

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Stirred: New Life on the Desert Road

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Can we take a moment to honor and celebrate our artists in our NCC community? I mean come on from, from the band that ushers us into the presence of God every week to the creatives that make these trailers that awaken our hearts and our minds and our imaginations to engage the text, our sculptors, our dancers, our singers, our writers, our graphic designers, we see the gift of God in you and we honor it.

I love that the first person we find in the book, or in the scriptures that is filled with the Holy Spirit is an artist by the name of Bezalel. You guys usher us into the presence of God in a unique way. So keep being stirred by the Spirit.

Also, Happy Mother's Day weekend. Hi, mom. Thank you for being a part of the online NCC campus. I appreciate the way you encouraged my creativity, whether it was enduring all those shows at Playhouse in the Park or enduring my science experiments in the kitchen. Thank you. I love you.

Thanks for letting me have that personal moments. One of the core convictions we have here at NCC is that the church ought to be the most creative place on the planet. And that creativity is not just limited to the arena of the arts. We need creative redemptive solutions from the heart of God in every arena, every vocation, every sphere of influence, every dimension of life. We need creativity in business. We need creativity in education. We need creativity in the halls of Congress. We need creativity in our homes as parents. And that creativity comes when we listen to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit. It's a nudge. It's a prompting. It's an idea in our gut.

Last weekend, Pastor Mark open the Stirred series and gave us I know pneumatology 101. I mean we learned last weekend that the Holy Spirit is hovering over the chaos of our lives. He is animating new life. He is anointing and appointing. We find out that the Holy Spirit is revealing and healing and sealing. He is comforting and counseling and convicting The Holy Spirit is guiding and gifting and fruiting and he is stirring.

If you have your Bibles with you this weekend, go ahead and turn over to Acts chapter eight. And I'm going to orient us to where we are in the story. So, Jesus walks out of a grave and says, "*Go to Jerusalem and wait for the filling of the Holy Spirit.*" And the disciples go to Jerusalem and they wait and the Holy Spirit comes and fills them and the day of Pentecost happens. Peter stands up and declares the words of Jesus and 3,000 people are saved and baptized in one day. And then the disciples begin to walk in the ways of Jesus, and people are healed and people are delivered. And the Lord is adding to their number daily, those who are being saved. And the disciples say, we're going to join on the mission

of Jesus to bring the kingdom of shalom to the world, and then that confronts the kingdom of Empire, and the church is persecuted, and the disciples begin to scatter. And one disciple, one follower of Jesus by the name of Philip, he's one of the ones that is chosen in Acts six to serve the church, Philip goes to Samaria. And Peter and John join him there and revival breaks out. When we read through the book of Acts, we find that these followers of Jesus are moved by the Holy Spirit. And as they are, it is one miracle after another, one adventure after another as they respond to one stirring after another. But by the time we get to Acts eight, the good news has gone from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and we pick it up and Acts eight, verse 26.

And here we read, "Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, *"Go south, to the road - the desert road - that goes down from Jerusalem, to Gaza."* Alright, so Philip is in Samaria with his friends. Peter and John, they're preaching, they're seeing people healed, and delivered and saved and revival is breaking out. If your calling in life is to preach the gospel and see God move, this is the place to be. This is where it's exciting. This is where you want to pitch your tent and live. Except he's nudged to then go south to the road, the desert road that goes down from Jerusalem, to Gaza. Leave Samaria the pinnacle of revival to go to the desert road.

Now, let's take a look at a map so we can get our bearings on this. So, if you follow that green line up all the way to the point, you find that Samaria that's where all of the good stuff is happening. That's where the fun stuff is happening. But Philip is told to leave there to come back down to Jerusalem, and then pick up that brown line that is going southwest to Gaza, the desert road. There is nothing there. And here's the deal. This is a very specific command. It's also a very absurd command. It doesn't make any sense. It seems like God is telling Philip, move away from the move of God, not closer towards it.

Now here's the deal, when God gives crazy commands like this to us, or let's just leave the crazy out of it God just gives us simple commands. We always want to know why, where, the reason, the destination. We want God to give us a sneak peek at the next steps. But here's the deal, that is not safe. That is factfinding to determine if we want to follow or not. We are not given the direction of God for our consideration, our deliberation or our negotiation, but activation. Pastor Mark says it best he says, "Faith is being willing to take the first step before God shows us the second step." Philip was in tune enough with the voice of God to be trusted with this very specific direction. And he was committed enough to his relationship with Jesus to bend his will, to bend his priorities, to bend his preferences and opinions to move in obedience with that direction.

Alright, let's keep reading verse 27. *"So we started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake, (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah, the prophet."*

Alright, we aren't given this man's name, but we're given more information about him than just about any other character in the book of Acts. We learned very quickly three things about him.

- First he is Ethiopian
- he is a eunuch,
- and he is a high ranking official in a very important, wealthy Empire.

