

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

BAPTISM 101: Water - Thicker Than Blood

(Acts 8:26-40)

Introduction: Welcome to the club...

I've had the chance to travel to Kenya three times to serve with Crossway, International (the ministry of Dean Chollar, who spoke here a few weeks ago).

On each of these trips, I saw men of the Masai tribe, always dressed in a red robe and standing on one leg, watching a herd of cattle. It's a great, iconic, African sight to see.

Kenyan friends also told me an iconic story about the Masai tribe, and it involves an initiation rite into the world of adulthood.

When a male member of the Masai tribe reaches a certain age, he is given a spear and a shield, sent into the bush, and told to kill a lion. He either does not come back, or he comes back a man.

That is one of the more dramatic initiation rituals you'll hear about. But initiations into adulthood or into secret societies or into clubs are and always have been commonplace.

There are initiation rites associated with joining college sororities and fraternities, Masonic lodges, and inner city gangs.

The teams that win the AFC or NFC Championship and the team that wins the Super Bowl this year will initiate their coach by dumping a five gallon Gatorade cooler on his head.

Initiation rituals play huge roles in some books (like the Harry Potter series) and in some movies (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 learn a secret handshake and get a lapel pin.

When we welcome someone into life in Jesus, we dunk them under the water and half drown them.¹

Yes. Today we are thinking together about baptism.

Maybe you've wondered why we baptize, what is baptism all about, and why is it important?

Those are great wonderings. And, with this morning's baptisms in front of us, today is a great time to open the Bible and learn what it has to tell us about baptism.

The book that documents the early life of Jesus' church (the book of Acts) shows the church to be prayerful, relationally connected, generous, and Jesus-centered. Acts also shows Jesus' church to be a baptizing church.

This morning we are going to focus on one particular baptism event, up close and personal. But before we go there, let's back up to the life of Jesus.

Setting the context (refer to Matthew 28; 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.

¹ Through the centuries, the church has baptized by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion. Baptism by sprinkling or pouring has always been allowed in certain cases. (if water was scarce; if due to physical limitations, the person could not get into the water). But from the beginning, unless there was a compelling reason not to do so, the default mode was baptism by immersion. The Greek word we translate "baptize" - βαπτίζω - actually means "to immerse, submerge."

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.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The physical act of baptizing makes its way into the last words of Matthew's Gospel. In what we call "The Great Commission" Jesus commanded baptism.

[Matthew 28:18] And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. [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 follow all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Note the company that baptism keeps.

Jesus linked water baptism with the missionary call to "**Go**" to all the nations with the Gospel. And it's an integral part of becoming a disciple of Jesus, on par with the priority of teaching disciples to obey all that Jesus commanded.

Matthew 28 says that baptism will play a major role in the lives of disciples through the ages. We see that reality played out in the earliest accounts Luke includes in the book of Acts.

- On the Day of Pentecost all three thousand of those who believed Peter's message about Jesus were baptized. (Acts 2:41)
- Shortly after his conversion, Saul of Tarsus (who became the Apostle Paul) was baptized in Damascus. (Acts 9:18)
- The Roman centurion, Cornelius, along with his whole household, were baptized by Peter after they believed, 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

Theologian Charles Ryrie saw the evidence in the New Testament and concluded that the pattern holds in every salvation experience recorded in Acts. New converts were immediately baptized.³

I've left out one remarkable baptism story from the list of Acts baptisms I just gave. That's because I want to unpack it and look at this one in more detail as we celebrate several baptisms here today.

We find the story in the eighth chapter of Acts. This chapter serves as a watershed in the history of Jesus' church.

Not only does this chapter record the outbreak of widespread persecution against the church,⁴ it also records the point at which the Gospel began to make inroads into the non-Jewish world.

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).

Simon lived in a city of Samaria and the Bible tells us that he believed the message that Philip the evangelist had preached.

² In this intriguing account, Paul met some disciples of John the Baptist who had been baptized with John's baptism (This 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, knowing that they had been baptized, Paul baptized them "***in the name of the Lord Jesus.***"

³ Ryrie, *Biblical Theology*, p. 118. And no less a scholar than F.F. Bruce states, "*The idea of an un-baptized Christian is simply not entertained in the New Testament.*" *The Book of the Acts*, F.F. Bruce, p. 77.

⁴ This persecution followed the stoning of Stephen, which prompted the Christians to flee Jerusalem to find safety elsewhere. As they left, they proclaimed Jesus.

