

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Focus on Baptism

Water - Thicker than Blood

(Acts 8:26-40)

Introduction: Welcome to the club...

When a male member of the Masai tribe in Africa reaches a certain age, he is given a spear and a shield, sent into the bush, and told to kill a lion.

This is his initiation into manhood. He either does not come back, or he comes back a man.

Now that is one of the more dramatic initiation rituals around. But in truth, initiations into adulthood or into secret societies or into clubs are commonplace around the world - and in our own culture.

We find initiation rites in college sororities and fraternities, Masonic lodges, inner city gangs, and groups of neighborhood kids.

If Green Bay continues its tear through the season into the playoffs, head coach Mike McCarthy will be, for the second time, initiated into the ranks of Super Bowl winning coaches with a five gallon Gatorade cooler being dumped on his head.

Initiation rituals play significant roles in the Harry Potter books and in movies like Robin Williams' "Dead Poets Society."

If you have ever joined a group, there was likely an initiation process of some sort, even if you didn't have to go out and kill a lion or slay a dragon.

So, when someone joins the Rotary club, they are given a handshake and a lapel pin. To welcome someone into life in Jesus we dunk them under the water and half drown them.¹

It is in the vein of thinking together about initiations that we turn our attention this morning to the theme of baptism.

Several weeks ago we were blessed to have Chinese pastor Bob Fu with us. You'll remember that Bob described the church of Jesus Christ as a singing church.

Well, the first book documenting the church of Jesus - the Acts of the Apostles - shows it to also be a baptizing church. This morning we are going to turn to the book of Acts to see one certain baptism, up close and personal.

Setting the context - baptism is HUGE! (see Matthew 28:18-20; see the book of Acts)

As you may know, baptism was a part of Jesus' ministry from the very beginning. He Himself was baptized by John the Baptist. And then He and His disciples baptized those who were following Him.

However, as His ministry progressed Jesus had less and less to say about baptism. In fact, over the last year and a half of His life He said almost nothing about it at all.

So, we might expect that with the diminishing stress on baptism through the course of His ministry, He wouldn't have placed much importance on water baptism as He gave final marching orders to His disciples.

¹ Through the centuries, three different types of baptizing have been practiced by the church: sprinkling, pouring, and immersion. From earliest times baptism by sprinkling or pouring was allowed in certain cases. If no streams of running water or large amounts of water were available, or if the person was physically unable to travel to water or if the person was unable to be placed in water due to physical limitations, such water as was handy would be used to baptize. But from the beginning, unless there was a compelling reason not to do so, the default mode was baptism by immersion. In fact, the Greek word we translate "baptize" - βαπτίζω - actually means "to immerse, submerge." When describing a ship that had sunk or a person who had drowned, you would use the word βαπτίζω.

Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. The physical rite of baptism makes its way into the last words of Matthew's Gospel. In what we refer to as "The Great Commission" Jesus commanded baptism.

[Matthew 28:18] And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. [19] Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Note the company that baptism keeps!

Jesus linked water baptism with the missionary call to "Go" with the Gospel to all the nations AND with the priority of teaching disciples to obey all that He has commanded. That's pretty heady company!

So, contrary to what we might have thought after noting the lack of emphasis on baptism in the latter stages of Jesus' ministry, baptism was to play a major role in the lives of disciples through the ages.

We see that role played out immediately in a bunch of the accounts Luke includes in the book of Acts.

- On the Day of Pentecost all those who believed Peter's message about Jesus were baptized. (Acts 2:41)
- Shortly after his conversion, Saul of Tarsus (soon to become the Apostle Paul) was baptized in Damascus. (Acts 9:18)
- Cornelius and his whole household were baptized by Peter after they received the gift of the Holy Spirit and were saved. (Acts 10:46-48)
- A jailer and his family in Philippi believed in Jesus, were saved, and were promptly baptized by Paul and Silas. (Acts 16:33)
- Paul baptized those who believed both in the city of Corinth (Acts 18:8) and in Ephesus. (Acts 19:5)²

² This story is especially intriguing. Paul came upon some disciples of John the Baptist who had been baptized with John's baptism (remember, that was a baptism of repentance to prepare them for the coming of the Messiah - Jesus!) but had not heard "the rest of the story" about Jesus. When Paul found out that they were not Christians, he proclaimed the Gospel to them, which they readily believed. Then,

Theologian Charles Ryrie sees these stories and concludes that in every salvation experience recorded in Acts, the new converts were immediately baptized.³

And no less a scholar than F.F. Bruce states, "*The idea of an unbaptized Christian is simply not entertained in the New Testament.*"⁴

I've left out one remarkable baptism from the list of Acts baptisms because I've wanted to unpack it and look at it in more detail this morning as we prepare for our own baptisms here in just a few minutes.

