Topic: Tending Orchards (Easter 4, Lectionary B)

Scripture: Psalm 22:25-31, Acts 8:26-40, John 15:1-8

Hymns: 393 Nearer My God to Thee, 286 Blest be the Tie, vu245 Praise the Lord

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Let’s take a moment to pray…

Mighty God, we thank you for your Holy Scriptures. We would be lost without them, they are a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our pathway – and when we stray from them, we stray from You. O God, this is your revelation of who You are, of your directives to your church and your people. We do well to study Your word, and to dig in deep, and truly take in what you are teaching us. Help us today, O God. We want to hear the Holy Spirit. We are trusting, we are praying in the Spirit, and we ask in Jesus name, that your Holy Spirit would illumine these pages – that it fill the words of the preacher and the listener alike, and that we may know that today we have met with the living God. For we pray these things in Jesus name, amen.

(SLIDE) Anyone here play chess? Checkers? These are pretty popular games. In grades 5 and 6 when I was a lad I was part of the school’s Chess Club. Ranked second place in a club tournament, only to my best friend at the time Sean.

Many of you might remember when I had my housewarming party and a young Evan Berestecki and I had a game there in the living room of the manse. I’m not sure I’ve ever had such a crowd watch me play anything before, that was my first game of chess in well over a decade.

As a game, chess has its roots in India - known there in the 7th century after Christ as CHAT-UR-ANGA. It was adopted by the Muslims after the Arab conquest of the Sassanid Empire. From there it spread to Persia, and spread into Europe via Spain and Italy.

By the 11th century the game would include gambling, and in two particularly notable incidents a game of chess devolved into two men taking up violence against each other… two deaths occurred because of the game.

It became associated with revelry and violence, and thus the game of chess began to alarm (SLIDE) the early church. During the 13th Century Louis the IX of France banned gambling on chess games because of just how out-of-hand the games could get (Can you imagine?!). (SLIDE) At around 1500CE the game of Chess had evolved into what we now know it as.

Chess is a game of strategy where you, as the player, are moving your pieces to .put your opponent into checkmate thus winning the game. That sounds mundane… (EM) you are the (SLIDE) Commander of an army, strategically moving them into positions that will eventually (SLIDE) overrun your opponent so that you come out victorious and annihilate your enemies!

Scripture reminds me of chess a lot. There are particular points in Scripture that really bring this out. You might think of Joshua and the Battle for Jericho or Ai. The commander of the Lord’s armies laid out a battle plan, Israel followed, and BAM… Checkmate…

Of course, the strategic combat side of chess would align with Scripture quite easily. But there’s a different part of chess that Scripture reminds me about and it comes from this morning’s reading.

Here is Philip, ahhhhh Philip… Philip was an interesting Disciple. Philip was always sought after, and rarely ever brought himself to the forefront of a situation or a conversation. (SLIDE) In all four instances where Philip is referenced in John’s Gospel, people go looking for Philip - even when Philip receives his call to follow Christ!

But in all the times Scripture deals with Philip, something big is going down. People may need to go and find Philip but clearly he had the skills and wisdom that are needed in those moments. And so here we come to Philip in Acts and the Angel of the Lord directs Philip to head South to Gaza.

Along the way Philip comes across an Ethiopian eunuch who was an official for the Ethiopian Queen. The Ethiopian has been in Jerusalem worshipping God and was on the way home, in his chariot, reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit instructs Philip to stay near the Ethiopian.

Turns out the Ethiopian has some questions… he isn’t fully comprehending the prophecies. We know that so much of Isaiah talks about the Messiah, about Jesus… of which Philip is an eye-witness, an expert in his day and so here we are again… an expert is needed, and Philip is near.

Philip and the Ethiopian go about talking about those prophecies of Jesus, Philip explains the Messiah to the Ethiopian, and as they come about some water along the road they stop and Philip baptized the Ethiopian.

And right as the man comes up from the waters, the Spirit of the Lord takes Philip away and takes him to Azotus to continue travelling and preaching all the way to Ceasarea. God put Philip in exactly the right place at exactly the right time just like we do our chess pieces.

Chess is a game of strategy, complete with libraries full of books on move sets and tactics to outmaneuver your opponent. Putting your pieces in the right place is the very core of Chess and God does the same here with Philip. This Ethiopian has questions, he was on the cusp of something miraculous, but he just couldn’t grasp it.

He needed an expert, he needed someone who KNEW the Saviour so well - an eye witness. So, God moves Philip in who would minister to the official while they walked. And just like a chess piece… Philip did his duty, he preached the good news of Jesus Christ, and then it’s off to the next square on the board.

(SLIDE) And, in all honesty, God has been doing this forever. Abraham, Lot, Moses, Jonah, Joshua, Samson, Gideon, Debra, Mary… each of these people and others have been guided to the right place at the right time. They’ve each had a duty, some work to perform, a great deed to accomplish.

Some of them knew it, some of them did not. A nation needs to be born, Abraham is moved around the board. God’s children are enslaved, Moses is moved to put Pharaoh in Check. The Israelites are threatened by outside powers and pagan forces, so Samson and Gideon and Debra take up the charge to protect them. Israel needed a Saviour, God calls Mary to the frontline.

God moves His people around, like a cosmic chess master, ensuring that all the moving parts of the cosmos all the way down to humanity work for good, work for His kingdom.

But God has been doing this with not only our Scriptural power-house characters like Mary and Moses and Gideon… God does this with us as well. God guides us to places and people. God takes people to far and distant realms to just be a voice calling out in the wilderness.

God empowers people here, in our fair town of Selkirk and in other places to speak out against injustices and against evils. God plies into us a testimony so that we each have a unique story to tell, and yet a common witness to those who need to hear the Gospel message.

And, in chess… if you know the game, no one piece once removed from the board is gone forever. Pawns that reach the other side can reclaim lost pieces, just as Jesus reclaims the sinner and makes them a forgiven saint.

God does all of this for a reason… because He is tending the orchards. Each of us, like a chess piece, can do so much more than simply BE on the board. Equipped with our testimony, well-versed in our witness, when we move in accordance with God we learn and grow and become more like Jesus.

When we do this, we produce fruit… characteristics like goodness and joy and love all begin to take shape within us. Our faith deepens, like a ripening orange, and we stand out to others as the faithful community of believers.

We are sustained by God’s tender love and his meticulous care, causing us to be ready to be sent out into the world filled with His grace and ready to listen to our Lord and Saviour’s commands to love one another and love God with all our heart, soul, and mind.

God put me here in Selkirk, and each of you. I’ve learned something from each of you over my time here, and I know many of you have connected with God in different ways - deepening your faith through the different services we’ve had together over the years.

We are all on the chess board, we are all being moved around and given tasks to complete. We are all growing into the likeness of Christ, day by day, deepening our faith more and more as we listen to our God tell us what our next task is.

I take deep comfort in knowing that God is the author of all this, that God is so intimately in control of things that all I have to do is do what Philip did: listen, and move. That’s ALL Philip did. He didn’t reinvent the wheel, he didn’t unleash any miraculous power, he didn’t call down the heavens for the Ethiopian.

All Philip did was listen and move. And that’s all you have to do, too. Listen and move. Christ has already done all the hard work, and I’ll quote His final words on the cross… “It is finished”. All you have to do is listen and move… AMEN