Philip heard his testimony and baptized him. Simon became a part of the church in that city.⁵

When the Apostle Peter came to the city from Jerusalem and laid hands on the new believers there, miracles started happening.

And Simon, after lifelong involvement in the occult, saw the miracles and reverted to his bad old habits. He tried to purchase the gift of the Holy Spirit from Peter with money. That story ended with Peter rebuking Simon as Simon begged Peter to pray for him.

Then, we come to the second half of Acts chapter eight.

Luke continues the story by tracing the travels of Philip the evangelist as he left the Samaritan city 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 ready and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert road.)

God had a new mission for Philip. An angel commanded Philip to go to the southern region of Israel, traveling on a road going out of Jerusalem that led to the ancient Philistine city of Gaza, near the Mediterranean coast.

And, yes, this is the same Gaza that is in the news today.

Fascinating, isn't it, that two thousand years ago, in the days of the first century church, Gaza was the place of very significant activity.

It had been the site of significant activity two thousand years before that, back in the time of Abraham.

⁵ This is not Philip the apostle, but Philip the servant / deacon. See Acts 6.

The Middle East is the scene of lots of history, good and bad. And while what is happening in Gaza today is scary and violent and ugly and tragic, what happened on the road to Gaza in Acts 8 is beautiful.

The road that Philip took is still an active road. It leads from Jerusalem to Gaza, descending some 2,400 feet in elevation. It continues from Gaza to Egypt and then continues south deeper into the continent of Africa.

Obedient to the angel's command, he went south from 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 Meets a Sent Messenger (vv. 27-29)

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

This man Philip encountered was a government official.

He was likely the treasurer⁸ of the vast Kingdom of Ethiopia, the huge territory south of Egypt stretching far into the African continent (much larger than the present-day country of Ethiopia).⁹

⁶ The ancient Ethiopians believed that their king was the child of the sun and was, thus, too holy to discharge the functions of royalty. 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. ***“Cush*** (a reference to Ethiopia) ***will quickly stretch out her hands to God.***”

⁸ He was a eunuch. Men who were born eunuchs frequently rose to governmental prominence or were made eunuchs in order to be fit to serve in the government.

⁹ What was likely in view by “Ethiopia” was whatever is south of what was then Egypt. Ancient Ethiopia would have included Sudan and South Sudan, or more.

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

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

He was traveling by chariot. In those days, chariots used for long-distance travel would seat three people, two passengers and a driver.

We don't know if there was a driver. If there was one, Luke doesn't mention him. What we do know is that this Ethiopian official was at the beginning of a five month journey, a long, tough journey over long, lonely roads.

While Philip, who was traveling on the same road as the chariot - and may have been traveling faster than the chariot - got 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."

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.

Sometime soon, try reading out loud.

Reading out loud actually enhances retention. And 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.

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

¹⁰ Eunuchs were not allowed to participate fully in Jewish worship. (But see Isaiah 56:3-5, where eunuchs will be restored to full worship in the end times.)

¹¹ Note that here, the Holy Spirit (v. 29; and in v. 26 "*an angel of the Lord*") "*spoke*" to Philip. Philip did not get an inner impression. God spoke to him.

Reading, But Not Getting It (vv. 30-31)

[30] Philip ran up¹² 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.

The African knew that he didn't know what in the world 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 LIKE A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER;
AND LIKE A LAMB THAT IS SILENT BEFORE ITS SHEARER,
SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH.***

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

The common understanding among Jews of the first century was that Isaiah 53 (and the 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 Jews back then thought that Isaiah was writing about the long-awaited Messiah.

This passage describes someone who was suffering, and the Jews couldn't wrap their heads around the idea of a suffering Messiah.

Well, the Ethiopian was really wrestling with this text. He doesn't get it. And he's hoping that his rider, Philip, can help him out.

A Request for Insight (v. 34)

¹² We are probably to understand that Philip began running after the Holy Spirit told him to join the chariot.

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

Remember. At this point Philip was a relatively recent convert. He hasn't believed in Jesus for very long. But he was also a Jew with a wealth of knowledge about the Old Testament.

So, 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.

He now listened to the familiar words of Isaiah 53 through a Jesus filter. And, knowing these words, he was able to use them to explain Jesus to this Ethiopian eunuch.¹³

Telling the Best Story Ever (v. 35)

[35] Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.¹⁴

This is so great. It's hard to imagine a better Old Testament starting place for explaining Jesus than Isaiah 53.

