Sermon Transcript
October 18, 2015

A Missionary God and A Missionary People
Acts 8:1-8, 26-40

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on October 18, 2015 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.
Sermon Text
Acts 8:1-8, 26-40

1 And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. 3 But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

4 Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. 5 Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. 6 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. 7 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. 8 So there was much joy in that city.

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 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. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.”

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.

Introduction

I came across an interesting quote this past week. It went like this; “The gospel is the story of a missionary God who sent His missionary Son and now indwells us by his missionary Spirit.” In fact, I can easily come up with verses for each part of this quote. We hear of a “missionary God” in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.” We hear of the missionary heart of Jesus when he says of himself in Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” And then of course, in our study of the book of Acts we discover the “missionary Spirit” who when he comes gives the church power to be “witnesses” to the resurrection of Jesus. That is what we read in Acts 1:8, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses.”

The Triune God is a “missionary God.” That is what the gospel tells us. The question we need to ask is this, “Are we a missionary people?” “Are we a missionary church?” Now I am not asking “Do we have a missionary program?” We do. But you can have a missionary program that sets aside funds to support missionaries, and really not be a “missionary people.” If the extent of our “missionary outreach” is limited to throwing a few dollars in the plate to support missionaries who go and do the work for us and sending a few teams from time to time on mission trips, then we really have not embraced what it means to be a “missionary people.” Having a missions program and going on mission trips can be part of what it means to be a “missionary people.” But if we ourselves are not giving witness to the resurrection of Jesus in “our Jerusalem” then we are yet to mirror the heart of the God we claim to worship.

We have been placed here, at 511 Maple Street. Here is where the light of Jesus is to shine through us. We have been planted in our places of work and in our communities where we live and in the parks where we play and in the families God has given us. It is here where we must proclaim Jesus and give witness to the resurrection of Jesus. You know my heart. I am all for ministries of mercy. I believe in what we call “crossing the bridge” and extending mercy to those in need. Through meeting needs, we extend the mercy and the love of God to people created in the image of God. These “good works” are how the light of Jesus shines through us. But even that is not enough. If we do a lot of good works, but fail to proclaim Jesus, crucified, dead, buried and risen from the dead for the forgiveness of our sins—then we are yet to truly reflect the heart of our
missionary God.

I understand we live in “different times.” I understand that things are not the way they were a generation ago. We live in an increasingly secular culture and there are certain challenges to proclaiming Jesus in this culture. It is hard to even know where to start the conversation because we can’t even assume a shared view that God even exists. Furthermore, matters of religion tend to be one of those topics that we don’t talk about in public places. It is meant to be kept private. I was at a golf course this week and in the clubhouse there was a sign that said, “Tavern Rules: No Peddling, No Preaching, No Politicking.” And so, quite naturally we understand that different times call for different strategies. I would agree with that. And yet, whatever challenges this generation presents us, there is something timeless about proclaiming the good news of Jesus.

Greg Gilbert is a pastor of a church right across from Louisville University and he readily acknowledges the challenges there are in sharing our faith in a growing secular culture. And yet he argues that in spite of all the differences, there is a commonality that still exists among us all. He writes, “We are all made in the image of God, we have all rebelled against him and gone our own way, we all need the grace of forgiveness and a substitute to stand in our place. Death stares all of us in the face, and eternity stretches out before us all. So maybe the first and most important thing we can do as we minister to this generation is to remember we’re ministering to human beings. And the same good news that’s saved millions through the ages will, by God’s grace, continue to do so in this generation and every one that follows.” No matter where we live or what the culture is like, the message is still the same. And as a missionary people who reflect the missionary heart of our God, we proclaim the same message that was proclaimed 2000 years ago in the book of Acts. That is what it means to be a missionary people.

