about to stand in the way! He hops out of the chariot and walks right into the water and baptizes him.

We too are invited to get out of the way, and to go where people are. Where people feel safe. We are invited to be guests in the world.

We are invited to listen and engage with people as we ask curious questions and hold each other in love.

If we're willing to try that, and to be honest about our faith and tell the story of the God we love with humility and openness, I've seen it over and over again, people begin to recognize themselves in the story of Jesus. And in the person of Jesus. They begin to recognize the image of God reflected in themselves and in the people they love, and they also begin to recognize the systems of power and oppression that work against God's beloved children.

And you will too.

Before you go out into the wilderness, know that it'll change you. You WILL almost certainly encounter God there.

It happens every time I'm a guest interacting with people who are genuinely curious or seeking connection. Something in ME changes.

That was an unexpected effect of my journey into the digital wilderness. I should have studied today's text more closely! Philip didn't just tell the Ethiopian eunuch - sure, yeah - you can be baptized. *Philip goes under the water with him and they rise together.* And in that moment, the Spirit of God shows up. Philip gets whisked away and the eunuch departs rejoicing.

Both are changed forever.

I didn't expect that for myself. I didn't expect public ministry in the digital space to transform ME. But it has. It's transformed MY understanding of the Body of Christ. It's transformed my reading of scripture. I've now had the privilege of interacting with people far outside my little circle in Albuquerque, FAR outside my culture and upbringing and faith.

I've not only become a less reluctant evangelist, I've become more tuned in and connected to the Christ my faith proclaims.

And yes - there is a cost.

It's not always smooth sailing. Anytime we leave the church for a wilderness road, there will be risks.

But for every one person I've encountered online who's angry that I'm a queer woman pastor talking about Jesus on TikTok, I've met 10 thousand people who say thank you just for showing up. I've met thousands who've taught me about their unique perspectives and experiences of God and shared with me stories of miracles. I've met thousands more who've said God's

growing their spiritual life as a result of our interactions in the digital wilderness. I've met thousands who are organizing for positive change in their local communities.

TikTok is not the path for everyone, and I don't recommend we all leave here today and become TikTok evangelists, although if that's something you're interested in, I'll leave my contact info in the chat.

My invitation to us IS to consider, where might we venture outside the walls of our local churches. Where might we go with humility as guests to learn and listen? How might we dare to show up authentically, with hope, as people shaped by a loving and liberating God, open to the possibility that the Living Body of Christ is being born anew?

Amen.

May you go in peace, blessed by a loving and liberating God, open to God showing up in unexpected ways.