

*Acts 8 4-Part Lenten Program  
Used Lent 2013 @ Saint Paul's Episcopal Church, Foley, AL  
The Rev. Steve Pankey*

Good Evening. Welcome to the first of our four Lenten programs for 2013. As you might recall, the last time I stood before you in this room, we were in the midst of our Annual Parish Meeting. It was a delightful affair, with 60 or so folks gathered. We do a lot of things that are out of the ordinary here at Saint Paul's, but perhaps the most out of the box thing we've done here is to hold an Acts 8 Gathering in the midst of our Annual Meeting. I only know of one other parish in the country that has attempted such a feat.

For those of you who weren't here, our Acts 8 Gathering included Bible Study, Prayer, and Dreaming. The evening culminated in a time for sharing, in which everyone was invited to finish this sentence, "I dream of a church that..." Here are our dreams.

<http://youtu.be/sE5HPQsqhlw>

Which brings me to our topic for the next four weeks: An Acts 8 Moment: How God does the impossible through his servants. You see, Acts 8 is a transition point in the life of the early Church. Acts 7 ends with the martyrdom of Stephen, who was stoned to death, as a young man named Saul looked on, for refusing to stop talking about Jesus. Acts 9 begins with a dramatic encounter between Saul and Jesus on the Damascus Road in which Paul becomes the Apostle to the Gentiles and from there, the Church spreads like wildfire. We'll spend the next four weeks praying, thinking, discussing, and dreaming about how we as individuals and as members of Saint Paul's Episcopal Church might be called to be the ordinary folk through whom God changes the world. First, a few ground rules.

We have four rules for our time together. They are simple rules that should be easy to remember, but I've made an acrostic of the word ACTS to help you out. A is for allowing others to speak. No one should monopolize the conversation, this will be hard for some of you, and I'll trust the tables to self-police. C is for confidentiality. We may share things around our tables that we don't want blabbed all over town; let's respect each other's willingness to share and be vulnerable. T is for time. It is a school night, and so we're going to call it quits at 7:15, sharp. S is for stay on topic. I'm sure the movie you saw last weekend was great, but unless it helps move the conversation along, perhaps it can wait until after 7:15.

Before we get too far into this thing, we should pray. The Lord be with you. **And Also with you.** O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

In order to get what is happening in Acts 8, we'll have to back up just a little bit; all the way to Acts 7. The first character we'll meet in our time together is a guy named Stephen. Many of you probably know Stephen because he is the first Christian martyr and his feast day is rather inconveniently placed on the day after Christmas. What you probably don't know about Stephen is how he got to that point.

Way back in Acts 6, the early Church had already begun to get too big for its britches. Luke tells us that the main source of controversy came when Greek speaking Christians started complaining that their widows weren't being taken care of like the Aramaic speaking widows were. Since the Church had not yet spread far beyond the walls of Jerusalem, the 12 Apostles decided to call a parish meeting and all the believers were gathered together and it was decided that the apostles should not quit preaching the gospel in order to do the servant work, so seven deacons were selected. These men were respected, wise, and filled with the Spirit. Among the seven were Philip, who we'll meet next week, and Stephen.

Quickly, however, Stephen's ministry grew as God gave him gifts. Stephen began to perform miracles and wonders, and almost immediately had a falling out with some of the Jewish powers-that-be. He is arrested, falsely accused essentially of heresy against Moses, and after a long sermon, that ends, "You stubborn and hardheaded people! You are always fighting against the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors did," things got ugly.

7<sup>54</sup> When the council members heard Stephen's speech, they were angry and furious.

<sup>55</sup> But Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit. He looked toward heaven, where he saw our glorious God and Jesus standing at his right side.

<sup>56</sup> Then Stephen said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right side of God!"

<sup>57</sup> The council members shouted and covered their ears. At once they all attacked Stephen

<sup>58</sup> and dragged him out of the city. Then they started throwing stones at him. The men who had brought charges against him put their coats at the feet of a young / man named Saul.

<sup>59</sup> As Stephen was being stoned to death, he called out, "Lord Jesus, please welcome me!"

<sup>60</sup> He knelt down and shouted, "Lord, don't blame them for what they have done." Then he died.