The story is found in the 8th chapter of Acts, a chapter that serves as a watershed moment in the history of Jesus' church. It is at this point that the Gospel began, for the first time, to make inroads among non-Jewish people.

Up until this point the Gospel has gone out to Jews. Now it is spreading among Gentiles.

In the first part of the chapter we read the fascinating story of the conversion of Simon Magus (Simon, the magician). He lived in an unnamed Samaritan city and the Bible tells us that Simon believed the message that Philip the evangelist had preached. Philip baptized him and he became a part of the church in that city.

When the Apostle Peter came to that city and laid hands on the new believers there, miracles started happening. Well, Simon, after a lifetime of involvement in the occult, saw the miracles and promptly reverted to his bad old habits. He tried to purchase the gift of the Holy Spirit from Peter with money. Peter rebuked him and Simon begged Peter to pray for him.

With that, the adventure in this Samaritan city came to a close and we watch as Peter and John head back to Jerusalem, preaching the Gospel as they go.

And the eighth chapter of Acts is only half over...

rather than allowing their former baptism to "count," Paul baptized them "***in the name of the Lord Jesus.***"

³ Ryrie, *Biblical Theology*, p. 118

⁴ *The Book of the Acts*, F.F. Bruce, p. 77

Luke continues the story by tracing the travels of Philip the evangelist as he leaves for another category-busting, border-expanding opportunity for the Gospel.

Philip Joins a Man in the Desert (vv. 26-29)

A re-commissioned Philip (v. 26)

[26] But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, “Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert road.)

Philip had been in Samaria, an area north of Jerusalem. While there, an angel commanded him to go to the southern region of Israel on a road going out of Jerusalem that led to the ancient Philistine city of Gaza.

We know “Gaza” today as a city near the Mediterranean coast. Two thousand years ago Gaza was, well, a city near the Mediterranean coast.

The road that still leads from Jerusalem to Gaza descends some 2,400 feet in elevation and is the route that anyone would take who was traveling from Jerusalem to Egypt and then continuing south deeper into Africa.

Obedient to the angel’s command, Philip traveled south out of Samaria into Judea, entered Jerusalem and then exited onto the Gaza Highway. Not too far out of town, he met up with a man who was on his way to his home back in Africa.

A seeking Ethiopian (vv. 27-28)⁵

[27] So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace,⁶ queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship,

⁵ Several commentators note that in the ancient world, Ethiopia was regarded as “the end of the earth.” And what did Jesus say in Acts 1:8? That His followers are to be His witnesses to the remotest part of the earth. Already, the command is being fulfilled.

⁶ In the first century, the Ethiopians believed that their King was the child of the sun. He was regarded as too sacred a person to discharge the functions of royalty.

[28] and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah.⁷

This man Philip encountered was a government official. In fact, he was likely the treasurer⁸ of the vast Kingdom of Ethiopia, the very large territory south of Egypt stretching far into the African continent (much larger than the present-day Ethiopia).⁹

A Gentile by both birth and culture, at some point he had heard about Judaism and become a God-fearing Jewish convert (a proselyte).¹⁰

Having adopted the religion of the Jews he worshiped the God of the Jews. He was just returning to Ethiopia after a time of worship at the Jewish temple in Jerusalem.

And he was traveling by chariot. In those days, chariots used for traveling purposes would seat three people, two passengers and a driver.

There may have been a driver or there may not have been. But the official was at the front end of a five month journey, a long, tough journey in a chariot over deserted roads.

When Philip, who was traveling faster than the Ethiopian, was close to catching up to the chariot, the Holy Spirit - not an angel - got involved.

[29] Then the Spirit said¹¹ to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.”

So, the actual tasks associated with ruling were performed on his behalf by the queen-mother, whose title (not her proper name) was “Candace.”

⁷ Ps. 68:31 anticipates the day when the Ethiopians will hear the news of salvation. **“Ethiopia will quickly stretch out her hands to God”**

⁸ He was a eunuch, the type of man typically put in charge of a King’s harem. Eunuchs frequently rose to governmental prominence.