So first, he's an Ethiopian. And at this point in history, this would have been the kingdom of Morea, it would have been the biblical Cush. It would have spanned from modern day Aswan to Khartoum. And this story would have fascinated first century Greek and Roman audiences, because according to Homer's Odyssey, the Greeks and the Romans believed that people from this place were living on the very south edge of the World. Now, scholars debate this man's relationship with Judaism. Was he a member of the Jewish diaspora? Was he a proselyte, a convert to Judaism? Or was he a Gentile, God fearer.

Now, for a lot of reasons that I can't go into right at this moment my personal opinion is that he was a Gentile, God fearer. But at the end of the day, it really doesn't matter because we also learn that he was a eunuch, which put him in a very similar category as the Gentile. It limited his ability to worship in the temple in Jerusalem. During this period of history, courts would often castrate young boys in preparation to serve in the royal courts, particularly if they were serving female leaders. Because it removes sexual temptation and it avoided power plays, to try to father an heir to the throne. And so this eunuch is coming to Jerusalem, but this is what's crazy. According to Deuteronomy 23:1 eunuchs were considered unclean and unable to enter the temple in Jerusalem.

Finally, he's a high ranking official. He is the treasurer. He is a man of great importance, a man of great influence, in a very wealthy and influential kingdom.

Then we learn two more things about him.

- One, we learned that he has gone to Jerusalem to worship. Now, the making of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem was significant for anybody. I mean, very devout, pious Jews that lived in the vicinity, might only go to Jerusalem once in their entire lives. And yet this man is so devoted to the God of Israel, that he will make a 1,500 mile journey just to get inside the court of the Gentiles. He is not even able to enter into the full presence of God. And yet, he is so desperate to get as close to God as possible that he will make this very lengthy and expensive journey.
- Secondly, we find out that he has an Isaiah scroll. Old Testament scrolls were incredibly rare. They were very expensive. In fact, a town might own one set of scrolls or a partial set of scrolls that were stored in the synagogue to be shared by the entire village. And yet this man has invested his resources and is dedicating his time to the study of Isaiah. This Ethiopian eunuch royal official has gone to Jerusalem and is dedicated to the text and yet he's an outsider. He has no hope of ever being in, no hope for having a seat at the table, no hope for becoming a full fledged member of the family of God.

Okay, that was a lot so let's review really fast or let me sum up. So we meet Phillip. Phillip's in Samaria he's leading revival. God gives him this crazy command, move away from the move of God go to the desert road and Philip is obedient. He's willing to take the first step in faith before God shows him the second step. And then we encounter an Ethiopian eunuch who has such devotion to God that he makes a very lengthy, a very expensive journey to Jerusalem, and his dedication to God is shown in his possession of a scroll of the book of Isaiah.

All right, we pick up the story, and I gotta find my place. Ah, verse 29, *“The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you're reading?” Philip asked. “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.”*

All right, when I'm reading scripture, I'll often make little comments and notes in the margins of things that I'm just noticing. And here are three things that I notice in this part of the passage. And this is for people that say that we're followers of Jesus, it's just some thoughts on how we engage people when we talk about our faith.

- The first thing I wrote down was proximity. The Holy Spirit told Philip, go get close to the chariot. Get close enough to listen.
- The second thing I wrote down was curiosity. So, Philip engages this man, he can tell he's very wealthy, he's very influential. And he hears him reading the scroll of Isaiah. But Philip doesn't launch with a sermon. He doesn't launch with apologetics. He doesn't default to his settings of how he led a revival in Samaria. He doesn't start assuming the guy even needs his help. And he doesn't start answering questions that the man isn't asking. He leads with curiosity. He just asks, “Do you understand?”
- He offered the gift of proximity, he offered the gift of curiosity, and he offered the gift of presence. It says he, *“The man invited Philip to come up and sit with him.”* We underestimate the value of simply being with. And I also wonder what Philip's comfort level was being with someone who was considered unclean and unable to enter the presence of God in the temple in Jerusalem.

By the way, this gift of proximity and curiosity and presence, that's our alpha course. It is not too late to sign up. If you have questions about faith. This is a safe place for you to ask questions in the context of a community that is exploring together. And so if you just take a moment, I think we've got some information on the screen, sign up for alpha.

Let's keep going. Verse 32, *“This is the passage of scripture the eunuch was reading: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.” The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself, or*

*someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.*" So, he's reading this section of the Isaiah scroll, that Philip is able to begin telling about the life and teachings of Jesus, about the death and resurrection of Jesus, the fulfillment of Jesus, in the prophetic words of this passage.

