

Sermon: Baptize you? I hardly know you!  
Text: Acts 8:26–40  
Context: WWPCCC  
Independence Day Sunday, and Immigration Sunday  
Date: July 2, 2017  
By: Rev. Steve Runholt

*“Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”*

Acts 8:36

The last time we focused our attention on this unusual passage, I shared the story of how I came to a deeper appreciation of the unusual book from which it comes.

That was in 2006. In the unlikely event you’ve forgotten the story I told eleven years ago, here are the basics, and I’m sharing these again today because they’re relevant to where we are headed:

I was in my last semester of seminary and I needed to take one more New Testament class in order to graduate. So I signed up to take a class called, simply, *The Acts of the Apostles*, which is the formal name of the book of Acts.

On the first day of class the professor asked us eager, over-educated, ministers-to-be what we thought Acts was about.

*It’s about the coming of the Holy Spirit!* blurted out the most extroverted member of the class.

*It’s about the birth of the church!* said someone else.

*It’s about Paul’s transformation from anti-Christian zealot to the church’s first great apostle, and about his missionary journeys throughout the Ancient Near East and the greater Mediterranean basin,* said my friend Shane, who, to no one’s surprise, would later go on to earn a Ph.D. and become a professor of New Testament.

I agreed with all of those replies, because they were all true. But for my part, with all the obvious answers taken, I suddenly felt a little desperate. So I ended up blurting out an answer that startled me a little:

*It's about liberation*, I tentatively offered, in a tone that betrayed the fact I was not sure I knew what I was talking about.

Given the look on the professor's face, it's fair to say that she, too, was of the view that I had no idea what I was talking about.

And she was right. At the time, I really didn't. I think it was more an aspirational claim than anything. Liberation is what I wanted the book of Acts to be about. During my time in seminary, I had come to believe that liberation was one of the core themes of Jesus' ministry.

Given that Acts is the story of his disciples, the story of how this new community put Jesus's teachings into practice, so I hoped that this theme would continue to play out in the life of the early church.

Now, all these years later, I can confidently say that the more I have pondered the meaning of this book – and the more I place it in the broader context of this Book – the more I believe that in the end I was right, even if I did not know it fully back when I was a student.

The Acts of the Apostles is about liberation. How could it not be?

Starting with the Hebrew people in Pharaoh's Egypt, the Bible is a story, told in a variety of ways, about how God acts in history to deliver humanity from the various enslavements that hold us captive. Enslavement to Egyptian overlords.

Enslavement to idols of wood, stone and gold. Enslavement to deceptive charms that promise the world and deliver crushing disappointments. Enslavement to our fears that keep our hearts closed to the new thing that God is about to do.

Starting with the liberation of those Hebrew slaves, it is fair to say that the Bible is, first, a political story. It has to do with the polis -- with the people and their relationship to one another, to their neighbors, to their rulers, and to the sovereign God.

This is an important point to make on this Sunday when we celebrate our nation's independence and remember our country's origins.

The United States was founded and largely populated by immigrants, which is to say by people who were fleeing their own versions of Egypt: from economic and political oppression, from famine, religious persecution, violence, lack of opportunity.

Of course these are the same conditions that continue to drive people to leave their countries of origin for the promised land of the United States.

And it's why so many people of faith today feel so strongly that we must build bridges, not walls; and that we're called to welcome the stranger among us because our forebears once were those strangers.

"Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore." This invitation went out to all the world in 1903, and many of us are working hard to keep the invitation open in 2017.

So this is an easy and important point to make on this particular Sunday. But like all good stories, the story of America is far more complicated than that.

For example, some people were here first, before Europeans arrived. The lands we now call home, the land on which this college was founded, the land on which this Chapel was built, these were once home to Native Americans.

All of this is holy ground and sacred land, on one hand, and, on the other, it is also stolen land.

Obviously, that's tough to hear. But the hard truth is that the story of America is complicated, and as people who care about words, people who care about the truth, it falls on us to make sure the truth of this story is told, in our churches and outside of them.