8<sup>1a</sup> Saul approved the stoning of Stephen. Some faithful followers of the Lord buried Stephen and mourned very much for him.

The message that Stephen preached was very different than what the council was able to hear, and it cost him dearly. Our first lesson as an Acts 8 Parish is that change is at the heart of mission. This probably doesn't come as a surprise to some of you, while others might be look around for stones to throw at me. I'll let John Stott, one of the 3 Greatest Theologians of second-half of the twentieth century, say it better.

"Stephen's teaching, misunderstood as 'blasphemy' against the temple and the law, was that Jesus (as he himself had claimed) was the fulfillment of both. Already in the OT God was tied to his people, wherever they were, not to buildings. So now Jesus is ready to accompany his people wherever they go. When soon Paul and Barnabas set out into the unknown on the first missionary journey, they will find (as Abraham, Joseph and Moses had found before them) that God is with them. That is exactly what they reported on their return (14:27; 15:12). Indeed, this assurance is indispensable to mission. Change is painful to us all, especially when it affects our cherished building and custom, and we should not seek change merely for the sake of change. Yet true Christian radicalism is open to change. It knows that God has bound himself to his church (promising that he will never leave it) and to his word (promising that it will never pass away). But God's church means people not buildings, and God's word means Scripture not traditions. So long as these essentials are preserved, the buildings and the traditions can if

necessary go. We must not allow them to imprison the living God or to impede his mission in the world.<sup>1</sup>

It isn't really fair of me to begin our four weeks by leading us all off a cliff into despair, but alas, it is the way the story so often goes. Resurrection is not possible without something having died. So here we are.

The real work of this teaching series on Acts 8 will be done around your tables. I'll set the backdrop, but your conversations will lead us deeper. As we sit, Stephen has just been martyred. A young man named Saul stood and watched approvingly. The fledgling community known as The Way has just had its world rocked. Many of us feel this way too. The world around us is changing rapidly. Long held beliefs are falling by the wayside. The ways things have always been aren't anymore. Around your tables, I invite you to discuss the following questions.

- When you look at the world changing around you, how do you feel?
- What do you miss about the old ways?
- What opportunities do you see in the new?
- Where do you see God at work in the Church?
- Where do you see God at work in the world?
- How do you see the Church working with God in the world?
- What gives you hope?

The Lord be with you. ***And also with you.*** Let us pray.

Gracious Father, we pray for your holy catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Savior. ***Amen.***

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<sup>1</sup> Stott, John, R.W., "The Message of Acts" *The Bible Speaks Today* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL, 1990)., p. 143

# Acts 8

*How God does the impossible through his servants*

*Lent 2013*

*Session 1 – The Martyrdom of Stephen*

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

## *Acts 7:54-8:1a (CEV)*

<sup>54</sup> When the council members heard Stephen's speech, they were angry and furious. <sup>55</sup> But Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit. He looked toward heaven, where he saw our glorious God and Jesus standing at his right side. <sup>56</sup> Then Stephen said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right side of God!"

<sup>57</sup> The council members shouted and covered their ears. At once they all attacked Stephen<sup>58</sup> and dragged him out of the city. Then they started throwing stones at him. The men who had brought charges against him put their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.<sup>[g]</sup>

<sup>59</sup> As Stephen was being stoned to death, he called out, "Lord Jesus, please welcome me!"<sup>60</sup> He knelt down and shouted, "Lord, don't blame them for what they have done." Then he died.

<sup>8 1-2a</sup> Saul approved the stoning of Stephen. Some faithful followers of the Lord buried Stephen and mourned very much for him.

## *Questions for Discussion*

- When you look at the world changing around you, how do you feel?
- What do you miss about the old ways?
- What opportunities do you see in the new?
- Where do you see God at work in the Church?
- Where do you see God at work in the world?
- How do you see the Church working with God in the world?
- What gives you hope?

Good Evening! Welcome back to our second installment of our four part Lenten Program. Last week, I pushed you off a cliff. We heard the story of Stephen, the Church's first martyr. We heard of his passion for the Gospel. We heard how the Gifts of the Spirit were at work in his life. We talked a lot about how what Stephen was preaching was different than what the powers-that-be wanted to hear, and it cost him his life.

