

Acts 8: Into the Water
September 7th-8th, 2014
Baptism Celebration

Welcome: It's good to be with you! If you've recently joined us, you might not realize that this is one of our favorite weekends of the year! **Baptism Weekend:** We'll be back together as a community and we're going to be whooping and clapping and there will be smiles and tears and hugs, which from the outside probably looks a bit peculiar, but when you begin to understand what a **Baptism Celebration** is all about...at least some of it will make sense. Those being baptized are literally saying, *"Jesus Christ has wrecked my life with his goodness and love, so from this day on...I belong to Him!"* And the Bible says that each moment when someone places their trust in Jesus as Savior and King, and steps back into a personal relationship with God, heaven erupts in a celebration! So...we're simply joining in on the party!

And in these next few moments, I want to do my very best to explain why baptism is significant and what baptism has to do with our faith in Christ, and I'm going to encourage many of you who have never been baptized into Christ to consider entering into the celebration!

Acts chapter 8 might be one of the more obscure passages in the New Testament, but it is also probably one of the more encouraging texts if you're asking the questions, *"Why should I be baptized?" Or, "Who can be baptized?"*

Read with me, beginning in verse 26...

"As for Philip, an angel of the Lord said to him, 'Go South down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza.' So he started out, and he met the treasurer of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under the Kandake, the queen of Ethiopia. The eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and he was now returning. Seated in his carriage, he was reading aloud from the book of the prophet Isaiah." Acts 8:26-28

The majority of us will read this text without realizing on one hand, how profound it is that God miraculously intervenes in this man's life to bring him to a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ! And on the other hand, how similar our own stories are to this man's...in this way! If it were not for the direct intervention of God in our lives through circumstances or events or relationships, there isn't a single one of us who would have ever personally encountered Jesus!

Whether you realize it or not and whether you have a personal faith in Jesus Christ or not...the fact that you're here this morning, in the basement of a mill, is evidence that God, in his goodness and mercy, is on your heels! He's after you! And some of us...we keep running, but God has more stamina! He won't give up! And some of us...we stopped running a long time ago and like the Ethiopian man...we finally said, Jesus, my life is yours!

Acts 8: Into the Water
September 7th-8th, 2014
Baptism Celebration

Eunuch – The text points out a few significant details about this man! First...he was the treasurer of Ethiopia under the queen! Meaning...he was the country's CFO, so here is a man of great influence and responsibility! Second...he was a eunuch, and I'll explain, lest you simply think that this is weird!

During that time, men who were not of royal blood could ascend in influence and position within the royal family, but in order to do so, they had to be castrated! **"That seems extreme...I'll pass!" Why is this?** In our culture, most people try to find significance through money, power, and position, but in ancient times, honor was gained through family and descendants! The more descendants one had, the more influential and powerful they became. So, imagine a foreigner being invited into the royal palace to a high position...and then having a family with multiple descendants, thereby gaining power and influence! Before long, you'd have an internal struggle for power and the royal family's rule would be threatened. So...how do you deal with that threat? **You hinder the man's ability to have descendants!**

So...here is an African Eunuch of great influence in his country, and yet...of limited honor and hope for the future!

Finally...the text says that he was on his way back to Ethiopia after traveling to Jerusalem to worship, which is a 1,500-mile journey. This man had traveled the better part of a year, by chariot, to worship God in the temple! Why would he leave position and power for over a year unless he was in search of something! There must have been a giant hole in this man's life that He was trying to fill...and we'll see this later in the text!

Now, as the eunuch made his way down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza...pick up in verse 29.

The Holy Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over and walk along beside the carriage.' Philip ran over and heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' The man replied, 'How can I, unless someone instructs me?' And he urged Philip to come up into the carriage and sit with him." Acts 8:29-31

The text goes on to say that Philip climbed into the carriage, and there he and the Eunuch had a small group on wheels (journey groups are biblical!). And they studied Isaiah 53, which we'll come around to in a moment! But before we do...here's what I want you to see!

Stories: In those moments, the Eunuch went from a place of "not understanding" the Scriptures to "understanding" the central storyline of the Bible which says that

Acts 8: Into the Water
September 7th-8th, 2014
Baptism Celebration

there is a God who is so personally and intimately involved in every detail of your life and who loves you so completely that even when you are on an obscure road in a remote part of the world trying to fill an enormous hole in your life, God sees you there...and in His grace God will orchestrate circumstances and events to help you come to a personal knowledge of Him!

And anytime that God orchestrates circumstances or events to get your attention...no matter how ordinary those things may seem...God is supernaturally at work in your life!

Stories – We tend to miss the extraordinary work of God in the ordinary moments of life because we're drawn to chariot stories! *"We were on vacation up in Maine, driving along with a minivan full of kids, when an angel appeared in the middle of the road and explained the gospel...and there was a lake and we were all baptized, and we've never been the same!"*

Truthfully...how many of us have this kind of story? For most of us, God has been quietly and consistently working in our lives long before we even recognized it!

