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Sermon Title: Look, Here Is Water!
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Acts 8:26-38

Acts 8:26-38

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then 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.

For a few summers, I was director or teenagers at a rustic Christian summer camp on the side of a mountain in Vermont. And a whole bunch of teenagers, 50, 75, they wanted to get baptized, they wanted to be

Christlike. A few miles from camp was a river. It came roaring down a mountain, settled into a perfectly formed pool—perfect for Baptisms—before heading off downstream.

So one afternoon, the whole camp, from old grandparents to little babies, the camp cooks, the camp preacher, and all the teenagers drove to the spot, parked on the side of the rural road, climbed down a little hill to celebrate all those Baptisms. Now, it wasn't just Baptism, it was a whole, joyous worship service: sermon, music, Scripture. So I'm standing waist high in a freezing Vermont mountain river, preaching up a storm, when two canoes full of naked people, what we used to call "buck naked," came paddling down the mountain into our pool.

I don't know who was more shocked: all those naked people paddling into a Baptismal service or all my teenagers looking at the naked people. Well, the naked people were quite intrigued, they were really interested, so they stayed awhile and awhile and awhile. So I started baptizing the kids, and if you've never seen a real river Baptism, I'll describe it in a minute.

In our church we baptize infants. They can't swim yet, so Alida and I just put them in our arms, dip our fingers into the water, and make the sign of the cross on their foreheads. Parents, godparents, and our whole church, we make promises to raise the babies in our Christian faith, to encourage them in church life, and to be an example of Christlikeness for them as they grow up.

Infant Baptism is a perfect example of God's grace. The babies know nothing at all, do nothing, answer nothing; the babies take no spiritual initiative at all. And yet, God's love, our love is given unconditionally. That's "grace."

The other kind of Baptism is called adult Baptism, or "believer's Baptism," because it's done for those people who are old enough to think for themselves, to choose for themselves, to decide for themselves, to believe for themselves, to act for themselves. Infant Baptism is grace. Believer's Baptism is choice. Our church does a bit of both. We baptize babies, but when they get old enough to think for themselves, we have Confirmation, like last Sunday, when we confirmed 42 teenagers.

We spent a year having those young people look hard at what it means to follow Christ, and they said, "Yes," they chose it, they embraced it, they decided. Well, in a lot of churches when teenagers or adults choose to follow Christ, they do what's called "immersion Baptism." Literally the whole body is immersed, dunked, in a large body of water. Some churches actually have

a large tank behind the altar, maybe 10 feet long, 4 feet deep. Or, like my Vermont story, they'll go to a river, a lake, an ocean.

O.K., let me describe it. The believer comes into the water. I take the person's two hands in mine; I put my other hand in the small of his back. I gently push him backward. His legs push out straight, and there will be a brief moment when the water cascades over him from head to toe. He's immersed. Then, quickly, I pull him up, lay my hands on his head and pray that God God's Holy Spirit will fill him.

It goes more smoothly without the naked people, but having baptized people with snakes at my feet and leeches on my legs, I prefer the naked people.

One last comment about the naked people, I promise. That story is about 40 years old. Through the years I've run into a lot of people who were there that day in that Vermont river. Even last summer, when I preached at my uncle's funeral in Vermont, several people were there whom I had baptized, and not once, *not once* did anyone mention the naked people! That wasn't a big deal. They talked about the Baptism; that was the big deal! They talked about their decision. They talked about their church and faith. That's how big Baptism is, how big it can be, how big should be. Really big.

I've always loved our Bible story for today. St. Philip, one of Jesus's disciples, is led by God's spirit to go into the wilderness, and there he comes across an Ethiopian Jew who served as treasurer to the Queen of Ethiopia. Ethiopians in Israel shared a lot in common, including their religion, Judaism. You may remember some years ago, when Ethiopia was suffering from famine and civil war, Israel airlifted thousands of Ethiopian Jews to safety in Israel. So they had this shared faith, making it no wonder that the Ethiopian treasurer had been in Jerusalem to worship at the Temple. Now, in our Bible story, he's headed home, riding in a chariot, and on the way, he's reading his Bible, some passages from Isaiah about the Messiah. Philip catches up to him, asks what he's reading, and asks if he's understands. The Ethiopian wants to know more about this Messiah, and Phillip tells him the whole story of Jesus from the beginning to the end. At which point, the Ethiopian sees some water and proclaims, "Look, here is water, what prevents me from being baptized?"

I like that progress. He goes from "I want to know" to "Now I understand" to "I've made my choice." And his choice was to be baptized, to quite literally follow Christ, since Jesus himself was baptized. It's the old cliché, "If it's good enough for him, it's good enough for me." So Philip and the Ethiopian stepped into the river. Philip took the Ethiopian in his hands, gently lowered

him down till the waters covered him perfectly, then brought him up and said a prayer.

Today, three families make that decision. They have all chosen to accept God's grace in the Baptism of their blessed children. On behalf of their children, they are taking a big step; they are making some big promises, and we, as a church, are accepting some big responsibility.

