

# Look! Water!

## Acts 8:26-40

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I am confident I speak for the entire Chi class when I tell you that it has been our great joy to put this service together for you tonight. I'm sure some of you plan worship with other staff, but have you tried a staff of 20 mostly musicians to plan a single service...well, as a pastor I knew where that would lead: all those times their pastors had said, "*Sunday's service is going to be really full... (you hear it coming, don't you?): Could you cut a song? Would you drop a verse?*"

So I knew my Chi colleagues would rise up and wreak their revenge on ME as we looked at tonight's five-hour service and needed to cut somewhere. But godly men and women that they are, they never once suggested I shorten the sermon. They seemed happy to give me the full two minutes they'd planned for the sermon from the beginning.

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There are many unusual stories in the Bible, but for me this story has always held a particularly fascinating and exotic appeal. There is, what I always assumed to be, a deeply blackskinned man in a white-skinned world, who comes from a queen's inner circle in a strange faraway land. He is the only one in the entire NT said to ride a chariot; and he is a eunuch – a mysterious category which I've never had the masculine fortitude to clarify with exactness.

He is riding along, reading his scroll ALOUD as was the custom. Then another man, undoubtedly the author of that lost first century witnessing classic *Just Walk Across the Desert*, under direct orders from an angel, sprints up alongside him, jumps in the chariot and he hits the evangelism lotto. There is a baptism, and whoosh, our Sprinting Angel-Directed Evangelist is beamed on to a new place, while our unphased African

eunuch simply rides on, rejoicing in his newfound faith. It really is an odd and intriguing story. But believe it or not, it is our story here at IWS.

In fact, if we were to read this in the IWSV, it might sound like this:

There was a Director of Worship who made the pilgrimage from afar to come to Mt. Webber in Orange Park to worship. After a week on the mountaintop, feasting on the four-fold manna, the worship director is heading home, awaiting her flight at the gate in the JAX airport.

Inspired by course 702, she is reading the Scripture aloud. Stirred by the Spirit, Jeff Barker draws near and hearing the Book that He Loves being read aloud, can hardly contain himself. He sprints up and with evangelistic fervor similar to Philip's asks, *"How about trying it like this?"*

Indeed, it is an inspired suggestion which seems to bring heaven to earth, and in a moment of glory Jeff is snatched away on a flight to Iowa to preach his gospel in a new city, and the worship director sees him no more, but goes on her way, rejoicing.

But truly, this IS our story. We have come to our mountain here to worship – and our spirits have been lifted and renewed. But we now prepare to leave the mountaintop and take the road down to Gaza, home to family and good things, but also home to the mundane,

- to paying bills and disciplining children,
- to a congregation that is stuck,
- to colleagues who may not share the enthusiasm found here,
- to a choir or praise team laden with dysfunctional sinners,
- to a difficult marriage,
- to parents needing care,
- and home maintenance that just won't quit.

(Came tumbling off that mountaintop pretty quickly, didn't we?)

But did you notice Luke's brief descriptive note about the road down from Jerusalem: it is a desert road. Do you feel that tonight, as you start making the shift to what awaits you? It sure has been wonderful to be in Jerusalem to worship, and yes, we

are eager to go back and try some new things, to point people toward a new horizon, but our road is often a wilderness road.

One of our classmates recently moved his family across the country to take a worship position in another congregation. Listen to what he shared as he prepared to return for this session:

*Starting over cold has been much more difficult than I thought, and I'm struggling. Surrounded by church folks, I feel isolated. Putting on a brave face for an exhausted ministry team, I feel discouraged. Facing a round of budget/staff reductions three months in, I feel disappointed.*

*I feel anonymous here and that I could get away with all my favorite vices to make me feel better about life. I feel the chasm growing between the [me] people see and the [me] I see. Either I've forgotten how to live the truth of the Incarnation or I never knew.*

It's a barren place sometimes as pastors and worship leaders. Here we are, supposed to lead people out of the overflow of our own spiritual vitality, but we are at odds with a spouse, grieving over a deep loss, in conflict with church members, anxious about finances. Goodness, sometimes, we are a pretty sorry lot, aren't we? (The Calvinists would AMEN there, except that's not really in our vocabulary!)

But it is not all just circumstances and difficult people. Sometimes the reason for the desert is us. We have fled from the shelter of the cross and gone our own way.

- Maybe we practice sins, hidden or not so hidden, that we pretend are not really a big deal.
- Maybe we no longer are astounded that God would use us, but instead simply presume that he will.
- Maybe we are just too busy to sit at the feet of Jesus.
- And then there's that annoying person – you fill in the idiosyncrasy: I have an elder who has told me that we need her negative spirit to keep things in balance: we can sure blow a lot of staff meeting time talking about her, but we never pray for her. That doesn't foster our spiritual health.

Let's face it - sometimes we're in a barren place by our own sinful choices. We have abandoned the streams of living water. And what makes this journey particularly difficult for some of us is that.... like the eunuch, you ride home alone – it's hard to leave Jerusalem alone.

But look what happens in the desert: ***“Then Philip opened his mouth...and he preached Jesus (to the eunuch).”*** The gospel appears. The gospel – not in Jerusalem, not in Gaza, not in Ethiopia – but in the desert! And the gospel changes things. Jesus changes things. The eunuch still is on the desert road, but he goes on his way **REJOICING!**

For all the intrigue of angelic direction and Spirit prompting and confounding scrolls and a royal traveler from afar and the whisking away, let us not lose sight of the center of the story: the simple wonder of the gospel, smack dab in the MIDDLE of the desert:

***“Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so he did not open his mouth. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.”*** (Is. 53:7,5) Philip... preached... Jesus. Oh, that's a good word for the journey home. Jesus. God in human flesh - crucified, raised, ascended.