This is the constant we find in the book of Acts. Last week we noticed that in Acts 7, with the stoning of Stephen, we reached a transition point in the book of Acts. Prior to Acts 8, all of the activity of giving witness to the resurrected Jesus had taken place in Jerusalem. And now we discover in Acts 8:1 that with the stoning of Stephen an aggressive campaign of persecution arose against the church. Look at verse 3, and how it describes the actions of Saul, prior to his conversion on the Damascus Road, “But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” And so quite naturally this threat of persecution caused the church to scatter. In Acts 8, we now find a man by the name of Philip in Samaria and notice what he is doing.
This is not Peter, this is Philip. This is not Jerusalem, this is Samaria. This may be a different person and this may be a different region and culture and with the rise of persecution, the times have changed. But the activity has stayed the same. It says in verse 5, “Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.” This is what it means to be a missionary people. It means that we are active in giving testimony to the crucified and risen Jesus and the promise of the forgiveness of sin. Our geography is different. We live in different times. But our God is still the same and the calling to be witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus still remains. God is still changing lives through the proclamation of the gospel. We are testimony to that!

As we look into Acts 8, I want to begin by showing you the missionary Spirit, the Holy Spirit. I want to show you how the Holy Spirit is active through us to bring God’s blessing to this world. Then I want to show you the missionary Jesus who has a heart for the outcast and the one who seems to be without hope. Then I want to end with a picture of our missionary God, who wants to use us to proclaim the hope of Jesus to this world. We are here for “such a time as this!” May the constant for us be that we readily give witness to the hope we have in Jesus. May we be a missionary people.

The Missionary Spirit

In Acts 8, we read the story of how the proclamation of Jesus moved from Jerusalem to the region of Samaria. Actually, by the end of Acts 8, through the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch, we see how the gospel first makes its way into Africa. Keep in mind, this is just one story of who knows how many stories not recorded for us by Luke. It says in verse 4 that what Philip did is what others were doing as well, wherever they happened to scatter. It says, “Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.” The primary mover in all of this is the Holy Spirit, as you will see in a moment. But the human agent the Holy Spirit uses in Acts 8 is a man by the name of Philip.

We first meet Philip in Acts 6. If you recall from Acts 2 and Acts 3, that at the very outset of the proclamation of the risen Jesus, there were a large number of Jewish converts in a rather short amount of time. At the end of the Day of Pentecost, there were three thousand who repented and turned in faith to Jesus. At the end of Acts 2 it says that “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” And in Acts 3, when Peter and John proclaim Jesus after healing the lame man who sat at the gate of the temple, we are told that there were 5,000 men who had converted to Christ. In a short amount of time, there are possibly 15,000 to 20,000 Jewish converts to Christ. That is a lot of people to care for in such a short amount of time.
In this early church at Jerusalem, you had Hebraic Jews who were “locals”, living in Palestine. They spoke Aramaic. You also had Hellenist Jews, who were from various parts of the Roman Empire, outside of Palestine. They spoke Greek. Remember, in Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, the city was teeming with Jewish worshipers from all over the known world and what caught their attention on the feast Pentecost is when they heard the apostles, Hebraic Jews, speaking in the native tongues of all these Hellenist Jews, these visiting worshipers to Jerusalem.

The early church in Jerusalem was known for taking care of those in need, but understandably, with all these people, the net of care broke down from time to time. That was the case in Acts 6. The language barrier between the Hebraic Jews and the Hellenist Jews, led to the neglect of the “outsiders” when it came to taking care of the widows. And so seven men, Hellenist Jews, were chosen to make sure that the Greek speaking widows, were not neglected. Stephen, the first martyr, and Philip, the man we see in Acts 8, were among these seven men, Hellenist Jews, chosen to make sure their widows were cared for. These seven men were chosen for this task because it says in Acts 6 that they were men “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.”

I think this is an important introduction to Philip before we even get to Acts 8 and before we consider what it means to be a “missionary people.” What you are going to see in Acts 8 is that the missionary activity of Philip is the result of the Holy Spirit at work through him. He was “full of the Holy Spirit.” Another word for “filling:” is “empowering.” This is why in Acts 1 the apostles were told to wait for the coming of the Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us power to give witness to Jesus. You can’t take this sermon and the call to be a missionary people and say that you will work up the courage to give witness to Jesus. There is no power in the flesh. A missionary people is a people who are filled with the Holy Spirit. This means we are empowered by the Spirit and we are controlled by the Holy Spirit. It is an ongoing condition.