And on the eve of the Independence Day holiday it's also important to remember that some people were brought here against their will in the belly of slave ships.

Which brings us right back to the overarching theme of scripture.

For America's slaves, the Exodus story and its promise of liberation served as a loadstone of their spiritual and cultural life. It was a source of inspiration, a well-spring of power and hope throughout the decades, and even centuries, of their captivity.

Unfortunately, that liberation, that journey from slavery to freedom, is not yet complete. For African Americans, the United States is not the promised land it so often is for immigrants who come here of their own free will.

We've all read with frustration and perhaps even horror the seemingly endless stories about how white police can shoot innocent young black men, without cause, and suffer no consequences.

But there is a kind of violence against African Americans that plays out in much subtler and less visible ways.

I read a story in the Washington Post just yesterday written by Margaret Jordan, an African American woman who had grown up in our nation's capital. As a little girl, the city felt like home. Her grandmother lived nearby, as did her great aunt, who was possibly Washington's first African American kindergarten teachers.

Her great-great-great-grandfather owned a nearby building, which he bought when he became a free man, after serving as President James Madison's personal slave.

Now these homes and buildings are gone, replaced by a World Bank building, and a string of boutiques, and a Nordstrom's. She tells this story simply because she doesn't want the march of privilege and power and affluence to erase the memory of her ancestors.

"We find ourselves in a nation bitterly divided in a year that feels oddly out of step with the time. It would be simplistic to suggest that in understanding our past we will find all of the answers.

"But I do believe that without deeper reflection and engagement with our history — in all of its complexity — we will not have the foundation of understanding and respect on which progress can be built. Without it, we remain trapped in a vicious cycle powered through complacency and ignorance."

I agree. But where does that leave us? And by “us” I mean those of us here today. Clearly, none of us have spent time making mud bricks in ancient Egypt. And for most of us, our ancestors did not pick tobacco for white overlords in colonial America.

The good news is that, like the story of America, the Biblical narrative is also complex. There are other, non-political ways to read this story, metaphorical ways that are every bit as true.

For example, we were not slaves in Egypt, not slaves anywhere, and yet I’m confident that every single person here today has found themselves lost in the wilderness at some point, journeying toward a Promised Land that felt far off.

Every one of us has been hungry for manna, for bread that satisfies a hunger we can’t name, that food alone cannot fill.

Every one of us has been thirsty for water that doesn’t just slake our thirst, living water that doesn’t just hydrate our cells, but hydrates our souls.

To you, I say, come, eat and drink.

Of course the Bible is a theological story, too. That story is centered largely on the promise of forgiveness for our sins.

We made the point last week that progressive churches, including this one, tend to focus our attention less on sin and calling people to repent, and more on making peace and doing justice.

But we would do well to remember that sin is what creates the need to make peace and do justice.

If you don’t like that word, and I know some of you don’t, that’s fine. But let’s make sure that whatever word we use in its place enables us to call out things like sexual assault and racism and unjust violence for what they are: offenses against God and God’s purposes for humanity. Because without that language we lose our ability as people of faith to speak truth to power.

And if you happen to be someone who is suffering from guilt or feeling shame for the ways you have participated in the world's brokenness, for the harm you may have done to a loved one or a neighbor, or even to yourself, please know that forgiveness is your birthright and that liberation from guilt and shame is at the top of the list of gifts you inherit when you're bathed in the waters of baptism, and you take your place in this family of faith.

So is the bible about liberation? It depends on what you mean. Do you mean that politically? Or do you mean that metaphorically? Or do you mean that theologically? If so, the answer is yes. Yes, it is. Because all of those things are true.

But there's still one other sense in which the bible is about this same powerful theme. It's about liberation in the practical sense.

And that is vividly on display in the book of Acts. Which is what makes the stories from this the perfect resource for our summer sermon series, Utopia for Realists. Because they show us in practical terms what the Realm of God looks like.

When we pick up today's story, the elders in Jerusalem are in the process of deciding who's in and who's out of this new community. They're trying to come to terms with just how free and inclusive Jesus meant for it to be.