⁹ Ethiopia then is not the same thing as Ethiopia now. Probably what is currently central Sudan. Nearly 1,000 miles from the Mediterranean, also known as Nubia (Yamauchi, 2006).

¹⁰ His condition would not have allowed him to participate fully in Jewish worship. (but see Isaiah 56:3-5, where eunuchs will be restored to full worship in the end times)

Philip Evangelizes a Man in the Desert (vv. 30-35)

Reading, but not getting it (vv. 30-31)

Well Philip didn't have to be told twice! He approached, and as he approached, he overheard the African reading.

The common practice in the ancient world was to read out loud rather than silently. Try it some time! Reading aloud not only enhances retention, it allows the reader to "hear" the words of the author. The reader takes in with both eyes AND ears when words are read out loud.

[30] Philip ran up (we are probably to understand that Philip began running after the Holy Spirit told him to join the chariot) **and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" [31] And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.**

This Ethiopian knew that he didn't know what the prophet Isaiah was talking about.

Jesus, in the Old Testament (vv. 32-33) (from Isaiah 53)

[32] Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:

**"HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER;
AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT,
SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH.**

**[33] "IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY;
WHO WILL RELATE HIS GENERATION?
FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH."**

The common understanding among Jews of the first century was that Isaiah 53 (and other "servant passages" in Isaiah) was either the prophet describing his own experiences or the prophet referring to the experiences of the nation of Israel.

Very few thought that it was a Messianic passage, because the Jews couldn't wrap their minds around the idea of a Messiah who suffered.

¹¹ Note that the Spirit (and the angel in verse 26) "spoke" to Philip. It was not an inner impression.

The Ethiopian's response to Philip's question and his own follow-up question shows that he was really wrestling with the text.

A request for insight (v. 34)

[34] The eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?"

Now Philip was a relatively recent convert to faith in Jesus. He was a diligent servant (see Acts 6) in the church in Jerusalem. But he was also a Jew with a wealth of knowledge about the Old Testament.

As Philip listened to the words of Isaiah, he recognized the passage and understood - maybe for the first time! - that the Person being described was Jesus.

So he was able, at a moment's notice, to explain Isaiah to the Ethiopian eunuch in light of the life and death of Jesus.¹²

Telling the best story ever (v. 35)

[35] Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.¹³

Wouldn't you love to come across someone who asks for help in understanding Isaiah 53? It's hard to imagine a better starting place for evangelism than Isaiah 53.

Wouldn't you have loved it if Luke had included the details of this exchange? We wonder what Philip actually said, how long did he take?

- Did he march all the way through the chapter, showing every instance where the life of Jesus paralleled the words of the prophet? Maybe.
- Did he pick from other Old Testament Scriptures that spoke of the ministry of the Messiah? Probably.

¹² Jesus anticipated His own fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in Mark 10:45 and Mark 9:12.

¹³ Verse 35 says that Philip "**preached Jesus to him.**" This means that he proclaimed good news and doesn't imply strictly one way communication. They may well have dialogued back and forth as Philip proclaimed/preached.

He must have told what had happened in Jerusalem and throughout Israel during Jesus' three year ministry, and then of His death and resurrection.

Catch this. Philip drew on his knowledge of Scripture and the apostles' teaching to share Jesus with someone who was seeking God.

This morning you and I are enjoying some very basic Christian experiences. No fluff.

We are taking the Lord's Supper. We are singing songs of worship. We are listening to the Word of God. We are witnessing the baptism of friends.

This is a no-frills morning. Christianity 101. The essence of church.

And watching Philip in action prompts me to want to say something to you. Do you want to be able to help those who are at the earliest stages of spiritual investigation? Do you want to be used by God, like Philip was used by God, to tell others about Jesus?

You do? Great! Get to know your Bible.

Plug in to one of the Bible studies offered here for men or for women. Join a Care Group. Start attending an Adult Bible Fellowship.

The more thoroughly you "own" the Book, the more helpful you will be in sharing your faith with those who have not yet come to know Him.

The wonderings about life and God that people are wondering are all addressed in the Bible.

- What is God like?
- Why is there evil in the world?
- How does it all end?
- Is there a point or any meaning to life?
- How can my sins be forgiven?

Now, did Philip get an easy passage to work with? Sure. Isaiah 53 is sort of the ultimate "cherry-picking" of great evangelistic texts.

But it was the text he was given. And from it, because he knew it, he was able to tell this seeking Ethiopian about Jesus.