We spent some time wondering what that meant for us. We talked around our tables about change. Based on the notes that our table facilitators gathered, what we really talked about last week was grief. That's a good thing. Grief was very real for the Church in Acts 8, and grief is very real for us today. Grief is a process that takes us from a time and place of sadness, often mixed with some anger, to a place of acceptance. Notice I didn't say resignation. We don't resign ourselves to the fact that life has changed, but we accept it, and seek new life beyond it. This evening, we'll begin that journey towards new life.

First, a reminder of our ground rules:

A – Allow others to speak

C – Confidentiality: general ideas will be recorded by table facilitators

T – Time, we end at 7:15, sharp

S – Stay on topic

The Lord be with you. **And Also with you.** O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Tonight I'm going to introduce you to another one of the seven deacons selected by the Church in Acts 6. Philip, known as Philip the Deacon or Philip the Evangelist, is remembered on the Kalendar of The Episcopal Church on October 11. He plays a prominent role in Acts 8 and then disappears until chapter 21 where he is said to have hosted Paul in his home while on his way to Jerusalem.

While the story of Simon the Magician is an important one, it is much too complicated for our short time here, so tonight, we'll deal only with the first half of Philip's trip to Samaria.

<sup>8</sup> <sup>2b</sup> At that time the church in Jerusalem suffered terribly. All of the Lord's followers, except the apostles, were scattered everywhere in Judea and Samaria.

<sup>3</sup> Saul started making a lot of trouble for the church. He went from house to house, arresting men and women and putting them in jail.

<sup>4</sup> The Lord's followers who had been scattered went from place to place, telling the good news.

<sup>5</sup> Philip went to the city of Samaria and told the people about Christ.

<sup>6</sup> They crowded around Philip because they were eager to hear what he was saying and to see him work miracles.

<sup>7</sup> Many people with evil spirits were healed, and the spirits went out of them with a shout. A lot of crippled and lame people were also healed.

<sup>8</sup> Everyone in that city was very glad because of what was happening.

I love the Contemporary English Version of the Bible, but it ruined that last verse. What Luke attempts to tell us in Acts 8:8 is that the city of Samaria was full of joy. It is the same word used by the Angel who announced Jesus' birth, "I bring you good news of great joy." In the course of 8 verses, we move from suffering and fear to joy and healing. God's way often isn't the way we'd choose to do it.

Just before Jesus ascended into heaven, he offered on last word of comfort and commissioning to the apostles. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you," Jesus assured them, "and give you power. Then you will tell everyone about me in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and everywhere in the world." The Spirit, as we all know, arrives in the Day of Pentecost, but it isn't until the persecution of the Church that the commission is fulfilled. Stephen's witness lead to his death. His death lead to a widespread persecution. Persecution lead to dispersion. And dispersion lead to wide spread evangelism. God's way often isn't the way we'd choose to do it.

Again, I'll let John Stott say it best, "It is hard for us to conceive the boldness of the step Philip took in preaching the gospel to Samaritans. For the hostility between Jews and Samaritans had lasted a thousand years. It began with the break-up of the monarchy in the tenth century BC when ten tribes defected, making Samaria their capital, and only two tribes remained loyal to Jerusalem. It became steadily worse when Samaria was captured by Assyria in 722 BC, thousands of its inhabitants were deported, and the country was re-populated by foreigners. In the sixth century BC, when the Jews returned to their land, they refused the help of the Samaritans in the rebuilding of the temple. Not till the fourth century BC, however, did the Samartian schism harden, with the building of their rival temple on Mount Gerizim and their repudiation of all Old Testament Scripture except the Pentateuch. The Samaritans were despised by the Jews as hybrids in both race and religion, as both heretics and schismatics..."<sup>2</sup>

"But now the Samaritans were being evangelized, and were responding to the gospel. It was a moment of significant advance, which was also fraught with great peril. What would happen now? Would the long-standing rift be perpetuated? The gospel had been welcomed by the Samaritans, but would the Samaritans be welcomed by the Jews? Or would there be separate factions of Jewish Christians and Samaritan Christians in the church of Jesus Christ? The idea may seem unthinkable in theory; in practice it might well have happened. There was a real 'danger... of their tearing Christ apart, or at least forming a new and separate church for themselves.'"<sup>3</sup>

