

GUEST PREACHER: BISHOP CHARLIE MASTERS

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Date: 03 May 2015

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[0 : 0 0] May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen. Well, dear friends, it's a joy and an honor to be back at Church of the Messiah.

And it's always a great joy to have the privilege of opening God's Word, which is what I would like to do at this time. The focus of this sermon will be Acts 8, 26-40, which was the first scripture reading which was read.

This morning. I know that you in your sermon times have been making your way through the Gospel of Luke. I'm a big fan of Luke. He's a good guy.

And I love the Gospel of Luke. And I love the second edition of Luke, which is the Acts of the Apostles. The first is what Jesus began to say and to teach and to do, which he puts in an orderly fashion, which he made sure.

Luke 1, verse 4, he makes it clear the accuracy and the faithfulness of what he conveys to this guy, Theophilus. But in the Acts of the Apostles, he continues the story.

[1 : 1 0] And in the first chapter, there is the account of those 40-day period between the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension. Soon we'll be celebrating the ascension of Jesus.

And we are in this period of time right now. And one of the things which is very clear about the resurrection of Jesus in that period is that Jesus pounded away with his followers on what we know as the Great Commission.

So, for instance, you have in all four Gospels a very distinct but consistent account of what we call the Great Commission. Matthew 28, 19-20.

Mark 16, 15. Luke 24, 45-48. John 20, 21. And then Acts 1, 8 is the account of Jesus in a conversation with the apostles in which they're asking the question, when are you going to come back?

When are you going to set up your kingdom? And he, interestingly, kind of deflects the question and says this. He said to them, Verse 7, And it's not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.

[2 : 2 6] But here's what we're heading for. Acts 1, verse 8. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witness.

Witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. Now, of course, Pentecost is the time when we realize that in fulfillment of the promise of old, and here in Acts 1, 8, when Jesus, the Holy Spirit was poured out on all the followers, that 120 in the upper room.

And why was the Holy Spirit given? Primarily, it was equipped them to be witnesses to Jesus. Now, the question is, what form did that take?

How was it possible for the witnesses of this cluster of 120 people to begin to take the world for Christ? How did it work from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the uttermost parts of the earth?

Well, you might expect that there would have been the best minds coming together, coming up with a well-reasoned strategy in which there are a five-year plan, a 10-year plan, a 15-year plan, in which they would have training and all sorts of things to make sure that the witness is going out in an orderly fashion to do exactly what it is that Jesus said.

[3 : 5 7] Well, I'm sorry to say that, in fact, that's not the picture that Luke gives in the Acts of the Apostles. Apostles. It's actually, from our viewpoint, pretty haphazard.

But from the viewpoint of the Holy Spirit, the trajectory is clear. Now, what is interesting from my viewpoint, in terms of this today, is that, in fact, more often than not, things were going badly.

More often than not, there were afflictions, difficulties, persecutions, imprisonments, all the bad things that you would think would be a hindrance to this witness going forward.

Acts 3. Here they are in Jerusalem. Peter and John went to pray. A man is healed, and there's a great furor. He was walking and leaping and praising God. And then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, unlike before when he denied Jesus, now he proclaimed, this is all about Jesus.

[5 : 02] Witness to Jesus. This is all about Jesus. You know, the Jesus whom you crucified, but God raised from the dead. And so, there was a great turning, it says, by Acts 4, in terms of the Gospel.

And by Acts 4, verse 4, there were 5,000 men, which means there were more likely around 10,000 people who were believers. Look at the trajectory from Acts 1, 15, 120, Acts 2, 23, 3,000, Acts 4, verse 4, 10,000.

It's incredible. But so far, all in Jerusalem. Now what is interesting is that there was a rest, they were given a hard time, did Peter, was he cowed by all this?

Not at all. In fact, he reminded them, this is all about Jesus whom you crucified, that God raised from the dead. As a matter of fact, there is no other name under heaven by which men may be saved.

So they didn't know what to do with them. They kicked them out, gave them a stern warning not to ever talk about Jesus. And did they say, phew, we got, you know, we made it. Let's keep our head down.

[6 : 12] This witnessing thing is getting us in big trouble. Instead of that, it says in Acts 4, 29, And now, Lord, they prayed, look upon their threats, and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.

Interestingly, they didn't pray so much for their protection. I'm sure they were calling out for God's protection. But they were confident in the sovereign purposes of God that that was not the critical issue.

The real issue was whether they would be bold in their witness in fulfillment of Acts 1, 8. And so what they prayed was that even in the midst of setbacks and threats and difficulties, Lord, make us bold.

