

Breakthrough to Questioning Seekers

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning. My name is Brian, and I attend the Alameda Parish.

Today's scripture lesson is a reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, Go south to the road, the desert road, that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake, which means Queen of the Ethiopians.

This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot, reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The spirit told Philip, Go to that chariot and stay near it.

[1 : 11] Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. Do you understand what you're reading? Philip asked. How can I, he said, unless someone explains it to me.

So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. This is the passage of scripture the eunuch was reading. He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

In his humiliation, he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth. The eunuch asked Philip, Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?

Then Philip began with that very passage of scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. And they traveled along the road. They came to some water, and the eunuch said, Look, here's water.

What can stand in the way of my being baptized? And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

[2 : 27] When they came up out of the water, the spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. There we go.

Can you hear me? You know, pre-COVID, I did not think that much about the role of pastors in public health. I didn't even know what an epidemiologist was, so like a year ago.

My brother's the doctor of our family. I'm just the preacher. I could have been a doctor. There were too many good shows on TV, though, when I was growing up. So I do have the handwriting of a doctor, but that's about it.

You just do not want me to treat any of your ailments. If you have a fever, I'm going to give you some aspirin. Step on a nail, I'm going to crush up some aspirin and rub it on your foot. Gaping wound, I'm going to pour some extra-strength aspirin into that hole and put some duct tape on it.

[3 : 54] So that's about the extent of my care. Extra-strength aspirin always. I just want the maximum human dosage allowable. Just take me up to, like, where it would kill me and then just back it off a touch.

That's the kind of pain reliever I enjoy. I'm not a doctor. I know very little about viruses or vaccines or public health, but I am happy to report to you that we've had 210 adults and kids, different people, in here since mid-February.

And we have not yet had any COVID transmission to date that I'm aware of, so praise God for that. And we also took a survey this past week, and you all let us know, about 132 of you, that you're 97% vaccinated.

So congratulations. Again, I'm not a math guy, but 97%, I'm told, is a high, high number. And you can probably feel pretty good about that. So our COVID task force is going to write a letter in the coming weeks to talk about what it means to reopen Christ Church fully with our county, with our state on June 15.

And many of you raised great questions in that survey and concerns, and so we'll try to speak to that. And if you haven't filled that out, we encourage you to do so. Well, today we are getting back into the Acts of the Apostles, the Acts of the Holy Spirit, the Acts of Christ's church.

[5 : 13] And this is the book that tells us about the church's identity and mission, who we are and what we are to do. And we want to take a fresh look at it as COVID recedes and we emerge from this pandemic to ask the question, who are we at Christ Church?

What does God have for us to do in Berkeley and Oakland and in the Bay Area? And we're following along this mission statement that Jesus gives in chapter 1, verse 8, where he says to a group of about 120 disciples, he says to them, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.

And you're going to go out and be my empowered witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and even to the ends of the earth. And so this is a blueprint for us, it's a map and a compass for how to move, how to keep up with the Holy Spirit as he's taking the gospel, the good news of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

We come today to Acts chapter 8, which is an especially cherished scripture among Christians of African descent, the story of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch.

And when we think about Christianity in Africa today, we often think about movements that began with the witness of missionaries from the West. But the biblical record tells us that Christianity in Africa actually starts before Christianity in Europe.

[6 : 36] And of course, if you know the history, now the center of gravity of Christianity is in the global south, in Africa, in Latin America, in Asia.

And the 20th century was probably one of the most remarkable of all the centuries since the first century, because the composition of the Christian church ethnically and culturally changed dramatically in that century.

In the year 1900, Africa had about 10 million Christians. Fast forward to the year 2000, it had 360 million Christians. About half of the population of Africa is Christian today.

And so what we see is that Africa became the heartland of Christianity in the early centuries of the church, and it is now the heartland once again. And so we do well to look at this text, which has inspired so many through the years.

And what it tells us is that the church's mission is to pursue others, answer questions, and baptize into joy.