Now, here's what's tempting for us to do in our Western 21st century reading habits, we read this passage, and then we just keep going. Good news about Jesus, and then we skip right to the baptism point. But here's what I want to encourage us to do, whenever we find places in the New Testament that are quoting the Old Testament, go back to the Old Testament and see what they say in context. Because what we find in Isaiah 53 is all of this talk about humility and the suffering servant and the sacrifice these prophetic words that Jesus fulfills. But here's the deal in that man's Isaiah scroll, he didn't have the chapter delineations that we have today. So it is very likely that Philip just continued on in his explanation, and went to Isaiah 54 that declares that the sin offering that Jesus made is not just for the Jewish people, but for all nations. He probably continued on to Isaiah 55 when it says, *"All who are thirsty, come to Jesus."*

And then probably got to Isaiah 56 and we're going to put it up and look at it, because otherwise you won't believe it. Isaiah 56 verse three, *"Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely exclude me from his people." And let no eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree." For this is what the Lord says: To the eunuchs who came my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant - to them I will give within my temple and its walls, a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever."* What? It's like that was written for this very moment, hundreds of years before Philip and this man have this God encounter on the desert road.

The Holy Spirit moved the prophet Isaiah to pen these words. 1,000's of years before this moment, God had said to Abraham, I am going to bless you, and I will make you a great nation and through you, all the nations of the earth will be blessed. And then hundreds of years before this moment, he stirs the prophet Isaiah, to say the eunuch gets in. And not only do they get in, but they are sons and daughters, and they have a place of honor in my temple, and my presence is no longer a destination to get to, but it fills you. And Jesus made it happen. Jesus makes a way for the foreigner. He makes a way for the outsider. He makes way for those on the margins. It was God's plan from the very beginning. And Jesus made it possible.

Okay, back to Acts eight, verse 36. *"As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both 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 suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea."* No, those last

couple verses are another sermon for another day but I read them now to whet your appetite, in hopes that you will go to the text to read it for yourself.

In this moment, the eunuch cannot go into the ritual cleansing pools in the temple in Jerusalem, but Jesus invites him into the waters of baptism. Great moves of the Spirit often begin with small steps of obedience. And small does not mean easy. It rarely means easy. It means messy. It means taking a step out of comfort and convenience, to go down a desert road or to step into the waters of baptism. It means for some of you a willingness to leave what is new and exciting to follow the Spirit's direction down the desert road. It's a willingness to jump into a chariot and get close to someone to offer them proximity and curiosity and presence and to listen well. For some of you it's a step that begins with bending a knee and saying Jesus, I accept your invitation to be a member of your family. I surrender to the Lordship of Jesus; I'll step into the waters of baptism.

I want to invite our worship team to come back. And I'm going to go my old school Baptist background self and I'm going to make two invitations today. For some of you there's a Philip decision that needs to be made. I want to invite you to make an altar where ever you are. For those of us that are joining from our living rooms, would you just pause right now, get on your knees, make an altar right where you are. For those of us that are with us live as the band leads us in a moment, I want to encourage you to just quiet your heart and your spirit and ask the Holy Spirit. What is the nudge? What is the stirring? What is the prompting that you want to give me because the Holy Spirit is always speaking? The question is, are we listening?

And listen, I want to make this really easy. I want you to ask the Holy Spirit, two questions. Who is someone that needs a word of encouragement? Who is someone that needs a word of hope? And then just listen and see what adventure the answer to that question takes you on.

And then some of you here today, need to make the same decision that Ethiopian UNIQ made. Maybe you feel like you're an outsider. Maybe you feel like you are on the margins. Maybe you feel like the good news is not good enough for you or your situation. Maybe you believe there is something about you that Jesus would never be able to love. I'm telling you today that Jesus paid it all for you. The cross makes all the difference. Jesus made a way for you. He gives you a seat at the table. He invites you into the family of God. His sacrifice on the cross, paid the ransom, it canceled the debt and sin is forgiven. But he didn't stay on the cross he walked out of the grave. And in his resurrection is the power that defeats the dead things in your life, breaks the chains of oppression and bondage and guilt and shame and also gives you a new identity. He transforms you into Christ's likeness, and invites you to participate in his mission of bringing the kingdom of shalom to the world of seeing his father's kingdom come and will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

And your next step like this man is to step into the waters of baptism. Now, it's small for me to say that but it may not be easy for you to activate that. But here's the deal. Baptism is the opportunity for you to

say, I am all in. I am a child of the king. I am no longer on the margins, but I am fully in. The presence of God has filled my life and I will bow my will and my preferences and my opinions to the rule and reign of Jesus in my life. And I commit to partner in his mission to bring peace to the world. If you would right now go to [ncc.re/baptism](http://ncc.re/baptism) we're going to celebrate baptisms towards the end of this series and we would love to be a part of that journey with you.

Now you may not be quite ready to make that decision maybe you're like the Ethiopian eunuch a little earlier in the story who has a lot of questions. If that's you, I want to encourage you to go to [ncc.re/followJesus](http://ncc.re/followJesus), because we want to come alongside you. We want to encourage you; we want to pray for you. And we want to answer the questions that you are asking. Would you follow Jesus today? Do not wait for what you feel like is the right moment. Be like this man and say what is keeping me? There is nothing keeping you today. Follow Jesus. Follow Jesus. Follow Jesus.

Holy Spirit, we pray that you would come open our ears to hear your commands. Soften our hearts, to sense your stirrings and we will follow you in Jesus name. Amen.