

“The Spirit at Work Through Us”

Acts 8:26-40 - May 24, 2026

8:15am and 11:00am – morning services

Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA

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Pentecost Sunday

Today is Pentecost Sunday and so we will be stepping back from our regular preaching series to place our attention here.

What is Pentecost? When we think of Pentecost, we think of Acts 2, because it was there that the Holy Spirit came from heaven like a mighty rushing wind filling the entire house where the disciples were. It is there in that passage that Luke writes that tongues that looked like fire appeared on each one of them. And he adds that they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit guided them. In fact, the mighty rushing wind was so loud that devout Jewish men, who were in the city from every nation under heaven came and gathered together to see what was going on. And each one heard the *disciples* speaking in his own language.

Now Pentecost was the Jewish *Festival of Weeks*. This was a celebration of thanksgiving for the harvest – for all that God had provided.

And in Acts 2 we see that Pentecost becomes a new type of celebration. In it, the prophecies of Joel are fulfilled, and we see that God provides not only all of our everyday needs but also provides his everyday presence in the giving of the Holy Spirit.

And this outpouring of the Holy Spirit immediately bears fruit in the expansion of the kingdom. And at the very giving of the Holy Spirit, we immediately see that about 3,000 souls were added to their number!

And that was just the start. Then we see the gospel being preached first to the Jews and then to an ever-expanding group of Gentiles. One commentator notes that it was here at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that the Christian Church assumed its own identity apart from Judaism. [Kistemaker, 91]

This is significant because up to this point the Israelites alone were the focus of God’s covenant promises. But after Jesus, the Passover lamb, had been sacrificed, resurrected, and ascended into heaven, we see he provided enormous expansions through the Spirit’s work. No longer is it only the Jews who are reconciled with God, now the gates of heaven burst open and Jew and Gentile are welcomed in.

So, with all that extensive background, let’s turn now to Acts 8, which is a fleshing out of this new reality. Here we begin with Philip, going to share the gospel to an Ethiopian foreigner who is brought into the covenant family of God!

So, with that in mind, let’s turn to Acts 8:26-40.

Reading of Scripture

Acts 8:26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert place. **27** And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship **28** and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. **29** And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” **30** So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” **31** And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. **32** Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so, he opens not his mouth.

33 In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.”

Acts 8:34 And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” **35** Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. **36** And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” **38** And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. **39** 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. **40** But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

This is the word of the Lord. (*Thanks be to God*).

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord endures forever.

Let's pray together.

Introduction

As I mentioned, today is Pentecost Sunday. And so, our focus will have one foot in the work of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2) and another foot in the passage before us here in Acts 8.

And on Pentecost Sunday it is impossible not to talk about evangelism and missions because Pentecost is the moment in Scripture where the Holy Spirit exploded and expanded into the world! It was the moment when the covenant people of God went from the small Jewish nation of Israel to include Jews and every other nation on earth. Pentecost is when the good news of Jesus begins to spread across the globe at rapid pace.

And we see that **the Holy Spirit in his perfect wisdom, delights to bring eternal salvation, through his flawed and limited people.** That will be our focus today.

Early Christian Evangelism – Jew, then Gentile

The Christian church was young, but it was growing very quickly. Early in the book of Acts, Stephen proved to be a powerful evangelist, so much so, that the religious leaders, seeking to silence him, produced false witnesses and had him stoned to death. [Acts 6:8]

After his martyrdom, the persecution against the church intensified. Saul also sought to silence Christians and went house to house, putting Christians into prison. Fearful for their lives, believers began to scatter into Jewish and non-Jewish areas throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria [Acts 8]

What the religious leaders of the day did not account for, was that the persecution of these Christians was actually adding fuel to their witness. And we see that the word of God spread even further than before to places it had never been. And so, the gospel was carried to far-away lands.

Philip, who we read about in our text, also fled with the Christians and went down to a Samaritan town to proclaim Christ. We read the happy report that all the people listened to him and there was much joy in the city. [Acts 8]

And it is here in this Samaritan town that Philip seemed to be enjoying great success for the gospel. In fact, because of his witness, the city was said to be full of joy.

Evangelism and Missions

But God has a plan for further away. An angel of the Lord visited Philip and sent him to go to Gaza – to a desert place.

The angel of the Lord doesn't appear to give Philip specific instructions. We are not told if he knew what he was travelling for. The journey was approximately 3 days long, and Philip was to leave the revival he was leading, to get up and find a foreigner on a vague desert road.