Another top-3 theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is NT Wright, who reflected on the Church Scattered this way, "[Going to Samaria] was part of the agenda which Jesus set for his followers, at the start of Acts, that they should be his witnesses not only in Jerusalem and Judea, but in Samaria – and on, to the very ends of the earth (1.8). Like many things in Acts, they don't seem to have had much of a plan for how to achieve this, and they don't seem to have thought out in advance what such a plan might look like if they did; but it began to happen anyway, as we have seen, because of the persecution in Jerusalem and the scattering of people who were eager to talk about Jesus to anyone they met, whether they were proper Jews or not"<sup>4</sup> God's way often isn't the way we'd choose to do it.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157

<sup>4</sup> Wright, N.T., "Acts for Everyone: Part One" (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2008). P. 128

The difference between the Church dying or flourishing in diaspora was evangelism. Acts 8:4 tells us that everyone who fled Jerusalem did so with the Good News of Jesus on their lips. First Peter 3:15 tells us to always be prepared to share the hope that is within us. This is scary for those of us raised to fear evangelism, but like I said, God's way often isn't the way we'd choose to do it.

So here we sit. The early church has been flung beyond the walls of Jerusalem. As they went, they couldn't help but share the Good News of Jesus, even to the point that Philip, who found refuge in Samaria of all places, began to convert half-blood muggles to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Around your tables, I invite you to discuss the following questions.

- What gives you hope?
- What is the source of that hope?
- Where does that hope lead you?
- How does the word evangelism make you feel?
- Why?
- How can the Church help make evangelism less scary?
- Knowing that Saint Francis probably flops over in his grave every time someone attributes, "Preach the Gospel at all times, when necessary use words" to him. How can you preach the gospel at all times: with and without words?

How many of you had an answer for what gives you hope?

How many of you had an answer for the source of that hope?

How many of you had an answer for where that hope is leading you?

Well then, you have all you need to be evangelists. If you can share why you have hope, and for 99% of you, that hope is founded in Jesus Christ, then you are evangelists. Learn your own story, and be able to share it. God's way often isn't the way we'd choose to do it.

The Lord be with you. ***And also with you.*** Let us pray.

Gracious Father, we pray for your holy catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Savior. ***Amen.***

# Acts 8

*How God does the impossible through his servants*

*Lent 2013*

*Session 2 – The Church Scattered*

Gracious Father, we pray for your holy catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Savior. **Amen.**

8<sup>2b</sup> At that time the church in Jerusalem suffered terribly. All of the Lord's followers, except the apostles, were scattered everywhere in Judea and Samaria. <sup>3</sup> Saul started making a lot of trouble for the church. He went from house to house, arresting men and women and putting them in jail. <sup>4</sup> The Lord's followers who had been scattered went from place to place, telling the good news. <sup>5</sup> Philip went to the city of Samaria and told the people about Christ. <sup>6</sup> They crowded around Philip because they were eager to hear what he was saying and to see him work miracles. <sup>7</sup> Many people with evil spirits were healed, and the spirits went out of them with a shout. A lot of crippled and lame people were also healed. <sup>8</sup> Everyone in that city was very glad because of what was happening.

## *Questions for Discussion*

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- What is the source of that hope?
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*God's way often isn't the way we'd choose to do it.*

Good Evening! It is good to see so many of you back for the third part of our four week Lenten Program: Acts 8: How God does the impossible through his servants. For those of you who haven't been with us the whole time, here's a brief overview of our first two weeks.

Week one was a week of sadness. We heard the story of Stephen, the Church's first martyr, and pondered what it meant for us to live in the midst of great change. Last week, we met a new character by the name of Philip. Philip was one of many early Christians who found themselves being forced to flee from Jerusalem as persecution under Saul heated up. Philip ended up in dreaded Samaria and preached the Gospel to anyone who would listen. Based on Philip's example, we discussed how we might be better equipped as evangelists to share the Good News of Jesus.

