



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“A Creek AND A Paddle”

Acts 8:26-40

Ministry can be an awe-some life. Some of you see yourselves as ministers. Perhaps you already know the gift of being with someone in one of those “boundary moments” of life. The most vivid of these “boundary moment” is death, when someone knows they are dying, the family and friends are gathered around. Because of the relationship you have forged with this person, you grieve too—but you also have something to give. You make sure the family and friends have all had a chance to tell the ill one of their love for him or her. You talk with God, and invite them to do that too, if they can. You ask God for an easy passing for your friend. You may read from God’s Word, so that they don’t base their hope on just your opinion, but upon the Word of God. You may read a passage that brings them comfort—often, that’s the Twenty-Third Psalm that speaks of God’s care. You hold their hand, which has become cold. Maybe you are there as they slip into unconsciousness, but you know they can probably still feel your touch, and you stroke their hair. Perhaps with Hospice care at home, or perhaps in a hospital room with machines striving to maintain life, you are there as they take their last breath. It is very quiet, yet the spirit of everyone is fully at attention. This is a “boundary moment”. It is precious. You are in the awe-some presence of God.

Boundary moments also occur when there is a wedding—the man and woman make a public commitment to love each other, and I charge all the guests present to take responsibility for helping this couple keep this covenant. Now, a number of folks think that “living together” in a committed sexual relationship is a good idea; it saves money, and it’s a good “test run” at what an eventual marriage would be. But surprisingly, when such couples do marry, the divorce rate among these couples is significantly higher than for couples who have not lived together. The commitment is the boundary. I do all I can to help couples get ready for crossing this boundary, and then I get together with them 6 months after a wedding to ask how they see the territory on “the other side” now, to make early course corrections in their marriage. As best I know, I have a pretty good record among the 60-some marriages I’ve performed over the years. A wedding is a “boundary moment”, and when the father of the bride walks her down the aisle, and all you fathers imagine what that feels like, when the woman and man look in each other’s eyes and repeats their vows, you feel it is a privilege to be present in that boundary moment. As you support and encourage that new couple, you are ministering to their marriage. Our God is the God Who makes Covenants and keeps them. When we witness a new covenant being ratified in a wedding, it’s another God-moment.

There are other boundary moments we could talk about, where we come to a place where body, mind, and spirit seem to be especially in synch. But the one I want to lift up this morning is “the boundary of faith”. The moment when a person asks God for forgiveness and for the new life with God that Jesus opened up for us, that is “the starting line” of eternal life. And just as at those holy moments of bodily death and at the creation of a couple, so being present at a person’s

spiritual birth is a gift, an awe-some moment, a moment when God feels especially close, reaching out to take the hand of someone reaching for His help.

Some of you have had that privilege, being there when someone comes into the Kingdom of God. Many of you have not, but can you at least imagine what that is like, when a new life stretches out for someone who really, really wants God?

Do you know that often those moments come by surprise? More often, of course, you have a previous relationship with a person that earns you the right to be present when they come to the starting line of faith. Perhaps you've been talking to them about your love for God, and letting them see Jesus in your life. But whether there is an ongoing relationship or there's a sudden surprise, we have to be ready to do what we can as God brings someone spiritually ALIVE! (And yes, it's God who does that--not me, not you. At the most, we are "midwives" to the birth God is bringing about.)

Are you ready for that moment when someone asks you for advice, for help, or asks questions about the deep issues of life? When someone is up a creek without a paddle, do you have the paddle they really need, and are you ready to get into the boat with them to help them apply the paddle? Are we looking for the people God wants to bring to Himself, or are we too wrapped up in ourselves?

This morning, I want to lay out the basics of what you need to lead someone to meet God in this way, and then we'll look at an incident from God's Word in the book of Acts, as a "case study" for these "hints" that we'll share. You might want to take notes! There are **6** Hints I'll review with you, first.

Here's Hint Number One: put together--and practice with a friend--a two-minute account of how God became real to you, or how God showed up in your life--and also how you responded to the opportunity to join with God for life.

For some of us, the story will be about a Christian home, but how that was never more than a "belief-in-your-head" until there was a crisis with a girlfriend in college—something like that—when a born-again Christian friend came alongside you. You were up a creek without a paddle, and your friend brought the paddle!

