



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

January 5, 2014

"Rise and Go" - Acts 8:1b-8; 26-40

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**W**re working our way through the Book of Acts, which is the story of the earlier years of the Christian Church. We took a break from our study of this amazing story to celebrate Advent. Today, we're back at it in Acts chapter 8.

Here in Acts chapter 8, in one half of one single verse, verse 1b, we find ourselves at an inflection point in the story of the Early Church.

The text reads, *"That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul (that's the guy who will become known as the Apostle Paul), but Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both (Christian) men and women, he committed them to prison."*

Think about this. Something remarkable is going to happen in the life of Saul, this man who was violently opposed to the church. He will go from one of its greatest opponents to its greatest champion. We'll hear more about that in the coming weeks. That's the power of the gospel.

The last time we were in the Book of Acts we talked about a

guy by the name of Stephen. He was a faithful, good man who stood up in front of the religious leaders of Israel and told them what he believed about Jesus Christ. We first met Stephen when he was chosen to be a part of a small group of leaders who were asked to resolve a complicated conflict in the church concerning how the needs of widows were being taken care of. That was a simmering ethnic struggle that could have fractured the church. Pastor Dan talked about Stephen in our last sermon on the Book of Acts.

In Acts chapter 7, Stephen stands up before the religious leaders of Israel and tells them what he believes about Jesus Christ and these religious leaders will not listen to him. They are so opposed to what Stephen has to say about what he believed God was doing in the world, that in a fit of rage they decide to shut Stephen up for good. They kill this good man and that day, the text says, a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem.

We're at an inflection point in the history of the church. This is a moment when the Early Church could have folded, closed up shop, and packed it all in. That was an option for the Early Church but what this inflection point became was a moment

when the church began to grow even faster.

In differential calculus, an inflection point, is a point on a curve at which the curvature of the graph changes sign from plus to minus or from minus to plus. The curve changes from being concave upwards to concave downwards or vice versa. (Every so often I have to pull out my Bachelor's degree in Biology and use it. I spent a lot of time and money on that degree and I hate to see it go to waste.)

Here in Acts chapter 8, we're at a point where the circumstances confronting the Early Church change dramatically. This is a moment like September 11 in our history as a nation. On September 10, 2001 many Americans had a general sense of safety and even invincibility. By noon on September 11<sup>th</sup>, I think it's fair to say, that many of us had a different sense of our security as a nation.

A lot of things start to change right here in Acts chapter 8. What doesn't change is the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. What doesn't change is the power of the Holy Spirit available to the followers of Jesus. What doesn't change is the incredible love God has for His people and the love He has for the world. A lot changed for the Early Church.

**B**ut what was most important, what was essential, stayed rock solid.

Here in Acts 8, the church goes from a local community, uncomfortably tolerated by the religious and secular officials, to a church that starts to experience the wrath of the religious and secular authorities. The first Christians are now a community on the move, which is, by the way, the kind of community Jesus wanted them to be.

Way back in Acts chapter 1, Jesus told his followers that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea (that's equivalent to our Honolulu and Oahu). He also said they would be His witnesses in Samaria (that's sort of like being called by Jesus today to be His witnesses to the Taliban, or any other group of people or nation that you distrust or strongly disagree with or see as undermining the very fabric of our culture). Jesus then told His first disciples that they would be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. That pretty much covers everyone else.

Here's what's really clear to me. We are called to get up and go into the world and proclaim the good news of the gospel to everyone. We are to be Christ's witnesses through what we say and by how we live our lives. Jesus calls us to rise and go to people we love, to people we distrust, to people we agree with, and to people we believe are trying to destroy what we hold dear.

God wants the world to know that He has a furious longing for the people of the world. That longing is the most powerful force in the universe. There is nowhere that God won't go to find us. There is no country that is too far away

for Him. There is no terrain that is too precarious. There is no risk too great. There are no boundaries to where His love will take Him in His pursuit of us and the people of the world. He searches for us. He doesn't wait for us to find Him. And when He does, He offers us His embraces. It's that love that we see lived out in this chapter in the lives of these first disciples.

