

**“Not Quite There”**  
**Acts 8:4-25**  
**The Rev. Dr. Rob Joy**  
**Grace Church**  
**Columbiana, Ohio**  
**January 9, 2022**  
**Baptism of the Lord Sunday**

I have a fascination with exploring and preaching on Bible passages, in and out of the suggested lectionary, I have never explored nor preached upon. Today’s suggested lectionary passage from Acts is one such example. Maybe I’m bored with passages I have worked on, sometimes, three or four times over my career. Some passages we visit and revisit every year. Every Christmas I always find something to say about Luke chapter 2. That seems easy, but often, for many other passages in the three year cycle of suggested texts, it is not a piece of cake for me. There are passages that I haven’t explored, and some of them bore me. If I’m bored, that is not good news for you.

This one from Acts did *not* bore me and it caught my attention as a bit strange and mysterious. It is concerned with baptism, and it is the Baptism of the Lord Sunday after all, but it involves one who is a practitioner of magic. Is that sleight of hand tricks? Probably not. Magic, in a religious sense, is the use of any means such as charms or spells, magic rituals or incantations believed to have influential and supernatural power over natural forces. Voodoo would be a type of magic. Putting pins in a doll representing the person to cause harm would be sympathetic magic. What type of magic Simon tried to practice, I don’t know, but I suspect Simon was into some strange stuff that impressed the locals. He had a reputation around town.

Now, this is a caution for Christians. Do we Christians practice magic? Do we try to practice magic? Not that we call it that. But I have seen some Christians practice prayer like it was magic. You name it and claim it and God gives it and that settles it. Is that trying to have influence over a supernatural power? I think it is or is at least some people use it that way. I did this, so now God has to do this. That’s manipulation. I think it is fine to ask God for blessings and certainly for the things we need. But we don’t control God or God’s angels at all. We are only granted blessings through God’s grace. You don’t earn a blessing through sincerely praying or believing enough. We are given blessings. Why? Simply because God loves us. We *never ever* earn them. I know. I’ll never build my TV empire saying such things.

We just covered last week, the story of the wisemen, the Magi, who came from the east to Jerusalem to find the baby Jesus in Matthew 2:1. Our story today concerns a man named Simon, in chapter 8:9, who had practiced sorcery in the city

of Samaria. The Greek words for Magi and the phrase “practiced sorcery” is closely related: *magoi* for “wisemen,” and *mageuon* for “practiced sorcery,” using the same root. We don’t want to draw too much from this, as we don’t know exactly what either magi or sorcerers did. It’s the dark arts because it is partially, if not all, hidden from us. But any readers from almost several millennia ago would have heard echoes from hearing about the Magi in Matthew 2, and now Simon the Sorcerer here in Luke’s second book. They would ask, like we do, “What’s goin’ on?”

What’s goin’ on when we meet God in Jesus is that everything changes. For the magi, the wisemen, when we read, “and they returned to their country by another route” it could be, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, that their old maps and ways of finding directions, did not work anymore. They had to walk a new path in life and to make their way home. The same happens to us when we meet Jesus. The same old things and ways don’t always work anymore and we have to go a different way. The writer T. S. Eliot says that means even for the wisemen, the old ways of treating people and things made them uncomfortable and they *had* to change.

However, the old ways and paths can still be very attractive to try to follow again even to we who have been baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection. A Samaritan man named Simon had a problem with his old ways, *even after baptism*. Those old ways cling to him and pull on him. Our old ways might pull on us too, *even after baptism*. If that is so, you are not at all alone.

Simon is a legend in his own mind. Because of the impressive power he displays in his practice of magic, he thinks he is a god himself, or at least one of god’s representatives on earth. Wow. That’s a guy with a big head. I’ve known ministers with big heads before, thinking they were God’s own quarterback. But this is even more than that.

As impressive as Simon’s sorcery is to his Samaritan country-folks, what the Living God does through the Apostle Philip, impresses them even more.