Acts 5, there's kind of the amusing situation by verse 17 where the leaders are jealous of what's going on, so they arrest them again. They throw them in prison, but an angel opens the door, and instead of them scuttling home and keeping their head down so that this will never happen again, the angel says, go into the temple courts and preach.

So that's what they did. And there's this, in my view, amusing picture of this great Sanhedrin court waiting for these folk who are in such big trouble to be dragged in before them, and they waited for them to be dragged in, and those who were the authority went to get them, and there was nobody in prison.

[7 : 41] They ended up going to the courts, and they found them there, and then they brought them in. But by then, the damage was being done. Finally, they beat these men, though there was nothing wrong other than them naming the name of Jesus.

And when they were released, verse 41 and 42 of Acts 5 says, then they left the presence of the council rejoicing, and they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.

And every day in the temple, and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. Power to be witnesses, Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria.

So far, we're still in Jerusalem, but this is bold witnessing in the midst of many setbacks. Acts 6 gives the account of conflict within the fellowship.

The Hellenist widows are not being looked after as well as the Jerusalem widows, and so as a result of that, there's a problem. The apostles make the conclusion they're to turn their attention to prayer and to preaching, and therefore they assign seven who were Hellenists, who were filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom, who had gifts of administration to take over.

[9 : 03] Two of them, you know, they're named Stephen and Philip. And Stephen, by the end of Acts 7, is martyred, this mighty man of God, simply for witnessing.

Bold witness can get you to trouble, but the gospel goes forward. And so it is in Acts 8, verse 1, and this is all by way of background to getting to Acts 28, verse 26, so I hope you're staying with me. What we're trying to think about is the sovereign purposes of God. When you want to be a bold witness for Jesus, you're on a path with those that we're reading about in the Acts of the Apostles.

You're in good company, and you are in line with the mighty arm of God at work. What you don't have is a guarantee that there will never be difficulties in your life.

You don't have that promise. So it is that Acts 8, verse 1 says, And Saul approved of his execution, that's Stephen's, and there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem.

[10:10] That was a dark day. And they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. Does this sound familiar? Judea, Samaria, to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul, this is Saul of Tarsus, was ravaging the church and entering house after house. He dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered, verse 4 of Acts 8, went about preaching the word. Instead of furtively running from bush to bush, making sure that nobody's following them, instead of that, these guys, yes, they're leaving Jerusalem because that was the wise thing to do.

The apostles made it clear that that's what they should do. But as they're going, they're gossiping the gospel. And now they're in Samaria. And the crowds, with one accord, paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did.

For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them. And many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city.

[11:26] You may or may not know that one of the churches in Annick, the Annick Network in Canada, named its name based on this verse. It's Celebration Church in Barrie, Ontario.

And they are praying, and when they had what they called their hard launch, looking out over the lake in this great, you know, medium-sized city north of Toronto, with all the pastors around them. They commissioned Brian McVitie, who is our Annick priest, and they prayed that there would be joy in the city because of the gospel being received. They were praying for bold witness, and that's what we pray.

Well, there was a great turning in Samaria, and this is so exciting. Do you remember the Good Samaritan? Do you remember what happened in 77, 22 BC, and so on?

The North Kingdom and the South Kingdom. Largely, the North Kingdom was lost and dark and in trouble as you follow the trail of the Old Testament. So for now, for little old Philip, the administrator guy who had a gift by the Holy Spirit also preaching, who makes his way fleeing from the authorities in Jerusalem and speaks about Christ, isn't it exciting that in the purposes of God, the gospel came to Samaria, and there was a great turning, and there was joy in the city.

[12:55] Do you remember in Genesis 50, when Joseph was with his brothers after their father had died, and his brothers, who had tried to kill Joseph before, sell him to slavery, they were now worried, and they said, tell, you know, you should know that our father said, be nice to us.

That's my paraphrase. That's not actually what it says exactly in the scriptures. You look up Genesis 50. But Joseph was very clear. He was gracious, but he was clear, and he said, as for you, brothers, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to preserve many people alive.

See, that's the amazing thing of the sovereign God we serve. He has many means of bringing about his purposes. He can even use the sin of man as the means of bringing about his purposes.

Exhibit A, the cross. Satan and all mankind thought they were dealing with the Son of God, the one good man, the sinless one.

Get rid of him, and he'll be gone. And so they nailed him to a cross. They got their way.

[14:18] But what they didn't know was that, in fact, that's the means through which salvation comes to the whole world. This is the God whom we serve.