This seems to be a puzzling move. Why would Philip leave his successful ministry? He was experiencing conversions and revival. Why would he leave to go somewhere else, somewhere deserted several days journey from there? It is confusing to say the least.

And we read that when Philip arrived there, he saw a solitary Ethiopian man, a eunuch, who was an important official, and who was reading the scroll of Isaiah.

Philip, still probably uncertain as to why he was there, was visited by the Spirit who tells him, "Go over and join this chariot." [v.29] Still at this point, Philip is not told explicitly what he is supposed to do. But he obeyed and ran over to the chariot. And hearing the man reading Isaiah, he asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" and the man essentially says, "How can I unless someone helps me?!"

Philip now understood why he was there. We read that "Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus." [v. 35] And after baptizing the eunuch, they got up out of the water, and the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away.

While this is a beautiful account of missions and evangelism, it is also confusing. Why did God send Philip to this man. Why did things occur the way they did?

Isn't there a better way to do Missions and Evangelism?

When it comes to missions and evangelism, while few have a strong conviction of how to do it, most everyone has a view of what it should *not* look like. And while we might disagree on many different methods, most would probably agree that this way of doing evangelism seems inefficient, and impractical.

First, it feels unwise

This evangelism account seems all backwards. Everyone knows that you don't leave a healthy revival to go to the desert. It makes no sense to abandon a fruitful and thriving ministry to find one random person. The work had been so new and fruitful that even Peter and John had paid a special visit to Samaria. Abandoning it seems to make no sense.

Second, it seems impractical.

Why use Philip? It seems like the eunuch was already almost converted. He seemed somewhat familiar with the Bible – enough to have a scroll already! Seems that perhaps someone more local could have helped him figure it out. Why use Philip for this minor job?

Third, it seems unnecessary tedious.

This is the one that puzzles me the most. Here is Philip doing the Lord's work when suddenly

- 1) God sends an angel to Philip to give him these instructions.
- 2) Then the Spirit has to supernaturally give him more instructions, "go run up to the chariot."
- 3) Then the Spirit carried Philip away a day's journey and "Philip found himself at Azotus."
[v. 40]

It seems like so much supernatural work in all the wrong places! I mean, think of all the work it took just to get Philip to get to this eunuch and then to take him back out. Three separate acts that we are told of. And there was definitely more at work supernaturally than these three interventions above. I mean the timing had to be perfect, the Spirit still had to work to change the eunuch's heart in the moment of conversion, in the baptism and afterwards.

God Could Have Acted Directly

From a human perspective this seems like so much more work – perhaps even a waste of time. Why use Philip at all? Why didn't God just speak a word and convert the eunuch on his chariot without all the additional hassle of using Philip? Why didn't God simply act directly in the eunuch's life?

God acted directly in other places in Scripture so why doesn't he do that now?

When King Abimelech took Abram's wife Sarah by force to be his wife. "God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife." [Genesis 20:3]

In that moment God supernaturally entered into the very inner thoughts of the King. If God could rebuke a King, he could have definitely converted the Ethiopian eunuch.

When we think of Jonah being sent by God to Nineveh, Jonah was a real pain. Not only did he not want to go, but he rebelled against God and went the opposite direction. God spoke to him, sent a storm, sailors and a fish. God acted all these times supernaturally to intervene several times just to get Jonah to preach to Nineveh, and then when he finally did, they immediately repented. It seems like such a waste of time and effort! Why does God bother with rebellious children? God has every resource at his disposal, and instead of snapping his fingers, he chooses to use us, his children, to be his mouthpiece, and to accomplish his work of salvation.

When it comes to being a witness in this world – be it evangelism or local ministry or world missions – it is hard to see how a God who is in charge of this world and who could save everyone in it with a flick of the wrist, chooses instead to use *us*. It seems illogical, impractical and even unwise.

But this isn't about being practical. God isn't about efficiency and his ways are not our ways. Efficiency is a cultural priority for us, but it is not a divine priority.

Misunderstanding Evangelism and Missions

When we lived in Peru, it was at times very difficult to get in to get my haircut at the barber I liked who had the old-school barber chairs. I would take time out of my day to drive across town to his shop only to find it closed for a long lunch, a siesta, a family vacation or him just deciding not to open up for the day. It was so frustrating. I could never figure it out.

Peruvian culture is very different from American culture. For this barber, efficiency was not a priority. He took his time with his haircuts– he would tell people to come back later if more than a couple people were waiting, and he could close whenever he wanted to. It was very confusing.

My priorities and his priorities were very different. And learning to do missions in Peru meant adjusting my expectations. It also meant realizing that my cultural desires were not morally superior to his.

