

# **On watch (Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8)**

**Fruitful ministry becomes sustainable when it is shared, person to person and generation to generation.**

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Retired US Coast Guard captain Donald Coffelt once urged me, his pastor, to rest. “On a ship at sea, someone is always ‘on watch,’” he explained. “When one person’s watch is finished, the person coming on duty salutes and says, ‘I have the watch.’ The person leaving salutes back and replies, ‘You have the watch.’ There is never a gap, and everyone gets time to rest.” On the heels of this sage advice, he also issued an accompanying offer to keep watch over a task so that I might step away and trust the necessary work to capable colleagues and lay leaders.

Sharing the watch emerges as a unifying theme across this week’s lectionary texts. Fruitful ministry becomes sustainable when it is shared, person to person and generation to generation, and only when we recognize the idolatry of believing we must discern God’s will—or set out to do God’s will—alone.

The Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8 is under no delusion that a life of faith is a solo endeavor. A man accustomed to shouldering heavy responsibility, he is unembarrassed by his desire for deeper understanding. Led by the Spirit, he rightly discerns that he needs a guide—a companion—to help him grasp the words of the

prophet Isaiah.

When Philip, also led by the Spirit, goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza to function as this guide, he takes up the watch. Beginning with the very scripture with which the eunuch had been struggling, “[Philip] proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.” It behooves us to note that it is necessary for Philip to meet the eunuch at the place where the eunuch is, not the other way around. When offering to take up the watch, we do well to meet the current watch keepers where they are instead of expecting them to come to us.

Roadside water appears, the sight of which causes the eunuch barely to contain his enthusiasm for receiving the sacrament of baptism. Philip obliges and is immediately snatched away to Azotus to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ all the way to Caesarea. Alone again, but still dripping with baptismal waters, the Ethiopian eunuch takes up the watch once more, this time as one who is claimed by Christ and called to follow in the way of the suffering servant of Isaiah.

This week’s epistle lesson and psalm echo Acts’s call to shared ministry while simultaneously lifting up the source of the love that fuels the mission of the church. 1 John 4:19 succinctly proclaims the order of things: “We love because [God] first loved us.” The final verses of Psalm 22 invite us to consider both the unending love and dominion of God and our role in receiving and extending that love from one generation to another.

Psalm 22 is likely better known for its opening verses, recited by Jesus from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” While I do not suggest, as some biblical scholars do, that in his moment of deep agony Jesus is intentionally invoking the entire psalm, I do believe that the ending of Psalm 22 provides perspective when we find ourselves and those we love suffering and feeling forsaken by God.

As the Lord once gave his servant Job the benefit of a tiny glimpse of God’s eye view, so the psalmist herself widens the lens of her experience of suffering without backing away from its gruesome reality. Thus, the psalmist’s lament “I am poured out like water, / and all of my bones are out of joint; / my heart is like wax; / it is melted within my breast; / my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, / and my tongue sticks to my jaws; / you lay me in the dust of death” faithfully co-exists with the promise of God’s ultimate deliverance: “Posterity will serve [the Lord]; / future

generations will be told about the Lord, / and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, / saying that he has done it.”

The gospel text reminds us that even shared ministry will bear no fruit unless it is rooted in God. Disciple to disciple, and generation to generation, may we abide in God, sharing the watch as we traverse the unending sea of God’s abiding love.