

“A New Power (Is Weak the New Strong?)”
Acts 8:9-13 and Isaiah 43:1-5a

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

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Note: The January sermons are all based on the actions declared by Jesus in his Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) which says: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.* Today’s sermon is on the Greek work which means “to baptize.”

Lesson background: The earliest church – those first followers of Jesus – were beginning to experience persecution living in a predominantly Jewish culture under Roman rule. One officer of the church – Stephen, a Deacon – had been stoned to death because of his faith. And other Christians were being dragged out of their homes and thrown into jail for what *they* believed.¹

But instead of making the Early Church afraid, the persecution energized many of them. There was another Deacon named Philip who went out into the region called Samaria (where the Good Samaritan had lived.) And he was so fired up that he found himself empowered to do things he had never done before. He not only preached. He also exorcised demons, and healed the lame and paralyzed. It was here in Samaria where our NT Lesson takes place.

Let us listen for God’s Word to us.

We used to have a magician living in our neighborhood. He was actually quite famous, starring in some of those cheesy television specials they show in the dead of summer or on Thanksgiving eve when very few people are watching television. He didn’t have a fancy stage name like “David the Dazzler” or “The Amazing Williamson.” But he performed for both the great and small – once for Princess Stephanie in Monaco in 2004 and once for the children of Fairlington Presbyterian Church right down the hall in our nursery.²

When he was here, the children were happy to have him pull quarters out of their ears. But he once wowed a roomful of IBM executives when he produced a live donkey on stage at their annual meeting during one particular trick.³

¹ See Acts 7:58-60 and Acts 8:3.

² David Williamson donated a performance to FPC’s Fall Fun Fair in October 1996.

³ Williamson, now living in Ohio, has starred in television shows like ABC’s Prime Time Special “Champions of Magic.” He has received many “best magician” awards by his peers.

But therein lies the difference between a magician like David Williamson and a magician like Simon of Samaria. In *the first century*, so-called magicians were considered *real miracle makers*. We are not told the *specifics* of Simon's amazing feats: Did he turn the sand into salt? Could he *even* turn water into wine?

All we know is that everyone – from the least to the greatest listened to him. And this is what they said about him:

“This man is the power of God.”

Not: This man has God's power. But: This man is God's power. He must have put on an impressive show. But that's all it was: a show.

And then along came Philip, a follower of Jesus, who had no tricks up his sleeve. All he had was a profound faith that allowed him to do things he never imagined he would be able to do. As he was preaching in Samaria, there was something about Philip's proclamations that made people discover **A New Power**.

It was a Power that was real.

But it was also a power that was different from anything they'd witnessed before. Instead of merely being amazed at a magic-maker, the people were moved into action. They had to do something! First, they wanted to be baptized.

Now being baptized was not an act of power. It was not a magic trick that would make them capable of leaping tall buildings with a single bound or casting a spell upon their enemies.

One did not expect to be splashed with holy water or immersed in the river and rise up with the power to conquer the world! In fact, the word “baptize” in Greek literally means ***“to be whelmed.”*** To be overcome with water.

We don't usually use the word “whelmed.” We hear the word ***“overwhelmed”*** as in: *I am overwhelmed at the office.*

I am overwhelmed at home. The baby isn't sleeping and I'm so exhausted I can't do anything.

I'm drowning in debt!

I'm swamped with school work!

I am overcome with grief. (All meaning: "I'm overwhelmed.)

The words "whelmed" and "overwhelmed" actually mean the same thing. They are one of those strange pairs in the English language like "flammable" and "inflammable." Two similar words that are defined the same way.

To be "whelmed" or to be "overwhelmed" by water is the literal meaning of the Greek word "to baptize." But water isn't the only thing that overwhelms us in baptism. We believe that the Holy Spirit overwhelms us, overcomes us, overtakes us. We might not feel anything but wet in baptism. But we believe that something powerful and holy washes over us in that moment of submission. And it continues to give us power as we learn, in life's journey, to relinquish our own will and submit to God's will.

And that's what we are doing in baptism. It's not merely a sentimental moment in which we are touched by the cuteness of a baby or the courage of an adult to willingly stand in front of other adults and be subjected to this humbling moment.

No, baptism is powerful in that we are confessing our weakness before God. We are confessing that we are in utter and complete need of God's power because our own power is flimsy and limited. Parents are promising to hand over their children so that God's purposes (not their own purposes) might be lived out.