And this is the God that Philip served. And this is the God that you serve. And so it is that they were in Samaria on this great turning, but by verse 26, amazingly, Philip is yanked out of the revival of Samaria to go to one man in the desert.

Is that not crazy? This is the Lord we serve. He worries about the individual, and he sees through the one nations being raised. So it is that it says in verse 26, Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza.

This is a desert place. And he rose and went. I'm amazed at this guy. I would have thought, bad decision, maybe sometime, but right now I'm kind of busy with the revival, you know, and so there's a lot of things going on here, Lord.

Lord, that might have been the lines of my prayer. And maybe Philip prayed that prayer too. But at the end of the day, he heard the angel of the Lord. And what that is, the angel of the Lord, as

opposed to verse 29, which is the spirit of the Lord, I'm not sure.

[15:42] I think it's the same. It's God speaking to him by a means which he knew it was God. So what we're thinking about, friends, is what does the witnessing of the Holy Spirit as in Acts 1-8 look like in a person?

When you see bold witnessing personified, what are some of the qualities or characteristics? That's what we're looking at when we look at Acts 26-40.

We're seeing a man who is a bold witness. Number one, now the angel of the Lord said to Philip, rise and go. And verse 27, he rose and went.

Verse 29, and the spirit of the Lord said to Philip, go over and join this chariot. So Philip ran to him. Remember, we're in the desert. It's hot out there. What we see here is a man who's a witness, which means he's in contact with the living God and he's learned to obey.

If you want to be a bold witness, you need to be connected to the vine and then allow the message of the Holy Spirit to come to you.

[16:58] You're listening carefully and you've learned to bend your will even though all your instincts say, bad idea. That person's not going to want to hear from me.

They're going to laugh me out of the room, etc. And yet, the Spirit of God says, go over there, talk to that person. They need to hear about Jesus. Philip, number one, was in contact with God and learned to obey.

Secondly, he was a servant. That's the posture of the Christian. For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

When we're connected to Jesus the vine, we find ourselves automatically in that relationship to everything around us and everyone around us. We're here only as a servant, as he is the servant of the world.

And so it is that Philip was available and enthusiastic. And so it is, he ran up. And what did he do? He said, he listened, says, so Philip ran up to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, do you understand what you're reading?

[18:09] And he said, how can I unless someone guides me? This is a servant. It wasn't, I just happened to have a talk, Ethiopian eunuch, which I'd like to drop on you at this time because I've gone to all this trouble to come into the desert and you're going to listen.

He was listening to what the Spirit of God was obviously doing and he was making himself available. To be a bold witness is to be a servant who's enthusiastically available to the people that God leads you to.

Thirdly, he knew the word. It says, and he said, how can I unless someone guides me? And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of scripture that he was reading was this, like a shepherd he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shears is silent so he opens not his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe that his generation for his life is taken away from the earth? And maybe we would think, gulp, where in the world is that?

Yikes, we're in trouble now Lord. I don't know where that is. It seems pretty obscure to me. Because the eunuch went on, verse 34, and said, about whom I ask you does the prophet say this?

[19:24] About himself or about someone else? Philip didn't miss a beat because he knew the word of God. He knew the word of God.

Of course it was Isaiah 53. There's no more important passage in understanding the cross of Christ. What it was for him to be the shepherd, to be the victim, the sheep that was slain, the lamb of God. What it was for the father righteously to judge sin who is the propitiation for sin. And then to be satisfied satisfied that in fact it's enough.

All of that is in Isaiah 53. So clearly the spirit of God was at work here. But what I want you to know is that to be a bold witness requires of you to live in the Bible.

It's interesting that Paul said to his young protege Timothy in verse 15 of 2 Timothy 3 he says, start verse 14, but as for you continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed knowing from whom you've learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings the Bible which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

[20:45] It's the spirit who gives life the flesh profits nothing Jesus said. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. For people to come to saving knowledge of Jesus there has to be a work of the word of God in their lives.

And if you're to be a witness that's effective you have to be involved in the Bible so that you can be used with the scriptures to open them up to the would-be person.