The first persecution of the Early Church has scattered the followers of Christ far and wide, yet you couldn’t shut them up. They continue to tell the story of Jesus, of his love, his teachings, his miracles, his death and resurrection. With this life-changing message Philip made his way to the city of Samaria.

In Samaria Philip’s preaching of God’s kingdom and Jesus’ name so amazes the Samaritans that they want to be baptized. It’s a big movement of the Spirit. But, if we were among the first readers of this book of Acts, Simon the Sorcerer would have been voted “least likely to become a baptized follower of Jesus.” The Samaritans, themselves, were not folks most would pick to be baptized. They weren’t good, trustworthy Jews. They were as unorthodox as they came. They were practically Gentiles and were considered by the orthodox Jews, on the religious scale, to be close to pagans.

Being a Samaritan and being a sorcerer gave Simon two strikes against him already. Have you ever been mistrustful of someone, suspicious, maybe for good reason, maybe not, but there it is. You don't trust this person as far as you could throw her or him. Simon was a Samaritan, of whom all good Jews were suspicious, but he was also a sorcerer, a practitioner of magic, of which Jewish law was most critical, even garnering the most condemnation.

Yet, as the Channel 3 Samaritan News Team pulls up and jumps off their chariot, and the action cam scopes out the odd crowd all lined up for Christian baptism by Philip, an odd sight in itself, who is standing in line? Simon the Sorcerer of all people! Simon knows real power when he sees it. Simon might not know exactly from where it comes, but one thing Simon knows: Philip has it. And Simon wants it. Simon apparently not only believes what Philip is saying as he preaches the gospel message, he follows Philip all around and soaks up watching all these miracles, and signs, and healings.

Then this passage gets *even weirder*. Our author, Luke, insists that Simon and the other Samaritans' baptism is somehow incomplete. Peter and John arrive from denomination headquarters in Jerusalem, to see what's goin' on. It says they pray that the Samaritan converts will receive the Holy Spirit "because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them: they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus." In other words, the Samaritans believed and had been baptized, yet they somehow hadn't yet received the Holy Spirit. They weren't quite there yet.

This might lead some of us to worry about our own baptisms. "Wait a minute! I was baptized! Maybe I didn't get the Holy Spirit?! Do I need to see a *real* Spirit-filled apostle of the Lord and be baptized for real this time?" No. Worry not, good Christian. Have faith, not fear. In 1 Corinthians 12:3 we have advice on this topic. If you, like the Samaritans, have already professed that "Jesus is Lord," (and can you say that even now? "*Jesus is Lord!*") then you already have received the Spirit. So relax. Paul said no one can say "Jesus is Lord" who does not *already* have the Spirit of God. That's also one of the litmus tests for demon possession, by the way. If the person can say, "Jesus is Lord" that person is not possessed.

But all the things of faith are not always as cut and dried as they might seem. Something about this mass baptism, and how the people are behaving, interacting, living, maybe, makes the apostles, Peter and John, wonder whether or not these Samaritans *had* received the Spirit. Maybe they seemed not quite as faithful, or maybe they didn't show signs that the Spirit was in them, as others had. We don't know because it doesn't say. Specifically, Simon's reaction seems to support their suspicion. Simon wants to *buy the Spirit*. Simon wants to play, "Let's make a deal!" But we're all smarter than that, aren't we? You *can't* buy the Spirit. You can't "make a deal" in this way. He wants to have, and pass onto others what the

Apostles Peter and John have and pass onto others when they lay hands on the followers of Jesus in Samaria. Peter corrects him severely. You can easily imagine the impulsive, emotional Peter shouting, “You want to buy the Spirit? Your heart is not right! You’ll have no part in this ministry until you repent of this wickedness!” It scares Simon. He doesn’t want to perish with his money. Simon begs Peter to pray for him that judgement will *not* fall on him. I like to picture that this brought Simon around and made him a better man and humble disciple. Whatever happened to Simon the Sorcerer? We don’t know. The scriptures don’t mention him again. He disappears.