Isaiah 53 is filled with crucial details about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Wouldn't you love to hear the details of this exchange? What would Philip have said? How long would his answer have taken?

- 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.

¹³ Jesus anticipated His own fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in Mark 10:45 and Mark 9:12.

¹⁴ Philip "*preached Jesus to him.*" (v. 35) 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 recently happened in Jerusalem and throughout Israel during Jesus' three year ministry. He must have told about Jesus' suffering and death and resurrection.

So, let's not miss 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.

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 very basic.

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! Own your Bible.

Spend personal time exploring it. Learn the stories of Jesus. Immerse yourself in the history and poetry and wisdom and teachings of the Bible.

Join a Care Group or a Sunday morning Adult Bible Fellowship here at church. Start attending a men's or a women's Bible study. You'll make friendships while learning the Bible.

The more thoroughly you *own* the Book, the more helpful you'll be in sharing your faith with those who haven't yet come to know Him.

The questions about life and God that people are wondering are all addressed in the Bible. So, make it yours.

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.

Well, by the time we come to Acts 8:36 it is clear that Philip and the Ethiopian have been talking for some time.

It is also clear that the Holy Spirit has opened the heart of this Ethiopian official. He saw Jesus as the answer to his soul’s thirst for life. He believes.

And believing, 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?”

Fascinating. How did the Ethiopian know about baptism?

It’s possible that he knew about it from 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.

Philip might well have told him about Jesus’ command to baptize people who believed in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Philip might have told him about how all of 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.

One way or another, the Ethiopian understood that believers in Jesus get baptized. So, it was only natural that he would point to the water as they passed some oasis in the desert and request baptism.

He has been persuaded that Jesus is the promised Messiah. He believes in Jesus. So, he asks to be baptized.

But listen again to exactly what he asked: ***“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.

He was a convert to Judaism. But as a eunuch, he was limited in how fully he could participate in Judaism. The Mosaic Law placed limits on the involvement of eunuchs.

This guy wants to know if he, a man like him, can fully participate in the Christian faith he has just embraced.

“I believe in Jesus. But will there be limits on my participation in this faith, like there was in Judaism? 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 fully welcomed?”¹⁵

[38] And he ordered that the chariot stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him.¹⁶

Welcome, indeed.

For two thousand years, per Jesus’ instruction, Christians have been baptized as a way to affirm their faith in Jesus. It is the initiation rite that symbolizes the journey from spiritual darkness to light, condemnation to justification, death to life, slavery to freedom.

Baptism also affirms a believer’s intention to follow Jesus into discipleship. It marks the beginning of a new chapter of life marked by the joy and purpose and meaning that come from following.

And one more thing.

¹⁵ Many Bible scholars believe that Acts 8:37, while reflecting what could have been a true exchange between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, was a later addition by editors and was not a part of the original text.

¹⁶ Church tradition (through Irenaeus, a church father) tells us that upon his return to Ethiopia, this official became a missionary among his own people.

Conclusion: Baptism - the initiation that unifies

Baptism is also a ringing affirmation of the unity believers in Jesus enjoy with each other.¹⁷

The Apostle Paul writes, ***[Ephesians 4:4] There is one body and one Spirit, just as you also 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. The differences are racial, ethnic, cultural, political, and linguistic.

Our church is made up of people with varying levels of wealth and education. Lots of different family of origin stories.

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

But there is an overarching unity that is weightier than the diversity. One of the unifiers is baptism.¹⁸

Common experiences unite us.

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

When I find out that somebody has traveled to Russia,¹⁹ tended a garden, does CrossFit, or read a lot of C.S. Lewis books, there is a connection.

¹⁷ See also 1 Corinthians 12. In a context concerned with the spiritual unity of the church, Paul writes, ***[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.***" Baptism emphasizes unity.

¹⁸ While it is possible that he was referring to Spirit baptism, it is just as possible that Paul writes of the nearly universally shared experience of water baptism.

And in the same way, 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 / that gal / that kid is feeling. We're family."*

And family is where love flows. Family is where we learn so much of what life is about. Family 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 heard, blood is thicker than water.

Well, we who make up Jesus' church are a family. We are a family of death-to-life people who have decided to follow Him. We are united by the blood of Jesus and the water of baptism.

¹⁹ When I recently met my new ophthalmologist, I learned that she had been to Guyana, South America. That gave us an instant connection. Not many people have been to Guyana.