In Luke 11, Jesus finishes his instruction on prayer and he tells his disciples to pray for the filling of the Spirit. I believe we ought to pray daily for the filling of the Spirit. We are commanded by Paul in Ephesians 5 to “be filled with the Spirit.” There is a parallel passage to Ephesians 5 in Colossians 3. Here Paul tells us to “let the Word of Christ dwell in your richly.” In both of these passages, Paul then talks about how this impacts your attitude, what comes out of your mouth and how you relate to others. The key to being filled with the Spirit is letting God’s Word dwell in you richly and expressing your dependence upon God by asking for the filling of the Spirit in prayer. This is important, because as you will see, Philip is led by the Holy Spirit in Acts 8. But that leading of the
Spirit does not take place in a spiritual vacuum. It takes place in the heart of a man or a woman “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.” If we want to be a missionary people, led by the missionary Spirit, we need to be filled with the Spirit.

In the first part of our passage, as a result of persecution in Jerusalem, Philip scatters into Samaria and it is here where he gives witness to the resurrected Jesus. Basically, a revival breaks out in the city. But it is the latter portion of Acts 8, I want to concentrate on this morning. At the height of this incredible revival, it says in verse 26 that “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.” One thing is clear, Philip is being led by God. Two times later in the story, it is the Holy Spirit who is prompting Philip. He is told to leave this “successful campaign” and go down to the last rest stop on the road that leads to the desert. This is the last Dunkin Donuts, the last watering hole, before the vast waist land that leads to Egypt. Philip obeys the angel, and he goes.

It “just so happens” that there is an “Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure” who was also traveling on this road. He was actually returning from Jerusalem where he went to worship God. I wonder if he was processing all that had been happening in Jerusalem since Pentecost. As he was traveling in his chariot, he was reading from Isaiah 53. This familiar chapter is a chapter that speaks of a coming suffering servant and it speaks rather vividly of the sufferings of Jesus on the cross. I knew a man who was a Hebrew scholar and spent time studying in Israel. Once on the beach in Tel Aviv, he too was reading from Isaiah 53, when a curious woman asked him what he was reading. He began to read Isaiah 53 out loud and she said, “Oh, you are a Christian.” To which he said, “I am reading from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah.” Here we read of Jesus, “He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.”

In verse 29 we read, “And the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over and join this chariot.’” And so he goes. Hearing this man read from Isaiah 53, he asks him if he understands what he is reading. The Ethiopian Eunuch responds, “How can I, unless someone guides me.” Starting with this verse, Philip tells him about Jesus and this man’s heart is drawn to respond with faith. He asks to be baptized, perhaps at the last watering hole before entering the desert.

Philip, a “man full of faith and filled with the Spirit” was led by the Holy Spirit. He was led to a man who was being drawn to faith by the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit was at
work in both the messenger and the one who received the message. I think of what God said to Paul in Acts 18 when he came to the city of Corinth. He told Paul that no harm would come to him there, and then he said this, “I have many in this city who are my people.” He was referring to people, whom Paul would encounter and who would respond to his ministry. God knows where those people are. I think it is appropriate for us to pray, as missionary people, for the Spirit of God to lead us to people God is drawing to himself.

Isn’t that how the acronym B.L.E.S.S. begins? “B” - Begin with prayer and then, “L” - listen to the prompting of the Holy Spirit who still speaks to our hearts today. Who is he putting on your heart? I received a great email this week from a lady in our church. It captures the spirit of what a missionary people led by the missionary Spirit looks like. She wrote, “Since your series started I have been praying that God would send opportunities my way and He has answered my prayers. There are three people I will be sharing the gospel message with. Two are people I have known for years and didn't see coming! The third is a woman who knocked on my door a couple days ago, out of the blue. I just struck up a conversation with her and after we were done I realized I am being asked to share with her as well. She is a neighbor way down the street that I never knew until now. Broken and seeking. This series has made me keep my heart, mind and soul open to whatever and wherever God is sending me. Please keep me in your prayers as I share with them. I admit I am a bit concerned, like Moses, that the words won't come, but then I am reminded that the Holy Spirit will speak whatever words won't come naturally.”