What was it we heard earlier tonight: *Hear the good news! While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven! Glory to God!* Oh, that's a good word for the journey home. Do you believe that?

But there's more! When we preach Jesus, we preach more than forgiveness. We preach HOPE! You sang that hope already – did you notice? *I see the King of glory, coming on the clouds with fire, the whole earth shakes, the whole earth shakes.* Do you see that vision? *Hosanna, hosanna. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God!*

Jesus is coming like he did before. Oh, that's good news in the wilderness. Jesus gives us a reason for hope.

My friends, the gospel comes on the barren road. Where the sun beats down, and the land is cracked, and where nothing grows: the kingdom of God is breaking in, like a stream in the desert, causing the ground to blossom. How we long for that day, over and over and over again. Sin and brokenness and loneliness and hard going – in our churches and in us - when will it end?

- When will our friends in tonight's video find there is nothing left to pray for because the kingdom has overtaken us?
- When will we enjoy the favorable year of the Lord Isaiah foretold when captives are released, and the blind see, and the oppressed are set free?
- When will the lame walk, the deaf hear? When will swords be beaten into plowshares and the lion lie down with the lamb?
- When will the visions of Ezekiel become incarnate and all the dry bones fully live, and rivers of living water pour forth from the Temple and nourish healing in every place? When? When? Brothers and sisters, when?
- When will Jesus lead us in the feast around the table in sweet fellowship with all the saints of every age, from north, south, east and west, in the glory of a day revealed to John, when there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain?
- When will our cries of *Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!* be silenced by the voice of him who sits on the throne and says, "Behold, I am making all things new!"

THAT'S what we want to go home to. Not diapers and dirty dishes and dull worshipers who don't care HOW many folds you give them in worship as long as you give them "*Amazing Grace*" – and not that "chains fell off" version!

The eunuch understood our longing. Philip had so unfolded the glory of salvation in Jesus Christ that the eunuch could hardly contain himself: "***Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?***" It's not Philip who suggests it.

This is the eagerness of a boy on summer vacation who not only lets out a shout at the first sight of the ocean on the horizon, but who is also not satisfied until he has vaulted the dune and charged into the water. Is this not the eager expectancy of Romans 8 that we share with all creation - just let me into the waters of that new kingdom – let's go! We have a great longing because we have a great hope!

And so the eunuch was baptized into life in Christ, bathed in the gospel, saturated in salvation, and he went on his way rejoicing. This shift is no small thing!

But baptism is not without it's pain. The story is told about a pastor who, as he laid a woman back under the water in an immersion baptism, her eyes popped open and her body stiffened. The look on her face was a mixture of excitement and surprise. All the pastor could think was, "*Wow! God is really doing something amazing with her!*" What he discovered when he lifted her out of the water and saw her rubbing the back of her head was that he had smacked the back of her head onto the steps of the pool!

It can be difficult and painful for us to die under the water. And sometimes that surprises us. But for us to be made, we have to give up the old. Do you find that surrender easy? The question of the eunuch was a good one: *what prevents me from being baptized? Or for us, what hinders me from full union with Christ?*

Our baptism into Christ is a powerful reality. Something happens under that water. Some miracle too big for our understanding, but not too big for our imagination. In a mystery, like that eunuch, we are joined to Christ. We are no longer who we were.

- We go down captive to sin; we emerge free in Jesus Christ.
- We descend shattered and broken; we are raised up whole and restored.
- We go down full of ourselves; we come up full of the Holy Spirit.
- We go down vulnerable and exposed; we are raised up safe – our lives “*hidden with Christ in God.... And when Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then we also will be revealed with him... in glory*” (Col. 3:3-4).

Can you taste it? Can you see it? Feast, saints, the new Jerusalem, illuminated only by the brilliance of God, reflecting on the crystal waters coming from his throne. Heaven and earth collapsed into a glorious new world. And you are there. Thy kingdom come – what a good prayer Jesus gave us! (You just gotta love Jesus.)

But tonight many are still on the desert road, looking for water. We long to go home rejoicing like our Ethiopian brother. But first, we do well to revisit the waters of our baptism. Because there is hope for us in Jesus Christ!

- Perhaps you need a good death, to release some things – because Jesus does not want you riding up out of the water clinging to those ungodly things, but to him alone.
- Or maybe you need to go under that water for a long, long time – what has encrusted your soul needs to soak in Christ before it will fall away, or you just need to be rehydrated.

No matter what, tonight we invite you to refresh yourselves in the wonder of the gospel, the absolutely confounding notion that YOU – broken, weary, struggling YOU are invited into the full feasting of God’s family. Who would believe it?!

Receive the good news of Jesus tonight as you head for home. The water is here – do not pass it by. As you come to the Table in a few moments, we would encourage you to circle past the font and to touch the water however the Holy Spirit leads you.

Tonight, you don't have to get to the piano, you don't have to give a benediction, you have no responsibility – let the gospel meet you in the desert, and go to the water.

As we prepare to go, let us spend some time in silence. In this silence, let God speak to you around this question: *what needs to happen under the water tonight for you to rise up and go home rejoicing*, what needs to happen under the water for you to rise up and walk into the kingdom that is coming?

Let me pray for us... Holy God, in your mercy, speak into this silence, like rain on dry ground...

....Amen.