This evening, we will continue to journey with Philip as he is led by the Spirit to new and exciting experiences. Before we go too far, however, let's recall our ground rules.

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The Lord be with you. **And Also with you.** O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

We last left Philip in the city of Samaria. He was preaching the Good News and performing many miracles. The city, Luke tells us, was filled with joy. Philip spent some time in Samaria, preaching, teaching and baptizing new believers. One day, however, Philip was approached by an Angel of the Lord.

<sup>8</sup> <sup>26</sup> The Lord's angel said to Philip, "Go south along the desert road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza."

<sup>27</sup> So Philip left.

An important Ethiopian official happened to be going along that road in his chariot. He was the chief treasurer for Candace,

the Queen of Ethiopia. The official had gone to Jerusalem to worship

<sup>28</sup> and was now on his way home. He was sitting in his chariot, reading the book of the prophet Isaiah.

<sup>29</sup> The Spirit told Philip to catch up with the chariot.

<sup>30</sup> Philip ran up close and heard the man reading aloud from the book of Isaiah. Philip asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

<sup>31</sup> The official answered, "How can I understand unless someone helps me?" He then invited Philip to come up and sit beside him.

<sup>32</sup> The man was reading the passage that said,

“He was led like a sheep  
on its way to be killed.  
He was silent as a lamb  
whose wool  
is being cut off,  
and he did not say  
a word.

<sup>33</sup> He was treated like a nobody  
and did not receive  
a fair trial.

How can he have children,  
if his life  
is snatched away?”

<sup>34</sup> The official said to Philip, “Tell me, was the prophet talking about himself or about someone else?”

<sup>35</sup> So Philip began at this place in the Scriptures and explained the good news about Jesus.

<sup>36-37</sup> As they were going along the road, they came to a place where there was some water. The official said, “Look! Here is some water. Why can’t I be baptized?”

<sup>38</sup> He ordered the chariot to stop. Then they both went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

<sup>39</sup> After they had come out of the water, the Lord’s Spirit took Philip away. The official never saw him again, but he was very happy as he went on his way.

I’m not sure what the Contemporary English Version has against joy, but for the second week in a row, I find myself correcting a translation. The Ethiopian, was much more than “very happy.” The Greek word, the root verb of the word we talked about last week, is “*chairō*,” the Ethiopian went on his way “rejoicing.” A reasonable question here is “why is he rejoicing?”

To understand the Ethiopian’s joy, we first have to understand his sorrow. Luke tells us that he was a eunuch, a castrated man, something that was much more common in the ancient Near East, especially for state officials), who held the office of chief finance minister for Queen Candace of Ethiopia. While his Jewish-ness is the source of some debate, I’m apt to agree with Tom Wright who says, “It is very unlikely, virtually impossible, that he would himself have been Jewish; and, being a eunuch, he could not have been a proselyte to Judaism. He was an outsider, forever to remain that way within the Jewish system. But there was something about this Jewish God and the Jewish way of life which attracted him, as it did with many in the ancient world (if you think of the kinds of gods that were worshipped by other nations, and of the kind of practices that were often associated with them, you might well see Judaism as a wonderful oasis of clean, calm wisdom). So the Ethiopian had made the long journey to Jerusalem to worship, perhaps at one of the festivals; and he had procured, or perhaps already possessed, a copy of some or all of the Jewish scriptures.”<sup>5</sup>

As fate and the Holy Spirit would have it, the Ethiopian was reading from Isaiah 53 when Philip arrived on the scene. The Ethiopian had a question, “Who was the prophet writing about

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133

when he described the one ‘led like a lamb to the slaughter?’” Philip, has an answer. I’ll again let NT Wright explain it.