The apostle Paul put it this way in talking about Jesus: "He was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but . . . we will live with him by God's power."⁴

Or in the words of another great preacher, "Weak is the new strong." I mentioned Rob Bell last Sunday, and have to mention him again today, because of the perfect refrain from one of his sermons. In talking about the power of Jesus, Bell says this: "Swords appear strong, but they're actually quite weak. Jesus appears weak, but he's actually quite strong."

"Weak is the new strong."

God's is an upside down kingdom in which "weak is the new strong"⁵ just like "lime green is the new black" or so we were told by designers last summer. Weak is the new strong. Poor is the new rich. Death is the course we take to get to abundant life.

Of course, we live in an area where strength and might are highly valued. Washington is rich with tough military leaders and powerful political leaders and big-time business leaders.

⁴ See Paul's 2nd letter to the Church in Corinth. 2 Corinthians 13:4.

⁵ From an article in *Christianity Today* (November 12, 2004) about Rob Bell and Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

And we ourselves might act like tough guys, strong and confident people who can weather any storm or withstand any pressure. But let's be honest here: trials and tribulations take their toll on us. They are a part of everybody's life, and it's always been this way.

When the ancient prophet Isaiah spoke of God's word to us, notice that he did not say:

"If you pass through the waters . . .

"If you walk through fire . . . I will be with you.

God says, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you." Wow.

There's that word again: overwhelm.

The truth is that people *do* become overwhelmed by the waters. Ask the residents of the Gulf Coast. Almost 2000 people died as a result of Hurricane Katrina. Most of those drowned, but many had heart attacks or strokes from the stress of it all.

Ask the 300,000 families who lost their homes. They were literally overcome by the waters.

And not only do thousands become overwhelmed by fires each year (hundreds have lost their homes in wildfires throughout the Western Plains just this past week), but God refers to "walking through fire" here.

It is recognition that life presents times when we don't just become overwhelmed by fire; sometimes we find ourselves having to walk through those flames, at least figuratively.

I'm talking about times of burning betrayal and injustice and physical agony. Times when we are going through hell at work, or in relationships, or with personal demons that taunt us and burn us over and over again.

God doesn't suggest that being overwhelmed might happen. It will happen. Being a baptized believer who was once "whelmed" in water doesn't protect us from being "whelmed" by other forces later in life. But what it does mean is that, like the children of Israel, we have hope:

- God has called us by name,
- God loves us so much he would trade *nations* for us
- God considers us precious and honored

- God loves us.
- God will not leave us even in the worst of times.

In baptism, we are not protected from the powers of evil and randomness. But we are given a new power that actually is made stronger in weakness. The weaker we are, the more awesome God's power becomes in us. Because it's clear that it's not us. We are not the strong ones. It's God's power in us that makes us able to do what we never imagined we could do.

Even Simon the magician, we are told, was so amazed by Philip's great power that he, too, asked to be baptized. The amazing became amazed.

But Simon just didn't get it.

Note to all of us who think baptism is like magic: That the water touches our tender heads and suddenly the angels sing and the heavens open and we become spiritual rock stars. It doesn't happen that way.

OR Note to parents who consider baptism for their children a must even though they have no intention of raising them in the church, as if to fulfill some family requirement or superstition: that if there is anything to this religion thing, they'll be covered. Doesn't work that way.

Baptism is our invitation into the family of faith. In baptism, we are welcomed into God's family.

But if we don't honestly seek to be disciples of Jesus, studying and practicing and choosing to live a new way of life, we might find ourselves stuck in a spiritual place in which we never change and life never changes.

Simon was baptized but he never really changed. He continued to live as if the world was all about him. He tried to buy the ability to pass the power of the Holy Spirit to others. He still wanted to be The Amazing One, The One with the Power.

If we want to be The Amazing Ones, the ones that makes everybody stop and gape at when we walk into the room, then we are in the wrong place.

But if we realize that we need some help living this life, if we know we are weak then there is great hope for a power we cannot fathom

- the power to overcome the most hideous temptation,
- the power bring something positive out of even the worst catastrophe,
- the power to destroy something as insidious and subtle as racism,
- to power to share this hope with others,

- the power to heal the lame and paralyzed.

This is the power of God, and we will never have it without God. But the wondrous thing is that even when we are weak, we are strong.

In Jesus' great commission, the disciples are told to go out and baptize others who wish to be disciples. And therein lies the difference. We are called not only to be a part of God's family. We are also called to bring others into God's family. Today, let us baptisms and all that baptism means.

Let us pray: You are the power, gracious God, and you are the One who truly amazes. Instill in us this truth, through Jesus Christ, our LORD. Amen

The baptistery of the Church of the Virgin Mary, Ephesus (built in the 4th century.)