I have a theory which is not original to me but I like it. Whoever thought of it I think it's a good idea that when Philip approached this Ethiopian great court official but a eunuch who was a God-fearer but would have been excluded from the inner court of the temple because he was a eunuch he I think would have been thinking also about Isaiah 56 about a promise that says this verse 3 let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say the Lord will surely separate me from his people and let not the eunuch say behold I am a dry tree for thus says the Lord to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters this is exciting stuff you see in a very real way

Philip had before him not only an Ethiopian so the whole world is before him but a person who by rights was in every way disqualified and yet in the gospel there was everything there for him he knew the word fourthly and this is the biggie are you ready drum roll please then Philip opened his mouth and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news about Jesus dear friends Philip nailed it because he taught him about Jesus there would have been so many things he could have digressed and talked about there could have been so many things that he might have found as sort of preliminary to it but what is consistent about the witness that you find in the book of Acts is that whether it be Peter or anyone else that in fact they get to Jesus quickly and directly and unabashedly see

Philip understood the truth that there's only one name by which a person could be saved he understood the truth that God loved the world so much that he gave his son that whoever believes in him should not perish for God did not send the son into the world to judge the world but that the world might be saved through him and then verse 18 says this whoever believes in him is not condemned but whoever does not believe is condemned already it's that simple it's reduced to one thing what have you done with Jesus and so if he cares in any way for this man he's going to teach him the good news about Jesus if you're a bold witness and I remember it was actually I was in a group where there was a new person who was hired in our diocese in a time before to be the evangelism person for the diocese and there was a two hour presentation where Jesus' name was never mentioned even once well that's unthinkable how can you speak about the good news and communicating the good news if it's not all about

[24 : 41] Jesus because he's the only thing that saves Philip got it right Jesus said I am the way the truth and the life no one comes to father but by me John said he who has the son has life he who has not the son of God has not life so it is when when they it says so as as they were going along the road they came to some water and the eunuch said see here's water what prevents me from being baptized and he commanded him to stop and they both went down into the water Philip and the eunuch and he baptized him and when they came up out of the water the spirit of the Lord carried Philip away and the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing recently just the predecessor to the present bishop of the arctic his name was Bishop Andrew the story of his conversion is an extraordinary one

I heard him give it once and he was as a young man of about 20 because he spoke English was used as a translator for Marnie Patterson Marnie Patterson was preaching and he would say a phrase and Bishop Andrew then just Andrew would say a phrase and so on this was the second night and Marnie was doing his thing and Andrew was doing his thing and then suddenly Marnie said a phrase and nothing happened he said the phrase again and nothing happened and they looked over and there was the prayer desk where people would come to pray and receive and there was Andrew kneeling at the prayer desk and what Andrew said was that he suddenly realized this message was for him and though it was embarrassing he was afraid if he didn't go there right now he might never feel this way again and he was not prepared to risk salvation even although it was tremendously humbling to break up a pretty good sermon by kneeling there and so Marnie went over and actually Andrew's wife Mary they were a young couple she slipped in beside him and the two received the Lord then they came back and Andrew continued in his translation dear friends this is what's exciting about this story is that in fact the man understood now is the time now is the day of salvation and Philip understood that as well he didn't defer didn't hold him up he knew the spirit of God had brought new life and they sealed the deal by baptism that day in the water in the desert I made a commitment to the Lord early on when I became a bishop knowing that

I would be doing lots of traveling and lots of preaching in different situations which is to take the opportunity though I would know that the vast majority of people that were before me and maybe all in some cases already know the Savior of whom

I speak to always give an invitation to acknowledge the fact that it's possible to have the grace of God dangling before you and to leave it there Paul said in 2nd Corinthians 6 don't receive the God allow the grace to be of God to be in vain behold now is the acceptable time now is the day of salvation and so dear friends I throw out the invitation once again here at Church of the Messiah as I did at the early service as well but I also want to say to you who do know the Lord have you heard the call that the reason you've been given the Holy Spirit is to equip you to be a witness do you understand that you've been given a tongue a tongue to bring glory to God and to witness to the saving power of Jesus are you in active contact with him and obedience have you learned to be a servant in the environment and the people around you are you involved in the word of God so that it can be used even through you to bring people to the wisdom that leads to salvation and when you have opportunity do you go to the goods do you preach Jesus anything less than that is to miss the mark would you stand and let's pray

Lord Jesus Christ I thank you for this wonderful church family and I thank you for everything you're doing here and through this congregation I pray that no one that you bring within the circle of influence of this church would miss out that no one would receive the grace of God in vain but would appropriate it by repentance and faith and even today Lord if there's anyone here who needs to respond would you hear our prayer Lord Jesus I know I'm a sinner I repent of my sin would you come into my life right now I want to be yours forever and would you begin the process of change and then one day

[30 : 26] I look forward to being with you and to be changed to be like Jesus and Lord for this company of mighty men and women boys and girls who know you would you enable us to be bold witnesses to this needy dark world that you love so much hear my Lord send me Amen