“It is important to stress how the early church read the prophets. It wasn’t just a matter of discovering strange passages here and there and lining them up with Jesus in some arbitrary fashion... they were aware of the Hebrew Scriptures primarily as a great *narrative*. This story stretched forward from Abraham –and, behind him, the creation of the world and of humans, and the disaster of human rebellion – through Moses, David, and the prophets, and on towards the present day. And the question was not only whether there are passages here which give us a foretaste of what is to come, but more particularly, how does this story reach its climax? And how do the hints and guesses along the way contribute to that climax?<sup>6</sup>

Isaiah, you see, wasn’t simply looking through a long-range prophetic telescope, seeing Jesus a few hundred years away, and describing him in cryptic poetry. Rather, he was meditating deeply on the fate of Israel in exile, and on the promises and purposes of God which remained constant despite Israel’s failure to be the light to the nations, or even to walk in the light herself. Gradually a picture took shape in his praying, meditating mind: the figure of a Servant, one who would come to where Israel was, to do for Israel and for the whole world what neither could do for themselves, to bear in his own body the same and reproach of the nations and of God’s people, and to die under the weight of the world’s wickedness. Only so, he perceived, could the promised be fulfilled. Isaiah was writing a kind of job description: This is what we want! He had, no doubt, many partial images in mind, of prophets who had suffered for what they had spoken, of the righteous sufferers in some of the Psalms. But what he was talking about was the way in which, and the one through whom, the long night of Israel’s exile would arrive at its new dawn, and with it the promise of blessing for the world, of a new covenant and a new creations – and, with that, a blessing even for outsiders and foreigners, and yes, even for eunuchs.

That hadn’t happened yet, but now it was beginning to, declares Philip; because the job description had found the right candidate at last. Jesus was the one through whom the slow and winding story of God’s people had reached its destination and with it the moment of redemption for the whole world. No wonder the Ethiopian was excited. When you tell the story of Israel like that, with Jesus at its climax, it opens up to include everybody, including people like him, doubly excluded and now wonderfully welcomed... No wonder he went on his way celebrating!”<sup>7</sup>

In our dreams, laid out at our annual meeting several months ago, Betty L. dreamed of a church in which, when someone says “no,” everybody else says “yes.” Little did she know that her dream was from Acts 8. The Ethiopian Eunuch had been told “no” over and over and over again. But in this new things that was happening, this way of life defined by Jesus, The answer to the question, “What’s to stop me from being baptized?” is quite simply, “nothing.” No had become yes. Doors are open. Chains are broken. We have been set free. Around your tables this evening, let’s imagine a church that turns “no” into “yes.” Answer these questions.

- When has the Church said “no” to you?
- How did it make you feel?
- How did you respond?
- When has the Church said “yes” to you?
- How did it make you feel?

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135

- How did you respond?
- When have you said “no” on behalf of the Church?
- When have you said “yes” on behalf of the Church?
- What has Saint Paul’s said “no” to that we should reconsider?

This is not a dream of a church where “everything goes.” Instead, it is a dream of a church that is a permission giver. It is a dream of a church that encourages and empowers everyone to take part in and develop new ministries. It is a dream of a church where, when the bulletin says, “The ministers of Saint Paul’s are the members...” it is really true. I think, by and large, we do that here, but I always think we can make improvements.

The Lord be with you. *And also with you.* Let us pray.

Gracious Father, we pray for your holy catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Savior. *Amen.*

# Acts 8

*How God does the impossible through his servants*

*Lent 2013*

*Session 2 – the Ethiopian Eunuch*

Holy God, no one is excluded from your love, and your truth transforms the minds of all who seek you: As your servant Philip was led to embrace the fullness of your salvation and to bring the stranger to Baptism, so give us all the grace to be heralds of the Gospel, proclaiming your love in Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

8<sup>26</sup> The Lord's angel said to Philip, "Go south along the desert road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza." <sup>27</sup> So Philip left. An important Ethiopian official happened to be going along that road in his chariot. He was the chief treasurer for Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia. The official had gone to Jerusalem to worship <sup>28</sup> and was now on his way home. He was sitting in his chariot, reading the book of the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup> The Spirit told Philip to catch up with the chariot. <sup>30</sup> Philip ran up close and heard the man reading aloud from the book of Isaiah. Philip asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" <sup>31</sup> The official answered, "How can I understand unless someone helps me?" He then invited Philip to come up and sit beside him. <sup>32</sup> The man was reading the passage that said, "He was led like a sheep on its way to be killed. He was silent as a lamb whose wool is being cut off, and he did not say a word. <sup>33</sup> He was treated like a nobody and did not receive a fair trial. How can he have children, if his life is snatched away?" <sup>34</sup> The official said to Philip, "Tell me, was the prophet talking about himself or about someone else?" <sup>35</sup> So Philip began at this place in the Scriptures and explained the good news about Jesus. <sup>36-37</sup> As they were going along the road, they came to a place where there was some water. The official said, "Look! Here is some water. Why can't I be baptized?" \* <sup>38</sup> He ordered the chariot to stop. Then they both went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. <sup>39</sup> After they had come out of the water, the Lord's Spirit took Philip away. The official never saw him again, but he was very happy as he went on his way.