[7 : 42] And let me start with the church's mission to pursue others.

The three main characters of the story are the Holy Spirit, Philip, and this man from Ethiopia. And if you pulled out Google Maps and you entered in Aswan, Egypt, and Khartoum, Sudan, that would put you about in the zone where this black African man began his 1,000-mile journey, his pilgrimage north along the Nile River.

And he got up there, and then he went east to Jerusalem, to Israel. And we're told that he's not just an Ethiopian. We're told five times that he's a eunuch, which means he's castrated.

And that was common if you're not part of the royal family, but you're being groomed in an administrative leadership position in the government, and you're constantly close to in proximity with the royal family members.

This was your cost of entry into your profession to be castrated, to be eunuched. Some of us thought we had to pay a high price for our graduate student degree entrance into our vocational field, so we should probably complain a little bit less.

[9 : 03] But notice the differences between Philip and this man. Philip is working class. This guy is upper class, part of the cultural, political elite.

He's the CFO of his nation. He runs the treasury. He's rich. He's successful. He's this powerful businessman. Philip is Jewish. This guy is racially different.

He has darker skin. He's from the outermost culture in the known civilized world at that time. He's sexually altered. He's about as different as Philip as you could possibly be.

And Jews just simply did not mix with Gentiles like this at all. But the Holy Spirit is work in this guy's life. Because of the Jewish diaspora that had spread throughout the Roman Empire, it made it all the way down to Ethiopia, where this man who was a spiritual seeker became a convert to Israel's God.

And so he traveled for months on pilgrimage to this feast in Jerusalem where he went there to worship Yahweh. And while he was there, this highly educated man found this rare, expensive scroll of the Scriptures, which he purchased.

[10 : 18] And now he's bumping along in his chariot reading this scroll. And the Holy Spirit has prepared the heart of this man for an encounter with a Christian.

Right? And meanwhile, the Holy Spirit's not just working in this Ethiopian man. He's also at work in Philip. In verse 26, we see that an angel of the Lord said to Philip, Go south to the road, the desert road, that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

And then in verse 29, it says, The Spirit told Philip, Go to that chariot and stay near it. And what we see is that the Holy Spirit intervenes. The Holy Spirit directs and guides this Christian to pursue this spiritual seeker.

And the chariot's moving. So Philip is having to run, right? He's running alongside and saying, I can see that you're reading the Bible. I can see that you're engaging with this. Do you understand it?

Do you need any help? And it's hot. He's in the desert. He's sweating. This kind of thing just doesn't happen between a Jew and an Ethiopian eunuch ever.

[11 : 26] It doesn't happen unless the Holy Spirit pushes and pulls Philip into this conversation. Unless it reminds him that statement of the resurrected Jesus where he said, I want you to go and I want you to make disciples of all the nations, of all the ethnos.

And here he is. He's pursuing this other who's very different than him. And he's doing what Jesus told us to do, which is to intentionally break down barriers so that the gospel can go to new groups of people.

And that's a theme throughout the Acts of the Apostles, that the Holy Spirit desires Christians to break down barriers, to get out of our comfort zone, to engage with and embrace different people in different places of different cultures.

And in fact, the Holy Spirit is grieved when Christians of one race disdain or have contempt for another or simply avoid and ignore others who are different than them.

So the Holy Spirit urges Philip to run after this racially different, sexually altered man, a man he would never have anything to do with him.

[12 : 38] And he says, I want you to get near him and I want you to stay close to him. And it raises the question for us, doesn't it? Who is your one? Who is your one person like this in your life?

Jesus told us about the good shepherd who goes after the one sheep. Right? And Jesus here through the Holy Spirit, through Philip, is going after this one man. Who is the one person that God has put into your life here in Berkeley and in Oakland whom the Holy Spirit is nudging you and saying, go to them and stay near them?