What if we all simply began with prayer and asked for God to keep our ears open to the opportunities around us? Just like the encounter with the Ethiopian, God is drawing people to himself, all around us. Ask God to give you natural opportunities for you to enter into conversation and to proclaim the good news of Jesus with others. Begin with prayer. Listen to the promptings of the Spirit. Look for natural opportunity. Be filled with the Spirit. Follow his promptings. Watch him use you like he did Philip.

The Missionary Jesus

Where do we see the “missionary Jesus” in this passage? It is somewhat buried in the text. Do you remember what we discovered “buried in the text” last week? Luke is not just haphazardly chronicling event after event for us. What he shares with us is purposeful and he is telling us something about Jesus. Last week we saw that David and Solomon, the king and the temple, go together. In Acts 1-2 the point of these two
chapters is that Jesus is “that Son of David” whom the prophets said would come and rule over God’s kingdom forever. The resurrection of Jesus proves this. Then from Acts 3-7 all the activity revolves around the temple. And it is here where we discover that Jesus replaces the function of the temple. This is what enraged those who heard Stephen’s message and caused them to stone him. Jesus is the dwelling place of God. Jesus is the place where sins are atoned for and God’s house is now found among God’s people. God is not confined to a building. So when we come to Acts 8, of all the stories that could have been told as a result of the church being scattered, these stories were chosen because of what they tell us about Jesus. These stores tell us that “the missionary Jesus” has come to restore the broken, and as we saw time and time again in the four Gospels, Jesus has a heart for the outcast.

First of all, we see the proclamation of Jesus makes its way into Samaria. I mentioned last week that the Samaritans were half Jewish. They were descendants of the ten tribes of Israel that broke from Judah and Jerusalem after the reign of Solomon. And yet the prophets talk about how when the Son of David comes, God will restore Israel under their one king and shepherd.

Many of you are familiar with the story in Ezekiel where he is told to start preaching to a valley of dry bones. And he starts preaching, they begin to rattle, then they assemble themselves, skin and flesh begin to appear and then the breath of life comes into them. In fact in Ezekiel 37:14, it summarizes this prophecy by saying “I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live.” This speaks to the power of the proclamation of God’s Word and the Holy Spirit. Do you know what comes next in Ezekiel 37? He refers to two sticks, one being the house of Judah and the other the ten tribes of Israel, known as Samaria in Acts 8. He talks about how these two will once again be united as one people. Do you know when this will happen? He says in verse 24, “My servant David shall be king over them.” It shouldn’t surprise us that a few verses later we hear talk of a temple, “My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

This mass conversion that takes place in Samaria, is the beginning of the fulfillment of the prophecy of Ezekiel 37. God is restoring these people who have long been separated and he is doing so under Jesus Christ. Whenever you hear the story of the Good Samaritan, it is well chronicled of how deeply they despised each other. Centuries of retaliating against each other built within them a deep prejudice. And now, you find Jesus restoring these people once at odds with each other and forming them into his people where the dividing wall of hostility is being torn down.
Luke is telling us, that the Davidic king has come and the dwelling place of God is found in Jesus. And look, as promised, we can begin to see how God is restoring Israel as one people under Jesus. But it doesn’t stop there. With the addition of the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch, we discover that the people of God is not confined to a nationality. The outcast, the foreigner and the eunuch, under Jesus are also now the people of God.

The eunuch was prohibited from gaining full access to the temple. This comes from a command in Deuteronomy 23. Most likely, this emasculating of the eunuch was part of a pagan temple rite. And yet here you have this eunuch who is seeking God. Is there no hope for this “outcast”? Just three chapters beyond Isaiah 53, where this particular eunuch was reading, we read of how “foreigners and eunuchs” will be part of the people of God. It says in Isaiah 54:6, “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, 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; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.” I can’t help but think that Philip made his way to this chapter. Five times in the story, this man is identified as a “eunuch.”

