

Did you watch the Academy Awards last Sunday night? I did – but *not* because I’d seen any of the major films and performances that were nominated. What I was interested in seeing was how a nominated short film would do. A film I had watched on YouTube after seeing a brief news spot about one of the actors in it. His name is Robert Tarango and he’s deaf and legally blind, and this was the first film he’d ever acted in. So in the news clip he was asked, “What is it like to have the first film you’ve acted in be nominated for an Academy Award?” And he just laughs and signs that it is great! Now you might think it is type casting for him to play a deaf-blind man in this short film – but this might actually be the first time a deaf and legally blind person has played a deaf-blind lead role in any film that’s been nominated for an Academy Award.

The short film is called, “Feeling Through.” And the heart of the film is what happens when an apparently homeless young man notices a middle-aged man standing on an urban street corner past midnight on a cold November night. The man is holding up a small sign in his hands that reads: “I am deaf and blind. Tap me if you can help me to cross the street.” Can you imagine how boldly vulnerable you would have to be to stand there waiting at that time of night? Not being able to see or hear anyone approaching you? I was struck by his calm patience and apparent trust that *someone* would come along – despite the hour – to help him and not hurt him. He seemed to patently believe that everything would work out and he’d be OK. Something about his trusting openness in a not particularly safe setting seemed to speak to the young man – because he decides to tap the deaf-blind man on his shoulder, and immediately realizes he has a lot to figure out if he is going to help him from there. Spoiler alert: things do eventually work out in some unexpectedly good ways for both of them.

After watching that short film, “Feeling Through,” I was able to see some similarities between the characters in the film and the characters in our story from Acts. In both the film and the story all the characters seemed to have a surprisingly high level of trust and openness with a stranger. For example, the Ethiopian man was reading aloud from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah as he traveled in his chariot down the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. This was the first century equivalent of having a town car and a driver on this desolate road, so it must have really surprised the Ethiopian to hear a voice (other than his chariot driver) ask him, “Do you understand what you’re reading?” – and to look up and see a stranger running alongside his chariot. Being a high ranking official in Ethiopia, he could have hidden behind a blustery response like, “How dare you approach my chariot! Of course I understand what I’m reading!” But he didn’t do that. Instead he honestly and openly responded, “How can I without some help?” And then he invited this

stranger to get into the chariot to sit with him and help him understand. The Ethiopian acted like he believed something good could come of this highly unlikely chance encounter on the road, and that he had nothing to fear from this stranger.

Of course we are privy to the whole backstory of how the angel of God, or perhaps the Spirit of God, told Philip to be at this particular place, on this road, at this time, on this day – so it doesn't surprise us that Philip was there when the Ethiopian's chariot came along. We also know that it was the Spirit who urged Philip to approach the chariot. But please note that when Philip approached this chariot he didn't offer any credentials to prove that he had the skills or training to interpret this scroll that the Ethiopian was reading from. No, Philip only asked the Ethiopian, "Do you understand what you're reading?" And then Philip simply answered the Ethiopian's questions. Philip just went with the flow of the situation as it developed. He picked up on the passage that the Ethiopian had been reading, and told him how it related to Jesus – and as *The Message* says: "he preached Jesus to him." And wonder of wonders, the Ethiopian listened, and kept listening to Philip. I mean *really listening* – because it was **NOT** Philip who suggested stopping the chariot by a stream of water. It was the Ethiopian who said, "Here's water. Why can't I be baptized?" And then he ordered the chariot to stop.

In this relatively brief time span from when Philip first got into the chariot, to when it stopped by the stream, the Ethiopian had come to believe enough about Jesus that he wanted to be baptized in his name. To receive the baptism that Philip must have told him about. The fact that the Ethiopian was ready, and willing, and asked to be baptized – must have startled Philip, but in a good way. Because Philip got out of the chariot and baptized the man on the spot. But as they came up out of the water – the Spirit of God spirited Philip away. While the Ethiopian didn't know what had become of this man who had just introduced him to Jesus and baptized him – that was OK. He knew he was on his way back to Ethiopia a changed man, happy to have gained this new understanding and amazing experience. And to think – even though his pilgrimage had been to the temple in Jerusalem – what was religiously significant about this trip, and what really mattered to his soul, was what had happened *after* he left Jerusalem!

It is interesting that BOTH the Ethiopian and Philip had to be willing to trust a stranger, and to choose to be so honest and open, to vulnerably speak from their hearts with each other. And we can't forget how the Spirit of God was able to use this odd and brief time of connection between strangers to work out some unexpectedly good things in both of their lives. Both men were changed by their encounter with each other and the Spirit of God that day. The Ethiopian was inspired to share the good news of Jesus the Christ with others in his home country. Philip was inspired (and Spirit lifted) to preach the Message

in all the villages from Azotus to Caesarea – because he knew from his experience with the Ethiopian – that the ears that were ready would hear the good news and believe.

What can we learn from this? Does it inspire us to be ready to respond to the Spirit's urging to trust a stranger and open up about our faith and the good news of Jesus the Christ? To take advantage of the opportunities provided to us to preach Jesus? . . . Or does that just sound "too pushy" to us? . . . Or maybe we only want to label it as being "too pushy" because we really don't want to feel that vulnerable with a stranger who might reject what is so important to us? . . . This is where we have to ask ourselves: What would a branch on the Jesus vine do? . . . Because sharing the love of God with others, and sharing the good news of Jesus, is what the vine is all about, isn't it? And someone who might currently be a stranger to us – is definitely NOT a stranger to God! We just need to trust that we're meeting another child of God, and that with God's Spirit at work in us and in the other person, things will work out OK.

May we trust in God that it will be so. Amen.