This Ethiopian is what we would call a person of peace. Meaning he's open to Philip. He listens to Philip. He invites him in. He sits down for conversation. Who is that in your life?

I want you to imagine their face. Imagine their name. And then I want you to ask this question. How is the Holy Spirit prompting me to take my next step and be intentional with that one person?

Is it to pray for them? Is it to spend time with them? Is it to ask them good questions like Philip is doing here? Now you might say, well, I want to be a good friend to that person, but I don't really want to impose my faith on them.

[13 : 55] I don't want to ask them to change their culture in sharing the gospel with them. But what the Acts of the Apostles tells us is that Christianity does not belong to any one people or culture more than another.

What we see is that the gospel is for Samaritans. It's for Africans. It's for Middle Easterners. It's for Europeans and Asians and all the way out to all the people groups of the world.

Laminsane, whom we've mentioned here before, he's a native of Gambia in Africa, professor at Yale, and he wrote a book called Whose Religion is Christianity?

The Gospel Beyond the West. And he sheds light on this issue of the cultural transference of Christianity as he's reflecting on that explosive growth of the gospel in Africa in the 20th century.

And he says, why is that? What enabled that to happen? And what Sané says, he says this, he says, Christianity gave us a reorientation of worldview. People sensed in their hearts that Jesus did not mock their respect for the sacred or their clamor for an invincible savior, and so they beat their sacred drums for him until the stars skipped and danced in the skies.

[15 : 12] Sané says Christianity helped Africans to become renewed Africans, not remade Europeans. In other words, Christianity does not destroy our African culture.

Rather, it completes it, restores it, and renews our Africanness. And that's what the Spirit does everywhere. The Spirit recreates Christianity afresh in each new culture without destroying or diminishing that culture, which Sané argues makes Christianity the most inclusive of all cultural differences among all the world religions.

In fact, he says Christianity is way more inclusive than secularism, which is always talking about inclusion. So when we ask that question, who is your one?

Who's your one person? And we try to imagine sharing the gospel with that one person in the context of friendship. You would not be imposing something that's alien or foreign onto that person in such a way to diminish them culturally or individually.

Rather, you'd be inviting them to become the truest expression, the highest version of who God created them to be, inviting them into an authentic humanity in Jesus who transcends all cultures.

[16 : 31] Cultures. And that's what's happening here with this man. And this is what the church's mission is all about. The church's mission is to pursue others who are radically different from us racially, culturally, religiously, in every way.

In every way. The church's mission is to pursue others, and it's also to answer their questions. The church's mission is also to pursue others and to answer their questions.

Because we see the three main characters in the story, the Holy Spirit, Philip, and the Ethiopian. But what are the three main questions in the story? The three main things that this inquire, this questioning seeker asks.

We see the first question in verse 31. He says, how can I understand this scroll of Scripture that I'm reading unless someone explains it to me and teaches me its meaning?

And the second question comes up in verse 34. He says, who is this prophet Isaiah talking about? Is he talking about himself or someone else? And then his third question in verse 36, he says, what can stand in the way of my being baptized?

[17 : 43] Our mission is to pursue others and to earn their trust in such a way that they would come and ask us their questions. And we should pray that the Holy Spirit would stir up this level of spiritual awakening and desire and seeking that we see in this man.

That more and more people would be asking these kind of questions in their hearts and then coming to us with those questions. And assuming that we, God's people, are earning the right to be heard and that people know how much we care for them, we should pray that the Holy Spirit would give us clear, solid, biblical, truthful answers about reality, about God, about human nature and the meaning of life and the story of salvation and the end and the goal of human history.

And the courage to share those convictions. So what is it that gives rise to this man's question? Well, the Holy Spirit has led this Ethiopian eunuch to the Word of God.

The Holy Spirit has fixed this man's attention on the Bible. And not just the Bible, but one of the most important texts in the heart of the Bible, Isaiah 53, the song of the suffering servant.