If you follow the news, it's been a bad week for Christianity. One day the headline was "Christianity in decline in America." The percentage of Christians in America is at its lowest ever. Then the next day it was "Millennials—that's young adults—in America, Millennials are not only less Christian, they are also even less spiritual." The last two decades or so, we have comforted ourselves with the idea that young adults, they were turned off by organized religion, but they still cared about God and faith and prayer. No more. Even vague spirituality is in decline. Then the third statistic hit, a huge jump in the percentage of teenagers who have never been inside a church. *Never*. Not Christmas, not Easter. It's a total non-event in their lives. They don't even know what it's about. It's like driving on Rte. 95 and pointing out to a young person, "Oh, that's the Jai Alai Fronton, and that's the old Greyhound Park race track," and they look at you as if you were from another world, another time. And you are. There's a huge percentage of American teens who have as much experience of church as Jai Alai, bocce ball, candlepin bowling, drive-in theaters, malt shops, and vinyl records.

Speaking of records, Alida tells a story of being in a record store, and some teenagers were looking at a Paul McCartney CD, and one says, "Did you know Paul McCartney used to be in some other band?" That's where church is headed. Someday people will be saying, "You know that that building used to be a church?" Or, Dad, what's a church?" Or "Hey, you remember when kids used to be baptized? What's up with that?"

Well, that's the "gloom and doom story" for this week. Next week it may be Martians running for Congress or a flesh-eating mushroom in the forest or deflated hockey pucks in the Stanley Cup finals. But I'm not interested in "doom and gloom." Right here, right now, three families have chosen to be here on a Sunday morning to begin the faith life of their children. That's a big deal!

That's a big deal! In fact, the last few years we've been in the top 100 churches in our whole denomination for Baptisms and probably the top 50 for Confirmations. That's a big deal!

Families are consciously making a decision to link life and faith, childhood and faith, growing up and faith, family and faith. That's a big deal!

We should feel just like the Ethiopian! "Look, here is water! Let's get baptized!" It IS a big deal.

I've told you how when I got baptized at age 13, our little church in Queens didn't have a Baptismal tank, so the whole church piled into rented school buses, and we all drove to Brooklyn where I was baptized at the first Italian Baptist Church of Brooklyn.

When I was a young pastor, a family had so many people coming for a Baptism, we had to schedule an extra service. When that little baby got baptized, 300 relatives and friends flew in from across America. It was a big deal.

In my career, people have skipped work, left hospital beds, canceled business trips, missed sports events, come home from college and the Army just to be at a baby's Baptism. Once, in Africa, I baptized 500 people in one day, the entire village had canceled everything to be there—beautiful gates made of fresh palms were erected at riverside for all the baptized candidates to walk through on their way to the river. It was a way of saying, "This is a big deal!" Baptismal gowns are passed down from generation to generation, water is brought over from the Jordan River in Israel, grandparents are flown across the country, family parties are held after the Baptism, bigger than Christmas because Baptism is really a big deal.

I wonder how many of you read the book *Roots*. I remember when it was serialized on TV. It was a stunning and captivating story of one African-American family from all the way back to village life in Africa to slavery in America to freedom itself. There is a wonderful story early in the book when the main character, Kunta Kinte, is born in Africa. And his father picks the little baby, walks outside their mud hut, lifts the baby up to the heavens, and declares to the baby, "Behold, the only thing greater than yourself," pointing to God, pointing the source of all creation, the baby begins life learning, "Behold, the only thing greater than yourself."

What a promise to make to a child! But, you know, we do that here. We'll do it again in just a moment. After each baby is baptized, after the parents and godparents and all of us have made some big promises, we always bring the babies to the center aisle. We stop, and we pray a big prayer about the amazing gifts God has given each child. Because at every Baptism I look at that little bundle of life in my arms, and I see the next President of the United States, the next center fielder for the Yankees, the next breakthrough

medical researcher for our sicknesses, the next businessperson with a big idea, the next missionary to take America higher, and the next hope for humanity, the next great mom or dad, the next church pastor who will lead our little Christian faith back to strength.

I see greatness. When we put our hands on the heads of the teenagers in last week's confirmation, I felt greatness. In a few weeks, we will have our high school seniors up here, sending them off to college, off to greatness. I see that because week after week, we see families choosing the decision to link life and faith, to take the greatness of faith into the greatness of life.

Before I came to Fairfield, I was a pastor in the Berkshires in Western Massachusetts. Our church was on TV, live every Sunday, and on tape all week long. I did a lot of prison ministry up there, and late one Saturday night, I got a phone call from jail. A young man was scheduled to get out the next morning, and he wanted to come directly to church and be baptized. So I rushed to church, turned on the faucet to fill the tank. "Why?" I asked, "why the rush?" "Because it's a big deal," he told me. "You're on TV all week long. I want everybody to see it, the whole city, everybody who knew the old me; I want them to see I am a new man. This is a big deal."

It was then, and it is now. It was for the Ethiopian, is for our three boys today. It is our declaration that these boys are new life. This is a new day, a good day for great day for our church and our world.

"Look, there's the water! Let's do some baptizing!"