And we can do that sometimes – we can assume or slip into the way of thinking where we begin to believe that our practices and cultural tendencies are morally correct or even Biblical.

And approaching the Bible with our cultural morality can be highly problematic when we are talking about God's actions.

And we might be tempted to do that with our theology of missions and evangelism.

But we must remember that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are our ways his ways. The Lord says, "for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." [Isaiah 55:8-9]

And at the beginning of Acts, we are given a clue of this sort of problem was already arising. It sort of slides in. When the disciples had all gathered together, they asked Jesus, “will you *at this time* restore the kingdom to Israel?” [Acts 1:6] And it is here that I think we get a picture of the disciples timeline conflicting with Jesus’ timeline, because Jesus responds, “it is not for you to know....but you will be my witnesses...to the end of the earth.” [Acts 1:6-8]

God isn’t concerned about our missions or evangelism efficiency. He knows what he is doing. He has a plan – and it is best and it is wise. It is full of mercy and grace, and it is for our best and it is not for us to know. We are simply called to be his witnesses to the end of the earth.

And while it is a call, it is clear that because it was his design God delights in having us be a part of that plan. Our heavenly Father *delights* in having us do the work he is involved in. He wants us to be in the business of reconciling people to himself.

Weight of Evangelism: Why we freeze

And truth be told, when we are given the opportunity to share Christ to someone and they turn to Jesus, there is no better feeling. We love it.

But I think that one of the reasons that we freeze when it comes to witnessing to others is because we feel the weight of evangelism and missions. It seems like such a huge responsibility, and we know we are sinners, we know we make mistakes. What if we turn people off of Christianity?

We vacillate between doubting the need for our efforts, and putting too much into our efforts. On the one hand we believe that our witness would never change anyone’s life, and then on the other hand, we go the extra mile to ensure that “our witness” is as eloquent and prepared as possible.

And the truth is that even in those moments where we do think we could make a difference, we can turn it into such a massive undertaking. We are terrified that things could go wrong if we say the wrong thing, or if we don’t have good answers to their questions. We know that we have doubts about certain things, and we suspect that they will see right through us if we don’t have good answers for every single possible question out there. What if we mess up? What if we fail them and make fools of ourselves? This can cause us to freeze in our witnessing. Fear of failing is a real fear that can keep us from witnessing.

Artemis II Launch

If you saw the Artemis II space launch, you saw history being made. Not only was it an incredible accomplishment, but it was mesmerizing to watch (especially in high resolution). But something we could not see on that video feed was the countless hours of preparation and money that went into that launch. From what I could find, it was an estimated \$4.1 billion dollars for a single flight!

Imagine the pressure NASA was under to get that launch right! I came across a list detailing Artemis II’s Weather Criteria required to launch. It was exhausting just to read. It is no wonder

their readiness checklists are so long! If the clouds, wind, temperature, precipitation, sunlight, and other conditions weren't within a specific percentage point, the instructions were very clear: **“Do not launch.”**

And there were hundreds of other conditions that had to be almost perfectly aligned with each other for them to be able to launch. A moon mission requires orbital alignment, precise timing, specific weather, fuel systems, software, trajectory calculations, safety windows, and dozens of other operational constraints must all line up. It is intense and so stressful to watch. If you don't get everything right, everything could be lost!¹

And brothers and sisters, this may be over the top, but I think we can sometimes think of evangelism and missions in a similar way.

We think conditions need to be almost perfect – the person needs to be ready to hear the gospel, and we need to be ready to give the gospel. There cannot be any interruptions, phone calls, text messages, or distractions. The relationship needs to be stable enough to allow for a deep conversation and not feel like an ambush. We can't come on too strong, or people might think that we are like those “other Christians” we work so hard to not be like. But we need to speak clearly enough so that they don't miss the gospel. We don't want to push too hard, but we also don't want to act like we don't care about their salvation. We want to invite them to church, but we also don't know who if they will like the guy who is preaching that Sunday or if the preacher who is on the church email is actually the guy who will be preaching!

Then there is the thought of what if someone is rude to them, or if too many people overwhelm them when they visit or if people ignore them will they ever come back? What if, what if, what if?

And at the end of these long lists of “Evangelism Criteria”, we seem to assume that we have clear internal instructions: **“Do not launch” or “Do not Evangelize...yet.”**

Over the years I have heard these or similar reasons as the criteria people have used to avoid sharing the gospel with people. It is usually not this bluntly articulated and it seems more reasonable and justified, but the truth is, it is all pretty similar.