And they're struggling a bit over that, to be honest. Some want to adopt a more expansive approach to welcoming new members, some a less expansive approach.

And right about that very time, Philip, one of the elders in this new community, gets an unexpected and highly unusual call.

"Get up," says a voice he's never heard before but which speaks with some authority. "Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.)

It is indeed a wilderness road. For if ever there was a less likely candidate for baptism, it is this man whom Philip encounters out there in the desert.

The man is, first, and the text makes an explicit point of mentioning this, a eunuch. How Luke, the writer of Acts, happens to know this about the man is not for us to speculate. Frankly, I don't particularly want to know.

But Luke does make it plain – one of the first baptized converts in the history of Christianity is a man whose sexuality is ambiguous at best.

Per the standards of that day, the very shape of this man's body would likely preclude him from membership in the community of the faithful. And in case you're thinking this, yes, the same is often true for transgendered people today.

On top of that he's an African. He turns up in Jerusalem and the first thing he hears is, *You're not from around here, are you?*

Meanwhile, poor Philip. You can almost hear the conversation he's having as he is sprinting along, gaining on the chariot.

*You sure this is the guy, God?*

I'm sure.

*But he's not really the kind of member we're lookin' for in the Jerusalem church.*

I'll pretend I didn't hear that.

*So you're sure then, cause ah...*

Enough Philip. I'm sure. Please do as I ask and get in the chariot.

So Philip hops aboard. It's got to be an awkward moment. Imagine you're driving your pickup down some deserted backroad only to suddenly find that a stranger has hopped up in the truck bed and is now talking to you through the back window. It's a wonder the eunuch didn't shove him right back out of the chariot.

Whatever those first few minutes were like, the two men seem to get things sorted out. For Philip ultimately leads the eunuch in one of the strangest Bible studies ever, answering all the man's questions as they travel together in that chariot, down that wilderness road.

Then, probably right around the time Philip is beginning to contemplate how he's going to get home after this long chariot ride in the opposite direction, he gets a question that's enough to stop his heart, only this time the voice belongs not to God but to his new friend from Ethiopia.

*Hey, Philip, look there's some water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?*

*Well, everything! Philip must surely think.*

*First, you're a eunuch and I'm sorry, but that's just waaaay outside the boundaries of what we're comfortable thinking and talking about.*

*Second, you're an Ethiopian and frankly you couldn't pass for a Jew if you tried. You don't look like us. You speak our language with an accent. You don't know our customs, our traditions.*

And just then that same voice breaks in that Philip heard only an hour ago.

*Philip, do it anyway.*

For heaven's sake, God! Would you stop already?! I can no more baptize this guy than I can ordain a woman into ministry.

*I'm telling you, Philip, do it anyway.*

But he's a eunuch! He doesn't fit in any of the categories we've established for this. He's not fully male and he's not really female. I'm afraid that if we baptize "him" ....

*Do it anyway!*

But we haven't had time yet to determine the policies for admitting foreigners into our faith. For that matter, I'm not even sure this guy is in the country legally.

*Philip! Enough already! Are you deaf? Do it, anyway!*

If this is a story about liberation -- practical liberation -- who do you think benefited the most from this exchange?

Who became freer that day? Whose politics were made larger? Whose theology was made more expansive? Whose world was made more welcoming, do you think, as a result of this baptism? Philip's or the eunuch's?

It's why this baptismal font will always be on full display in our chancel. Because baptism reminds us of all these stories.

It reminds us of the way God parted the waters of the Red Sea and created a path to liberation for the small band of slaves living under the thumb of the most powerful ruler on earth.

It reminds of the extent to which God is prepared to liberate us from our guilt, our sin and our shame--from all the psychological and theological baggage that weighs us down on our journey to the promised land.

It reminds us that God's welcome, that God's definition of who's in, of who belongs in our community, and our country, will always be bigger and more generous than ours.

Is the Acts of the Apostles a story about liberation? Yes, I'm fairly certain it is.