If you and I want to be the sharpest tool you can be, a tool that the Holy Spirit is pleased to use to help others find Jesus, immerse yourself in His Word.

After talking for some time, it became clear that the Holy Spirit had drawn this Ethiopian official to faith in Jesus. And he expressed a desire for baptism.

Baptism at a Desert Oasis (vv. 36-38)

[36] As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" [37] [And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."]¹⁴

Fascinating. The Ethiopian requested baptism. How did he know about baptism?

It's possible, I guess, that he knew about it through Jewish sources, or that he had heard about Christian baptism while he had been in Jerusalem.

More likely, I think, he probably heard about it from Philip. Might Philip have told him about Jesus' Great Commission and the command to baptize people in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?

Wouldn't he have told about how all those who had been saved in Jerusalem were baptized, and about how all of those who had believed in Jesus in Samaria had been baptized?

Doesn't that explain how natural it was for this Ethiopian to point to the water as they passed some oasis in the desert and request baptism?

He is now convinced that Jesus is the promised Messiah. He has placed his trust in Jesus for salvation.

¹⁴ Harrison, Bock, and most other commentators, take verse 37 as a gloss.

He asks, “*Can I be baptized, too?*”

Did you hear the desperation in his voice? “*What prevents me from being baptized?*”

Remember who this man was. He was a eunuch, having been made so because that was the way it was for the servants of Candace in Ethiopia.

As a eunuch he was limited in how fully he could participate in Judaism, because the Mosaic Law placed limits on the involvement of eunuchs.

This guy wants to know if he, a man in his condition, can fully identify as a Christian and can fully participate in the Christian faith.

“*Will God accept me just as I am? Will there be limits on my participation in this faith, too? From all that you have told me, Philip, baptism symbolizes salvation and full inclusion in the family of God - can I be baptized? Am I welcome?*”

Without missing a beat Philip says, “*Yep. As long as you believe. That’s the only thing required.*”

[38] And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him.¹⁵

For two thousand years, per Jesus’ instruction, baptism has been the identifying mark of the Christian disciple.

It is the rite of passage symbolizing the journey from darkness to light. It is a statement by the one being baptized that he is serious about following Jesus.

And it is the act that celebrates the welcome of God and every other Christian to the family of God in Jesus.

Conclusion:

Among other things, baptism is a ringing affirmation of the unity believers in Jesus enjoy with each other.¹⁶

The Apostle Paul writes, ***[Ephesians 4:4] There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; [5] one Lord, one faith, one baptism, [6] one God and Father of all who is over all, and through all, and in all.***

There is great diversity in the church. People from different backgrounds come together on Sunday mornings and at other times to worship and to pray, to serve and to learn.

The differences run deep, and we shouldn’t ignore them. They are racial, ethnic, and linguistic.

There are differences in politics and worldview. This church has people of greatly varying levels of wealth, education, and family of origin.

I could go on. Diversity is the rule in the church of Jesus Christ - and He loves it that way.

But there is an overarching unity that is weightier than the diversity. One of the unifiers Paul lists is “*baptism.*”

While it is possible that he was referring to Spirit baptism (and I certainly won’t say he wasn’t!), it is just as reasonable to suggest that Paul writes here of the common experience of having gone under the waters of baptism.

Common experiences unite us.

¹⁵ Church tradition (through Iraneus, a church father) tells us that upon his return to Ethiopia, this official became a missionary among his own people.

¹⁶ Paul also hints at the idea in 1 Corinthians 12. In a context more concerned with the spiritual unity of the church, he mentions that ***[1 Corinthians 12:13] by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*** - and he uses the vocabulary of baptism to emphasize that unity.

I'm not tech-savvy. Those of you who know me well know that. But I've noticed that people who are tech-savvy can meet, strike up a conversation, and get along famously.

When I find out that somebody has traveled to Russia, tended a garden, does CrossFit, or read The Lord of the Rings, there is a connection.

Christians who have been baptized watch other Christians get baptized and think to themselves, *"I remember when I did that. I know just what that guy is feeling. She's decided to follow Jesus. That kid is family."*

Family is a place where love flows. Family is where we learn so much of what life is really about.

Our core values are shaped at home and family is the one group that will take you in when everybody else has thrown you out.

Family is the place to which we retreat when there is nowhere else to go. As we have all heard, blood is thicker than water.

But, in light of our baptism and all that it represents, we in the church of Jesus Christ affirm that water is thicker than blood.

We are a family made up of death-to-life people who have decided to follow Jesus. And we're in it together.