And so if you wonder how the Holy Spirit acts, if you wonder what it means for the Holy Spirit to be working on someone, what we see here is that the Spirit of God leads us to the Scriptures of God, which focus on the servant of God.

[19 : 15] The Spirit of God leads us to the Scriptures of God, which focuses on the servant of God. And that's what prompts his question in verse 34. Who is this about? Who is this talking about?

Is this about the prophet or somebody else? And why is he so eager? Why is this man so eager to know the someone in this text? Because think about the context of this Ethiopian eunuch's life.

He's reached the top, right? He's the head of the treasury, the CFO of his country. He's got money. He's got power. He's got success. But it's come at great cost and at great sacrifice, right?

He's eunuched. He's eunuched in the midst of a family-centric culture, which means he is never going to marry. He is not going to have a legacy to pass on to his kids and his grandkids.

And so he probably reads that line, who can speak of his descendants? And that resonates with the story. He wonders, who is this? Who is this?

[20 : 15] And think about it. Why did this guy leave his kingdom to go in this long, dangerous, costly 1,000-mile pilgrimage up to Jerusalem to worship at the temple?

He must have had an enormous spiritual emptiness inside of him. He must have had a deep hunger that all of his money and power and success could not fill, that only the God of Israel, only the God of the Bible could fill.

And so he goes on this journey, but he gets to the temple. And guess what? Gentiles and eunuchs are not allowed in to that holy place.

And so he's reading this text about this one who's shut out, this one who's cut off, this one who's humiliated, and he's wondering, who is this? And how is it that Philip responds?

Well, Philip does not give this guy postmodern literary criticism. He doesn't say, well, you create the meaning in this text, right? He doesn't give him Derrida and deconstruction.

[21 : 18] He just tells him straight up. He says in verse 35 that he began with that very passage of Scripture, and he told him the good news about Jesus.

He said, you've been reading Isaiah's songs about the servant of Yahweh and what he's going to do, how he's going to come, and he's going to triumph over everything that threatens us.

How he's going to be victorious over all that dehumanizes us. And now you've gotten to that text that tells us how the servant is going to do it.

The servant of the Lord is going to triumph through defeat. The servant of Yahweh is going to be victorious through suffering, it says.

The servant of God is going to be exalted through humiliation. You see that slaughtered lamb in verse 32, that humiliated one in verse 33, that's Jesus of Nazareth.

[22 : 16] That is God crucified. That's the man who was born to die. Because these are the verses that lead up to this text. The few verses just ahead of what's printed for us.

It says, surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions.

He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was laid upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Each of us has turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us. Every single one of us.

Philip, I imagine, looked at this man and said, you know all the self-centeredness that's in our hearts? You know all the guilt and shame of this world?

[23 : 17] God provided a substitute to carry that for you and for me. God provided a sacrificial lamb to bear that in our place.

He came and he was deprived of justice. He came and he was covered in blood. He came and he was swallowed up by the darkness.

And why did he do it? He did it to heal us. He did it to forgive us and to cleanse us. To put us back in a right relationship with God to give us life.

To give us peace. And I can imagine Philip looking straight in the eyes of this man and saying, you know on the cross, Jesus became this suffering servant not just for Israelites, but for Ethiopians.

Not just for Jews, but for Gentiles. Not just for marrieds, but for eunuchs. Not just for insiders, but for outsiders. Because on the cross, the Son of God, God in the flesh, the ultimate insider, took the place of the ultimate outsider.

[24 : 26] So that we, who are outside of a relationship with God, longing to be let in. Let into that holy place. Let into his holy love. Could finally become insiders.

Christ Church. Of all the questions that the world is asking, this is the one answer that we've been given.

It's the deepest answer to all the world's questions. The answer of the suffering servant. The answer of the sacrificial substitute. The answer of the crucified Christ.

It's all we have to offer as good news to this world. And that's the church's mission. It's to pursue others. And in pursuing others to answer their questions.

And then finally, it's to baptize into joy. The church's mission is to pursue others, answer their questions, and baptize them into joy.