So what is the point? Through proclaiming the message of the resurrected Jesus, we discover that Jesus is restoring the lives of broken people. You can’t be too broken for Jesus to reach you. I have heard people say that they have done things that they don’t think can ever be forgiven by God. That is not true. People who feel unworthy, are the most worthy of receiving the forgiveness of God through faith in Jesus. It is the one who is “poor in spirit” who humbly repents of their sin. The “missionary Jesus” is the Jesus who restores all people under one king and one shepherd and he fills you with a heart that reconciles you to others and he forgives whatever sin you think cannot be forgiven.

**Missionary God**

This brings us to the “missionary God” and it brings us to you and to me.

Let me first speak to the “Philips” in this room. Are we a missionary people? It starts with daily seeking the filling of the Spirit, through prayer and immersing ourselves with Scripture. If that is where you need to start, get started. But then as the Spirit of God prompts us, let us be ready to proclaim Jesus.

Greg Gilbert gives some sound advice on how to engage this post-Christian culture with four points.
• Assume that you do not share common starting points which implies that proclaiming Jesus is best done out of a relationship over a period of time.
• Tell the story of the Bible. It is a grand story and it intersects with our story. A few pithy points scrawled on a napkin will not win the day.
• Be confident about your faith. When you are in conversation, ask questions of them to get them to think about how they are viewing life.
• Point to the empty tomb. At the end of the day, they need a credible explanation for the empty tomb.³

Now, let me talk to the “Samaritan and the Ethiopian” here this morning. If there is something in your life that makes you feel unworthy of God’s love, I want you to know that there is nothing that you have done that God can’t forgive. This is his specialty! This is what the missionary God is all about. God went to great lengths to reach you with his love. He sent his Son, Jesus, to die for your sins. Jesus rose from the dead, declaring that his death was sufficient to pay for your sins. I think of the invitation in Isaiah 55 that perhaps this eunuch, this former outcast, heard in that chariot. It is the invitation of Jesus to you, “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money without price.” How can I buy without money? “Jesus, the Living One, offers you mercy, life more abundant in boundless supply. . . Jesus, the gracious One, welcomes the weary; Jesus, the selfless One, died for the lost. . . Jesus is such a compassionate Savior. Draw from the grace that flows freely from him. . . Come to the Savior, the God of salvation. God has provided an end to sin’s strife. Why will you suffer the Law’s condemnation? Take the free gift of the water of life.”⁴ The eunuch said, “what prevents me from being baptized?” Nothing! Come!

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¹God Calls Us to Share the Gospel, Not Just Talk About it www.thegospelcoalition.org
³Ibid
⁴James Boice “Come to the Waters” Hymns for a Modern Reformation (Philadelphia: Tenth Presbyterian Church)

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Getting To Know Me Questions
2. If you were to explain to a friend what it means to know God personally, what would you say?
3. Thinking back on the sermon, is there anything that challenged you? Is there something you resonated with? Did you disagree with anything in the sermon?

Diving Into The Word
4. Read Acts 8:26-40 - Discuss how you see “the missionary Spirit” at work in this passage? How was the Holy Spirit at work in Philip’s life? How was the Holy Spirit at work in the Ethiopian’s life? Do you ever sense the Spirit of God prompting you to reach out to someone? Can you share an experience where you followed the prompting of the Spirit?
5. Discuss what you learned in the sermon about what it is like to be “filled with the Spirit” (see Acts 6:5; Luke 11:13; Eph. 5:18; Col. 3:16) Share what you learn from these verses.
6. Read Acts 6:2-5 - What was Philip set aside to do? How did it differ from what the apostles were set aside to do? What does this tell you about the kind of people God uses to proclaim Jesus to others? How does this encourage you?
7. Read Acts 8:30–35 and 1 Peter 3:15 - How ready do you feel to “guide someone” through an understanding of the gospel? What steps can you take to learn how to share Christ with others? How can you be a help to each other in this area?

Taking It Home
8. What inspiration do you receive from the email that was shared on page 8 of the transcript? What step would you like to take “begin with prayer” and “listen to the prompting of the Spirit?”

9. What next step to you want to take as a group to discern how you might serve together and BLESS someone?

10. Continue to work on memorizing your verse for the week, 1 Peter 1:3-8.