Or, maybe your story will be a story about a bad experience with religion when you were laid off from your job, and it wasn't until you'd come to the end of your own resources that you were desperate enough to "try God". Or, maybe your account will be a slowly-growing awareness of God, until someone explained it at your 60th birthday party, and suddenly it all made sense and you reached out for the God you'd been searching for all your life. Whatever your experience with God, just tell it like it was, and then tell it like it is. How are you enjoying God now? What difference does God make from Monday through Saturday? We call such an account of yours a "testimony", and we regularly have "God In My Life" stories on Sunday mornings so we can all cheer for God, and also hear how others tell their story, which can give us ideas about telling your story. Hint number One—create a short account about God in your life, your "testimony", and practice telling it in two minutes or less.

Hint Number Two is to develop some conversation-turners, and we all could get better at that. "Did you hear about the man in Oklahoma who shot his two daughters last week?" you say.

“Makes you wonder what the world is coming to.” Or, in response to conversation about something casual, you can take the conversation deeper. “Yes, I guess we’re all looking for love.” Or, segue into a story that suddenly pops into your mind. “That reminds me of a friend of mine. He was really excited about a new promotion at work, when so many other people are losing their jobs. It really bugged him—‘Why me?’ And that started something in him that wanted to find answers, and that led him to God.” Develop some conversation turners.

Hint number Three: develop some skill at assessing spiritual readiness. This is so helpful. If you share your testimony and ask, “Has God ever shown up for you?” and they say, “I don’t believe in God,” then you can ask how they came to that conclusion. And listen. Often there’s a really important story there.

This Hint Number Three is about assessing readiness. If you’ve been in conversation with this person for a time, and as you listen to God it seems God is saying ‘yes’ in your Spirit, then you might ask, “Is there anything that is keeping you from starting a new life with God?” If they say, “No, nothing is holding me back,” then ask, “Would you like to come to God with me now?” And that leads to Hint Number Four.

Hint Number Four is, be ready with a way for your friend to connect with God in prayer. I like the prayer which is just three words, “Sorry”, “Please” and “Thank You”. Tell your friend that’s what you two are about to do together—talk with God. You’ll lead, and they’ll repeat your words as their own. For example, “We’re going to say to God, ‘O God, I’m sorry for living without thinking of You.’ Then, we’ll say, ‘Please forgive me, and apply to me this new chance at full life that Jesus created.’ You know, God’s Word in the Bible shows us that Jesus died on the cross to pay your penalty and my penalty for living as if we were God. It cost Jesus everything, which proves God’s love for us. And finally, we’ll say to God, ‘Thank You for sending Your Spirit to live in me as the Bible says. I want to know You more, follow You better, and serve in Your love.’ Does this make sense?”

If they say “yes”, then pray that prayer with them, and let them follow your words. You can also carry such a prayer with you in your wallet or purse, so they can see the words as well as say them. There are also little booklets, like “Steps to Peace with God” that lay out the salvation decision and the beginning of new life in Christ, so you can use one of those. Make sure you then go to Hint Number Five.

Hint Number Five is to congratulate them on this life-changing decision. God’s throwing a big celebration in Heaven right now about you! Your friend has just been introduced to the God of the Universe, who is great enough to have been loving them for many years, and has been eager for this moment as the start of a new life with Him. Say to your friend, “You’ll want to get to know God better. I’d love to help you with that. We could do that with a group of friends I meet with, or I’ll get together with you, just myself. But I’d love for you to share with my friends what has just happened. Is there someone you can tell today?”

You continue to say to your friend, “Now, you may not feel amazingly different; but you and I both know that you prayed, and God tells us in the Bible that He has been waiting eagerly for that. You should also know that it’s natural to wonder if anything changed, or if it’s all just a nice story. The fact is, God has an Enemy who lives to pull people away from God, and destroy this precious decision you’ve made. So stay with the fact of your decision just now, and we’ll get to know the truth of God in the Bible. Don’t rely on your feelings, because for all of us, our

feelings go up and down. Does this make sense?” This Hint Number Five is to “put in cement” the fact of their act, to give the first “next step”, and to give this warning about Satan. And follow up—do what you’ve said you will do to help them know God better.