## **Questions for Discussion**

- When has the Church said "no" to you?
- How did it make you feel?
- How did you respond?
- When has the Church said "yes" to you?
- How did it make you feel?
- How did you respond?
- When have you said "no" on behalf of the Church?
- When have you said "yes" on behalf of the Church?
- What has Saint Paul's said "no" to that we should reconsider?

*I dream of a church where "no" becomes "yes."*

Good Evening! It is always great to see who sticks it out until the bitter end of our Lenten Series. Tonight marks the final night of our four week Lenten Program: Acts 8: How God does the impossible through his servants. For those of you who haven't been with us the whole time, here's a brief overview of our first three weeks.

Week one was all about change and grief. We heard the story of Stephen, the Church's first martyr, and pondered what it meant for us to live in a time of big change. Week two was all about evangelism. We met Philip who was forced to flee from Jerusalem as the church found itself under strong persecution, but while he fled, Philip preached the Good News to everyone he met. Last week, we followed Philip from Samaria to the desert road to Gaza where he met an outsider's outsider, the Ethiopian Eunuch. We dreamt of what it looks like to be a part of a church where "no" becomes yes.

Tonight, we'll move on to chapter 9 of Acts, and see how God takes what was impossible just a few weeks ago, and changes the world because of it. Before we go too far, however, let's recall our ground rules.

A – Allow others to speak

C – Confidentiality: general ideas will be recorded by table facilitators

T – Time, we end at 7:15, sharp

S – Stay on topic

The Lord be with you. **And Also with you.** O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

When last we heard about Saul, he was going from house to house, arresting men, women, and children who were professing Jesus as Lord and Savior. He was so powerful a force, that the Church, excepting only the Apostles, fled from Jerusalem in search of safer homes. En route, they preach about Jesus to anyone who would listen, and the Gospel began to catch on in places like Samaria and Ethiopia. Still, there was one group to whom the Gospel was still a mystery. The Gentiles, but before we get there, let's listen to the story of Saul's conversion.

<sup>9</sup> Saul kept on threatening to kill the Lord's followers. He even went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked for letters to the Jewish leaders in Damascus. He did this because he wanted to arrest and take to Jerusalem any man or woman who had accepted the Lord's Way.

<sup>3</sup> When Saul had almost reached Damascus, a bright light from heaven suddenly flashed around him.

<sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice that said, "Saul! Saul! Why are you so cruel to me?"

<sup>5</sup> "Who are you?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus," the Lord answered. "I am the one you are so cruel to."

<sup>6</sup> Now get up and go into the city, where you will be told what to do."

<sup>7</sup> The men with Saul stood there speechless. They had heard the voice, but they had not seen anyone.

<sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, and when he opened his eyes, he could not see a thing. Someone then led him by the hand to Damascus,

<sup>9</sup> and for three days he was blind and did not eat or drink.

<sup>10</sup> A follower named Ananias lived in Damascus, and the Lord spoke to him in a vision. Ananias answered, “Lord, here I am.”

<sup>11</sup> The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the house of Judas on Straight Street. When you get there, you will find a man named Saul from the city of Tarsus. Saul is praying,

<sup>12</sup> and he has seen a vision. He saw a man named Ananias coming to him and putting his hands on him, so that he could see again.”

<sup>13</sup> Ananias replied, “Lord, a lot of people have told me about the terrible things this man has done to your followers in Jerusalem.

<sup>14</sup> Now the chief priests have given him the power to come here and arrest anyone who worships in your name.”

<sup>15</sup> The Lord said to Ananias, “Go! I have chosen him to tell foreigners, kings, and the people of Israel about me.