And you know what? The fact that we see that kind of response to the violence perpetrated against the first Christians is pretty surprising to me. Think about it. The church is facing terrible persecution. They're being dragged out of their homes and thrown in jail because they believe in this God who loves the world with this furious, relentless, self-sacrificing love. Their lives are on the line. They're living under constant threat.

So what do they do? Do they lash out in anger? Do they meet violence with violence? No, they meet violence with love. Instead of retreating they move forward. God did allow this persecution to break out on them to get most of them moving. But once they were on their feet they carried the good news that there is a God who loves the world. God wants people to know that His grace and His peace are available to them...today!

A friend of mine in California sent me a link to an article called, "Do You Still Want to Be Like Mike?" It's about Michael Jordan, who turned 50 last February. Can you believe that? 50 years old! Michael Jordan is, without a doubt, the greatest basketball player ever to play the game. He dominated on the court. In an article written by an ESPN reporter who spent time with

Michael, that writer makes some surprising observations about how he's doing in retirement. The observations he makes are not surprising to me as a Christian. But they will be to many people.

Here's this incredible athlete who has been, for the past 30 years, the most important person in almost every room he enters anywhere in the world. That may be a bit of an exaggeration, but not by much. The ESPN report observes that Jordan's self-esteem has been tied directly to the game of basketball. Without the game Michael says he feels adrift. He wonders who he is. He seems to be struggling to find meaning and purpose in his life again.

The reporter quotes Jordan as making this very candid and honest remark, "How can I enjoy the next 20 years? How can I find peace away from the game of basketball?"

The fact that Michael Jordan is having that unsettling experience is not surprising to me at all. Even Michael Jordan struggles with being at peace even with all his incredible accomplishments in his life. Matt Smethurst, who wrote the article that was sent to me, makes these observations.

"The distance between (Michael Jordan) and us is, after all, uncomfortably slim. We want to be the most important person in every room; he is. In the world, status is tethered to performance. It's the same in the gospel. The difference, however, is that our status as believers is not tethered to *our* performance, but Christ's. Only the gospel can offer the resources to combat our pride, expose our emptiness, and flood our hearts with peace."

**T**hat's what we talked about last week. It was this message of the incredible love and mercy and forgiveness of God that we see being lived out in community after community as the church was on the move starting in Acts chapter 8. That settled confidence in the goodness and love of God is what we see being proclaimed by a guy by the name of Philip.

Acts chapter 8 verse 4: *“Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralyzed or lame were cured. So there was great joy in that city.”*

Philip was one of the guys on that reconciliation team with Stephen who brought peace to a terrible ethnic conflict in the church. That tells me a lot about this brother in Christ. Because of his involvement in that difficult ministry Philip, in addition to being an evangelist—someone who was particularly gifted with the ability to tell people about Jesus Christ—apparently was a maker of peace.

Jesus said to His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the peacemakers, not just the peace lovers, or peace seekers or peace keepers but the makers of peace.” Seeking justice for those who are oppressed is how one becomes a maker of peace. That is what those seven deacons did back in Acts chapter 6. They sought justice for those who were not being treated fairly.

Every disciple is called to be a maker of peace. We're going to have to be transformed by the gospel if we are going to join God in His work of making peace in our relationships, in our communities and in our world.

So, Philip goes down from Jerusalem to the leading city of the Samaritans. The Jews hated the Samaritans and the Samaritans hated the Jews. For Philip to go to the main city in Samaria and proclaim the good news of the gospel is a dramatic move. It was risky on a number of levels. But God blessed him and the lives of many people in Samaria were dramatically changed when they said, “Yes” to Jesus Christ. The result? There was joy in the city.

Don't miss that. The result of Philip's ministry was that there was more joy IN the city. The city of Samaria was a better place, a more peaceful place, a more joy-filled place because Philip jumped over the barriers between his culture and theirs and told them about and showed them what this God can do.

Our God wants to see the cities of Kaneohe, Honolulu, and every other community on this island more filled with peace and joy. The future of others, their well-being, their joy is to be our priority. I think God is interested in us helping Honolulu be a better city. Philip jumped the cultural barriers of his day, told people the gospel with his words and with his life and the result was that there was joy IN the city.