[25 : 27] And I want to end with this. Because what do we do with Philip's answer to this question? Do we believe that the suffering servant took our place? And that his substitutionary sacrifice for us is good news.

Not just for us, but for the whole world. And do we cherish that as the best news that we've ever heard that anyone ever will hear? And do we cherish it to such a degree that we want to do something about it?

The story of this eunuch ends with him being baptized. And it says he goes home to Ethiopia rejoicing. And there he goes and he commends what he most cherishes.

Right? The Holy Spirit has come upon him. He's received power when the Holy Spirit came on him. And he returned home as an empowered witness to the ends of the earth. The first evangelist in his city.

The first to plant a church in Africa. The first to launch a missionary movement on the continent. And what's so ironic is that this eunuch who would never have a biological family became the spiritual father.

[26 : 35] To countless sons and daughters. All because he asked this question in verse 36. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?

See, understanding is essential to faith. But understanding is not enough. Right? We can understand what's at stake. We can understand what God has done for us in Christ.

But we can still be undecided. We can still do nothing about it. We can still stay on the fence. But this man's will becomes malleable. And he says, I want to take a step of faith.

I want to come off the fence. I want to identify myself with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And all that God has done for me. I want that water.

I want the water of baptism that says, I belong to the Father. I want the water that tells me I've been washed by Jesus and all my sins are washed away.

[27 : 33] I want the water that plunges me into the resurrection life by the Holy Spirit. Is there anything that should keep me from that water? He knows that this is a serious step.

He knows that this is a costly decision. It's an action with consequences that will reverberate his whole life long. All the way to the very end. Because baptism means conversion.

And as Laman Sané puts it, he says, Conversion is the turning of ourselves to God. And that means all of ourselves without leaving anything behind or outside.

Baptism says the old way of life is over. And the new way of life begins here. Baptism says stop believing those doctrines and start confessing this creed.

Baptism says stop living in this ethical way and start walking on this moral path. Right? And this guy knows that here and now I'm unreservedly, irrevocably committing myself to Jesus to belong only and wholly to him.

[28 : 43] Baptism says stop living in this moral path. To be devoted to his word. To obey his commands. To live a holy life. To love his church. To participate in his mission.

To be under his control. This is what baptism means. And some people might look at this and say, Gosh, all of those commitments of baptism seem like they might rob this man of his joy.

I mean, all the constraints that baptism requires, that would seem like it would kill this man's joy. But that's in fact the opposite of what happens.

It says in verse 39 that when they came up out of the water, that he went on his way rejoicing. He went on his way with exceeding joy, with immense gladness.

Andrew Walls, a missionary to Sierra Leone and scholar of world Christianity, says one of the great gifts of the African church today is its sheer joyousness. And I think many of those brothers and sisters would come and look at the troubled, retrograde souls that inhabit backward places like New York, LA, and San Francisco.

[29 : 55] And they would pity us for our secularity and our joylessness. And they would say, Hey, don't you know? Jesus prayed that we might be filled to the full measure of his joy.

Don't you know that one of the most devastating accusations that could be made against a Christian is that they're joyless? Don't you know that a joyless Christian is a contradiction in terms?

I think if this Ethiopian eunuch were here, he would challenge me, and maybe he'd challenge you. And he'd say, You know, if the good news of this suffering servant Jesus is actually true, how can you keep from rejoicing?

If this is true, how can you keep from sharing your newfound joy with others? I want to end with this quote from a guy named Roland Allen.

He became a missionary to China in 1895, about two years before my great-grandmother was born in China. So he was a contemporary missionary of my great-great-grandparents. And he wrote a book called The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church.

[31 : 09] And here's what Allen says. He says, Don't we want this?

Don't we want this joy in our lives? That's the only way we're going to live out the mission of the church that's been given to us. The church's mission is to pursue others, answer their questions, and baptize them into not only our joy, but the joy of the Lord himself.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.