<sup>16</sup> I will show him how much he must suffer for worshiping in my name.”

<sup>17</sup> Ananias left and went into the house where Saul was staying. Ananias placed his hands on him and said, “Saul, the Lord Jesus has sent me. He is the same one who appeared to you along the road. He wants you to be able to see and to be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>18</sup> Suddenly something like fish scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see. He got up and was baptized.

<sup>19</sup> Then he ate and felt much better. For several days Saul stayed with the Lord’s followers in Damascus.

<sup>20</sup> Soon he went to the Jewish meeting places and started telling people that Jesus is the Son of God.

<sup>21</sup> Everyone who heard Saul was amazed and said, “Isn’t this the man who caused so much trouble for those people in Jerusalem who worship in the name of Jesus? Didn’t he come here to arrest them and take them to the chief priests?”

“Isn’t this the man who caused so much trouble...?” Let’s be honest for a minute, prior to the opening lines of Acts chapter 9, the idea of Saul converting from Judaism to Christianity was as laughable as the idea of the Pope retiring was just a few months ago. In his letter to the Philippians, which we will hear read on Sunday, Paul gives us his pedigree: If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” Saul wasn’t headed to Damascus hoping to meet Jesus. He was on his way, hoping to stamp him out, once and for all.

So what happened? John Stott says God happened. “If we ask what caused Saul’s conversion, only one answer is possible. What stands out from the narrative is the sovereign grace of God through Jesus Christ. Saul did not ‘decide for Christ’, as we might say. On the contrary, he was persecuting Christ. It was rather Christ who decided for him and intervened in his life. The evidence for this is indisputable.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Stott, p. 168.

God did the impossible, he converted Saul's heart. But what happened next was unfathomable. God opened the door to salvation to the ends of the earth. Tom Wright, again, says it so well.

“If the death and resurrection of Jesus is the hinge on which the great door or history swung open at last, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus was the moment when all the ancient promises of God gathered themselves up, rolled themselves into a ball, and came hurling through that open door and out into the wide world beyond.”<sup>9</sup>

“The Lord is calling Saul for a particular task. The time has come for the message about the one true God, the Jewish good news of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to be told to the wider world, the world of pagans, Gentiles, people who know nothing and care less about this God. And the person to do this task, to spearhead the work of getting the message out to those outside the law, must be the one who most clearly, of all others of his generation, had been the most keen to stamp the message out. Nobody must ever be able to say that people took the message to the Gentiles because they weren't bothered about Israel and its traditions, or because they didn't understand how important the law itself really was. No: when you want to reach the pagan world, the person to do it will be a hard-line, fanatical, ultra-nationalist, super-orthodox Pharisaic Jew. And then they say that God doesn't have a sense of humor.”<sup>10</sup>

From Stephen to Philip. From the Eunuch to Saul. From the end of Acts 7 to the opening of Acts 9, God is at work doing the impossible through regular disciples, high powered statesmen, and religious fanatics. God is equally interested in being at work, doing the impossible, through you and through me. Miracles happen every day, through regular people with faith like a mustard seed. God does the impossible. We hold on for dear life. Around your tables, Answer these questions.

- Have you ever witnessed a miracle?
  - Share your story.
- Have you ever thrown up your hands and said, “This is impossible.”?
  - Share your story
- When was the last time you were surprised by God?
  - Share your story
- How is Saint Paul's an Acts 8 Church?
- What is Saint Paul's missing?
- What impossible thing do you think God is calling you/us to do?
- Finish this sentence, “I dream of a church...”

<http://www.vimeo.com/10736544>

The Lord be with you. ***And also with you.*** Let us pray.

Gracious Father, we pray for your holy catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Savior. ***Amen.***

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<sup>9</sup> Wright, p. 142

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145



# Acts 8

*How God does the impossible through his servants*

*Lent 2013*

*Session 4 – The Conversion of Saul*

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, a you will, and always to the glory and welfare of your people, through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

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### *Questions for Discussion*

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- What impossible thing do you think God is calling you/us to do?
- Finish this sentence, “I dream of a church...”

*God does the impossible.*

*We hold on for dear life.*