Let's jump down to Acts chapter 8 verse 26. I love what happens here. After his ministry in Samaria, Philip is back in Jerusalem. God now sends Philip to the road running between Jerusalem and Gaza. Gaza was

on the main trade route from Egypt to West Asia. Philip the evangelist, this seeker of justice, this peace maker was directed by God to head down the road leading from Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, to Gaza.

Along that road the Spirit of God directs Philip to run alongside a chariot that is rolling down the road, headed back to Egypt and Africa. As he's jogging alongside the chariot he hears the man reading from the book of Isaiah. So he asks him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” That simple question is going to bring this man to an inflection point in his life. The man makes a critical decision to invite Philip up onto his ride for a chat. That decision will end up changing this man's life.

Once on board, Philip finds out who this guy is. He's a very high official from the royal court of Ethiopia. In fact, he's the treasurer for Queen Candace. He apparently had been interested in the God of the Jews for some time. He'd come all the way from Ethiopia to learn more about this God and to see if he could worship the God of the Jews in the Temple in Jerusalem. He was now on his way home and most biblical scholars believe that he was headed home confused and deeply disappointed. He'd come 2,500 miles to worship God in the Temple but when he tried to enter the Temple the priests turned him away.

He could not enter the temple because he was a eunuch. At some point in his life he'd been castrated. He was not intact as a man. How did he end up as a eunuch? We don't know. Kings often believed that a eunuch could be trusted around the wives and the concubines.

This terrible practice was followed by many pagan cultures.

In Deuteronomy chapter 23, there is a list of people who were barred from entering the assembly of Israel. The first kind of person excluded was a eunuch. The practice of emasculating men was disgusting to the God of the Jews. This terrible practice had to be stopped. So, it was believed that barring eunuchs from the Temple would act as a deterrent to others who would do this to themselves or others. It would also save future sons of Israel from being subjected to this painful and inhumane treatment. So as harsh as it sounds, this restriction can be seen as a compassionate law in the long run.

Professionally, this man was at the top of his game. He was the treasurer of Ethiopia, but he longed for something more in his life. He was a God-fearer, a pre-convert to Judaism. He believed in Israel's God but was not a Jew. When Philip meets him he is diligently studying Isaiah chapter 53 and he has questions. He had traveled all the way to Jerusalem and even though he was a man of great status and one who believed in Israel's God, he was turned away from the Temple. 2500 miles is a long way to come in the 1<sup>st</sup> century only to be turned away.

But look at what God does. God has His eyes on this man. He tells Philip to go and intercept this man and tell him that there is a God who loves him. There is a God who will welcome him.

How many people have felt turned away from the church? How many people have felt wounded by their experience in a church or with Christians? God is calling us to get up and go and reach these de-churched people

and those who have never heard the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. To reach people who have come to the conclusion that Christianity isn't for them, we can't sit here and wait for them to come to us. The vast majority of the people who need to know that there is a God who loves them are not coming here, but are out there on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza—out there on some a desert road, struggling to make sense of their lives.

What event could change the ritual clean laws of the Old Testament that barred this man from entering the Temple? What event could make a way for him to come into the presence of God where there was no way? What could lead a Jewish follower of Jesus to embrace a sexually altered African man? It is the same way that makes a way for all of us. Look at the text the man is reading from Isaiah as he rolls down the road.

Acts 8:26-40: *"...the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 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 silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him*

*the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing."*

The result of Philip's time with this man was once again joy. The man went on his way rejoicing and God sent Philip on his way.

Jesus Christ has made a way for all of us to come to God. That is the message we have the privilege of proclaiming to one another and the world. That is what this Communion Table is all about. It is at this Table that we are directed, once again, to the cross of Jesus Christ where God made away where there was no way.

I want to invite you to come, just as you are, to this Table of God's love and grace and receive from Him—His forgiveness, His embrace, His welcome, fresh hope and to go your way at peace and rejoicing. And as you walk out those doors today, I want to challenge you to follow Jesus Christ into the world He loves and with your words and with your life, proclaim the good news that there is a God who loves us like this.

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