In life we will meet people who may believe profoundly. But they believe profoundly wrong. Their wrong belief leads them into catastrophic consequences. I have heard some well-meaning supposed people of faith say it, but they are wrong. They say, “I don’t care what you believe. Whatever you believe is fine, as long as you believe it strongly, with all your heart!” Remember the Heaven’s Gate cult? They followed the teachings of their leaders. They were waiting for the closest approach of Comet Hale-Bopp. When it was closest to the earth, 39 members committed mass suicide so they could shed their human bodies and catch a ride on the comet in what they supposed was the next stage in human evolution. It doesn’t take a master’s in theology to know they believed profoundly and catastrophically *wrong*.

The practice of magic is a cult. There are many cults in America. Some of the identifying marks of a cult are these: 1.) They are authoritarian and will treat you like you can’t think for yourself. They are the only ones with “the real truth.” Friends, you are Americans. You may think and believe as you wish or makes sense to you. 2.) Almost always there’s a living human leader who demands total loyalty. 3.) They emphasize the importance of feelings and emotions in religious experience. Often anti-intellectual. Don’t think, feel. Sorry. Jesus came to take away our sins, not our brains. 4.) They require behavioral and belief conformity from their members. There is no freedom and variety of belief allowed. 5.) Often they teach a religion that is concealed. There’s an inner group with the complete truth that nobody else has. Scientology is big on that. 6.) There are no professional clergy who have been trained, vetted, approved, and at least somewhat overseen by others. Those are the major marks of a cult. If you or someone you know, a friend or family member is involved in a questionable group, talk to me about it.

Simon was in a cult of magic. He wanted to be the only leader in his town. When he lost the people’s adoration to Philip, he tried to get it back by doing what Philip did, but he was unable. The Spirit, through the apostles, Philip, Peter, and John, would not gift him in that way. Probably they never did. It may have been too tempting for Simon to abuse the gift of passing on the Holy Spirit to others.

On any given Sunday, there are many people like Simon with a set of beliefs already in place, but they want more. They hunger for a *profound religious experience*. Many leaders of churches try to give a “profound religious experience” through creating an emotional moment in worship. But merely stirring up emotions is not at all the same as a spiritual experience. The two can be easy to confuse. A spiritual experience, no matter where you have it, is often emotional, but an emotional experience is not often a spiritual experience. Please be leery and suspicious of those who like to stir up emotions in a religious setting.

In the end, I have hope for Simon, the former sorcerer. What apostle dealt with him at the end? Peter. Peter followed a Jesus who was patient and persistent with him. So Peter is patient and persistent with Simon. Peter invites a misguided man to prayerfully turn from his sin, and turn toward the Living God in the person of Jesus Christ. The call of the gospel is compelling. I think Simon eventually fully receives God’s grace and surrenders to a wholehearted faith in Christ.

For the Apostles, the Book of Acts moves quickly to expand the scope of the gospel. Peter and John preach the gospel throughout Samaria on their way back to Jerusalem. Philip preaches that same gospel successfully to a traveling emissary of the Ethiopian crown. Yet before Christians hurry on with those apostles to the rest of the world, we should never forget that there are Simon’s around us who still seem to dangle between faith and unbelief, who kind of get the Christian faith partially right, but goof up critically on other parts. Some of them are in hot water with how mixed up they might be and hover between eternal life and eternal death. We cannot leave them there. *We have Good News*. We dare not keep it to ourselves.

Do you like *The Father Brown Mysteries*? I always liked that when he confronted the criminal, while he couldn’t remove the legal consequences of the criminal’s actions, he gave him an opportunity to confess his sins, repent, and get right with God, for the sake of his own soul. Friends, there is forgiveness. There is redemption. Life can be better. Life can even be an adventure with the Lord Jesus. Amen.