Now, let’s look at a case study. We’re going to read together part of the 8th chapter of Acts. Then I’ll take just a moment to point out how some of these hints were applied in this case. Together we say, *[text]*

The man in the chariot was probably the treasurer to Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia, which explains how he could have such a costly hand-copied scroll with him. He must also be a seeker, or why would he have wanted to acquire this expensive scroll of Isaiah, with this portion of our chapter 53?

Now, did you notice these hints? Philip was an apostle, and if you read the early chapters of Acts, there are several prayers there we can use tell about Jesus. Philip finds himself on a “road trip” he had not planned, and here is this royal official—he’s probably dressed funny, probably a black African, and if he’s in a chariot, he’s got to be with some government or army. He’s reading out loud, as everyone did for centuries until recently, so it’s easy for Philip to catch what he’s reading, and that gives Philip a natural opening to connect Jesus to what the man is reading from the Old Testament prophet. The conversation continues and the man makes a decision. He gets it. He wants to be baptized—have his dirty and selfish life washed away, and start that new life with God. And Philip, who had not planned on this, either, follows God’s nudge and goes with the man into the water. It’s a moving, boundary moment for this government official, and he’s been changed. That’s Philip’s last connection with this guy.

Hint one: Philip had something to say—he could tell what happened to him and the other disciples on Pentecost that turned them all on to Jesus. He could even link up (as Peter had done in Acts, chapter 2) the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible pointing to Jesus. I see Hint Number Two—the conversation-turner. Philip asked if the man understood what he was reading—a reasonable question given the poetic imagery of this Isaiah passage, and the way Jesus’ disciples had been led to link such things to Jesus. Hint number Three is also here—Philip assessed the spiritual readiness of this government official. In this case, it was super easy to figure out. We don’t see explicit example of Hints Four and Five—leading in some version of “The Sinner’s Prayer”, and cementing this change into the official’s life. Can we imagine that there was more conversation between these men than we have in this account? I think so. The Scripture DOES say this government official went on praising God, so he must have met the God he was praising.

I said there were SIX hints I was going to give you, and since I’ve only given 5, there must be one more. Hint Number Six is the most dangerous of all: ask God to put people in your path who are hungry for God. Then, watch.

A fellow I met this week told me two stories of what happened when he asked God to do this. First, since he flies a lot in his business, he found himself on a Southwest flight coming home after a trip. Strange for Southwest, the plane was less than 1/3 full. No one was in the middle seats anywhere, and there were lots of aisle and window seats available, too. My friend chose an aisle seat near the front of the plane; a woman had already taken the one over against the window. Then, a man came in, walked just to my friend’s row and stopped. He looked around, and then asked, “Is this seat taken?”—*pointing to the middle seat*. My friend said, “You can sit anywhere you want.” “I know, but I just have this feeling that I’m supposed to sit here.”

The woman at the window looked at him with some irritation, but the man took that seat, and started a conversation with my friend saying, “My wife has left me, and I don’t know what to do.” Do you think that was a boundary moment? Do you think this man was up a creek without a paddle?

Then later my friend was walking around Aaron Brothers Art Mart, looking at picture frames. A man walked up to him and asked, “I just retired, and I’m looking for a frame for this certificate they gave me. I don’t know what I’m going to do with the rest of my life. Do you have any advice?” (My friend said to himself, “Hey, buddy, I’m just looking for a picture frame.”) But he could not ignore that here was a man up a creek, and my friend had a paddle to offer. My friend had prayed that God would send hungry people across his path, and God had honored that prayer twice, in short order.

Asking God to put people in your path who have a hunger for God (even if they don’t yet know it by that name) is a dangerous prayer to pray. Because God loves nothing more than to have a woman or a man who is willing to put themselves in tender territory for Jesus’ sake, for the sake of God’s Kingdom.

It is a privilege to be present at a boundary moment, and it’s a sin for clergy to hog these moments. It’s a sin because it slows down the Kingdom; there are only certain people that will warm up to me, whereas others will warm up to you. If I don’t equip you for this ministry, I’m cooperating in shutting those people away from God’s love. Why would I do that? If you are not willing to get ready for fulfilling your life with God, you are shutting people away from God’s love. Why would you do that?

Pick up a paddle, by using these hints. Look for the ones who are up the proverbial creek. Listen to God. Join in the awe-some joy of ministry on the boundaries!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on June 22, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]