And this is meant to reveal the fact that it is not uncommon for many of us to have checklists in our heads that prevent us from sharing the gospel or being a witness.

And I bring this up now, because I think that one of the reasons that we think in these ways is because we are very **man-centered in our evangelism**.

That is why JI Packer writes,

“It is not right when we regard ourselves as responsible for securing converts and look to our own enterprise and techniques to accomplish what only God can accomplish. To do that is to intrude ourselves into the office of the Holy Ghost, and to exalt ourselves as the agents of the new birth.” [Packer, 29]

¹ <https://www.nasa.gov/missions/artemis/artemis-i-mission-availability/>
<https://www.nasa.gov/artemis-ii-weather-criteria>

We freeze under the weight of evangelism because we actually *really do*, truly believe deep in our heart of hearts that if we don't do evangelism right, we will blow it and people will end up in hell. When we think this way, we overstate our hand and place ourselves as the ones who are causing the "new birth"

Brothers and sisters, do we realize how self-centered that is?

I get the confusion – God calls us to be his witnesses.

But he doesn't call us to convert anyone. That is not on our shoulders. When we put the weight of conversion on our shoulders, we will be crushed because we will treat every opportunity for evangelism as a NASA checklist that has to be perfect – and there will never be a perfect time!

Acts 8 Corrects our Error

"While we must always remember that it is our responsibility to proclaim salvation, we must never forget that it is God who saves....Our evangelistic work is the instrument that He uses for this purpose, but the power that saves is not in the instrument: it is in the hand of the One who uses the instrument." [Packer, 27.]

And this is what Acts 8 teaches us. Acts shows us clearly that the gospel is not about our timing, speech, control or our persuasion. Rather it shows us that everything is always in God's sovereign hands. We are the instrument, but that instrument saves only because it is in the Father's hands.

God does use us, and he uses our very words to bring people to himself, ***but without the power of the Holy Spirit*** our words accomplish nothing.

You've no doubt heard the story of my father's conversion from communism to Christianity more than a few times from this pulpit. But what always stood out to me was that it wasn't the eloquence of the arguments from the gifted pastors and missionaries. It wasn't the apologetical arguments. God used the high school boy who said, "I would like to be like you, but I can't" and my dad said "he made the blessed mistake of asking 'why?'" and the young man said, "Because I have Jesus in my heart." And that is what the Spirit used. Those simple, basic words from a high schooler. **It was clearly the Spirit's power at work there.**

As it was also some six months ago when I went to visit Anita Doorman. Her family and our church had prayed for Anita's salvation for decades. I came ready to persuade and debate. I had heard that Anita was strong and unmovable in her rejection of the gospel. She had refused every attempt to convince her.

And when I sat down with her, ready to go to battle for her soul, it was clear that the war had already been won. Anita agreed with everything I shared about the gospel. She wasn't even the least bit defensive or argumentative. She was 100% on board. All of us, including Anita, were baffled at the Spirit's work! We all just kept saying, "this is amazing!"

While I was given the opportunity to share the gospel with this dear woman, everyone in that room knew it wasn't me who persuaded her to repent and believe.

In fact, I'll say that never in my life has it been clearer that that someone's salvation was *not because of my efforts*, than that day.

I was merely present as the Holy Spirit was at work. I witnessed God answering the tears of hundreds of prayers for her salvation and the faithful efforts to witness to her over the years. It was a delight to be there, and I was honored to be a tool in our savior's hands. But it reminded me that the Lord alone saves.

And Acts 8 shows us that. This is God's mission and glory, not *ours*. God is the one who changes hearts.

Even when Paul writes that he did not bring the gospel with "lofty speech or wisdom". He writes, "I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." [1 Corinthians 2:1-5]

Paul did not want their faith to rest on reason or intelligence, but on the power of God. And that was because he knew that only God could give the growth.

And these words give us such freedom, brothers and sisters.

These words correct the flawed thinking and dependence on eloquence, technique, timing, or flawless delivery.

Acts 8 gives us a glimpse behind the curtain and shows us that God is in control, and he still delights to use us to save the lost.

Conclusion

So in conclusion, as we consider missions and evangelism and the work the Spirit does through us for the advancement of the Kingdom, may we be men and women who rise up and hear the call to be Christ's witnesses in all the world, in the power of the Holy Spirit, always silencing the false thinking that we are somehow indispensable.

May we also remember that while God uses us as a means for achieving his purposes, "in the last analysis nothing depends on man; everything depends, rather, on the God who raises men up to do his will." [Packer, 31]

Amen.

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