For some of us...God placed us into a family that taught us about Christ from birth... and if that's your story, there might be a tendency to think, 'my story is so ordinary.' I don't have a prodigal son story. I didn't run away from home and squander my parent's 401K and spend nights in jail and wake up in an alley eating food fit for pigs...and in a moment of despair run home into the open arms of my father. I wish I had a story like that. But I've just always stayed around home.' ***Don't you see the sovereign hand of God who chose the time and place for you to live and gave you your family, and knew this would be how you would encounter Him! This is the grace of God!***

Then, there are some of us who grew up without anyone to show us that there is a personal, loving God who is interested in our lives! And still, God brought someone across your path (a friend, colleague, a family member) and they pointed you toward Jesus! **This is God's grace!**

Finally, some of us grew up around the church, but we didn't like what we learned about God! And so we walked away from the church...but even more significantly, we walked away from God! And yet, God is gracious...and he didn't let you go, and in the middle of trying circumstances, or when you were trying to figure life out, God drew you back to himself...and now you've come to know a God who is so much greater and more glorious than the god of your youth!

Don't you see...that no matter your story, the same God that pursued the eunuch has been pursuing you!

Acts 8: Into the Water
September 7th-8th, 2014
Baptism Celebration

C.S. Lewis – C.S. Lewis was one of the greatest writers, thinkers, and apologists of the 20th century. He was an atheist for many years until, through a series of friendships (with individuals like G.K. Chesterton and J.R. Tolkien – *Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*), Lewis began to look at the claims of Christianity and in his early 30's, gave his life to Jesus!

In Lewis' autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, he describes the moment when he turned to Jesus!

*"You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility, which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape? **The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation.**"*

C.S. Lewis, Surprised by Joy

Lewis is saying that God has been committed to us long before we ever considered committing our lives to him...

Like the eunuch, you have a story of how God is working out his grace in your life to bring you back to Him! You might not see it, you might be running from it, but God is far more gracious and compelling than we are stubborn...and He stays on our heels!

But that's only part of the story. The beauty of the eunuch's story is what actually caused him to turn toward Jesus!

"The passage of Scripture he had been reading was this: 'He was led like a sheep to the slaughter. And as a lamb is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth. He was humiliated and received no justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.' The eunuch asked Philip, 'Tell me, was the prophet talking about himself or someone else? So beginning with this same Scripture, Philip told him the good news about Jesus.'" Acts 8:32-35

Acts 8: Into the Water
September 7th-8th, 2014
Baptism Celebration

The eunuch was reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. And in chapter 53, Isaiah describes a 'Servant' who would come and he too would die without descendants! Now...for a eunuch who had voluntarily given up descendants and the honor associated with family, this must have gotten his attention! But there was more. The Servant was unjustly condemned and like a sheep goes to the slaughter, He willingly gave up his life for the sins and rebellion of all people!

Philip says to the eunuch...this 'Servant' that Isaiah is talking about is Jesus Christ! Jesus loves you so much that he was willing to die for you to bring you back into God's presence! **This would have been earth shattering for the eunuch!**

Temple and Eunuchs - During that time...the Jewish people observed a whole series of ceremonial laws and rituals to make themselves clean, so that they could walk into the temple and worship God! This went all the way back to the Mosaic Law, which existed to teach the people that God is holy and perfect, but we are sinful and unclean. So if you want to get into the presence of God, you had to become clean! So...if you touched a dead body...for seven days you had to purify yourself to become clean again. Or, if you touched mold, you had to wash your whole body to be clean again.

But there were a few things that excluded a person from ever going in to worship God. For example...a eunuch was permanently defiled and could never enter the Temple! Imagine how defeating this must have been. And yet, later on in Isaiah, God promises that this was not to be a permanent rule...

"Don't let foreigners who commit themselves to the Lord say, 'The Lord will never let me be part of his people.' And don't let the eunuchs say, 'I'm a dried-up tree with no children and no future.' For this is what the Lord says: I will bless those eunuchs who keep my Sabbath days holy and who choose to do what pleases me and commit their lives to me. I will give them - within the walls of my house - a memorial and a name far greater than sons and daughters could give. For the name I give them is an everlasting one. It will never disappear."
Isaiah 56:3-5

Now...you take that promise. Foreigners and eunuchs will be welcomed into the presence of God...and you take Isaiah 53, the Servant will give his life to take away the sins of the people, making them clean again so that they can walk into the presence of God. And you have a picture of the gospel!

You see...It is one thing to say, 'God is on your heels because He loves you!' But, it's another thing to consider the price God paid to pursue you! God the Father sent His Son to die in your place, as a sacrifice for your sin, to make you clean again!

Acts 8: Into the Water
September 7th-8th, 2014
Baptism Celebration

We're all like eunuchs...unfit to stand in the presence of God because of our sin!
Yet...on the cross, Jesus was excluded from God's presence to bring us back into the arms of our Father!

The apostle Peter wrote about this...

"Jesus personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. It is by Jesus' wounds that we are healed!"
1 Peter 2:24

Now...with our last few moments...I want to apply this text by looking at the eunuch's response to this Good News!

"As they rode along, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, 'Look! There's some water! Why can't I be baptized? He ordered the carriage to stop, and they went down into the water and Philip baptized him.'" Acts 8:36-38

I love this...the eunuch has only known the Good News about Jesus for half of a day...and yet He believes what Philip tells him, and seeing some water he says, *"I want to be baptized,"* meaning, *"I want to know this Jesus!"* *"Why can't I?"*

This is a profound statement about baptism! You see...I talk to many individuals who are considering baptism, but they believe that there is a cosmic checklist out there that they need to complete before coming to Jesus!

But...notice that the text doesn't imply this at all! The eunuch doesn't say!

I want to be baptized...but first I need to be better educated!

That's what some of us believe, right? I can place my trust in Jesus when I've taken the class...or I've satisfied all of my intellectual curiosities...or I know more about God! But right now, I just don't know enough?

Please hear me...at Harbor, we are all for pressing into the Scriptures, and knowing what you believe and why you believe it so that you can make an informed decision to follow Jesus, but please hear me. **You can become better educated, but that doesn't make you better suited for baptism!**

Romans 10:9-10 – In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul tells us what we must do to walk back into the arms of God!

Acts 8: Into the Water
September 7th-8th, 2014
Baptism Celebration

"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved." Romans 10:9-10

Paul says, you don't need to be better educated...you just need to recognize your need for Jesus and confess that to Him! And call on Him to save (rescue) you! And He does!!

Illustration – If you're drowning in water, you don't ask your friend to throw you a manual on a life preserver so that you can study more...you ask for the life preserver!

In baptism, we call out to God in faith... *"Please rescue me!"*

(Nor did the eunuch say...)

I want to be baptized...but first I need to be better prepared!

Many of us believe that we need to get rid of all anxiety and uncertainty surrounding baptism, before we respond!

Now...we can't see it from this story alone, but if you read through the rest of Acts, you'll see that each time a person encountered the Good News about Jesus and believed, they responded immediately in baptism! Acts 2...the Day of Pentecost, 3,000 people heard the gospel, responded to Jesus in faith, and were baptized that day. Acts chapter 10, Cornelius, a Roman officer, and his entire family heard the gospel, responded in faith and were baptized. Acts chapter 16, Lydia, a businesswoman heard Paul explain the Good News about Jesus, and she along with many of her family members responded in faith and were baptized.

Over and over again you'll see this! People believe the Good News about Jesus and are baptized, and not once do the Apostles go... *"Now, first you need to get prepared."*

No...the gospel is that we're not prepared. Jesus came and died for us when we were completely unprepared! In fact...one of the qualifications for faith in Jesus is for you to recognize that without Him, you are unfit for God!

(Finally, the eunuch didn't say...)

I want to be baptized...but first I need to be better!

Acts 8: Into the Water
September 7th-8th, 2014
Baptism Celebration

There are some of us who whole-heartedly believe that we can't respond to Jesus in baptism until we first get some things right in our lives! Until we deal with a sin from the past or a habit in the present. **What we're really saying is...**

"Jesus won't have me until I clean up!"

But don't you see what the image of baptism shows us? In Christ, we who are completely filthy and covered in sin, are washed and covered in the beauty and holiness of Christ! We who have messed up pasts are given brand new beginnings, along with a desire to love and obey Christ!

Don't try to clean up before coming to Jesus! Instead, listen to the eunuch!

When the eunuch heard the gospel, he said... *"Here's water, why can't I be baptized?"*

And Philip doesn't say... *"I'll tell you why. You don't know enough...you're not prepared enough...you're not good enough."* He says, *"you're right, that is water...let's do this!"*

At Harbor, when a person is baptized, he or she is saying two things!

JESUS...I NEED YOU! *I need you to be the Savior of my life! I believe you died to pay my debt! I place my trust in your death and resurrection! Please rescue me and forgive me!*

JESUS...I WANT YOU! *I want you to be the king of my life!* You see...when you begin to understand how far Jesus has gone to show you His love and to save you from sin and death, you'll say to Him, *"Jesus, from this day on, my life belongs to you!"*

Close

Have you personally responded to Jesus in this way? To respond to Jesus in faith, yet to never be baptized is like getting married, but never having a wedding ceremony! Baptism is the public celebration of our union with Christ!

Maybe this morning you have doubts about Christianity, and truly aren't ready to place your faith in Christ! Will you be like the eunuch and sincerely study the Scriptures? He demonstrated an incredible amount of intellectual honesty; will you do that as well? What do you have to lose?

Acts 8: Into the Water
September 7th-8th, 2014
Baptism Celebration

For many of you, you're ready to be baptized...Jesus has been pressing on you for a long time and until today, you've thought that there's a process you need to get through to be ready!

Now you see that there isn't a process! Instead, there's a Person...Jesus, who is inviting you to step into His arms! Today can be your day...will you surrender your life to Him! And will you say, like the eunuch...

Why Can't I Be Baptized?

If this is what Jesus is doing in your life, I will be up here after the service, along with some of our staff and we'd love to hear your story and talk with you about participating in the baptism celebration tomorrow!

PRAY!