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The Source of Sorcery
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I don't know about you, but magic tricks like the ones Andy just did for us drive me crazy. It really bugs me that I can't figure out how they are done. It bugs me that I can't see when they hid the card, or switched the handkerchief or put something up their sleeve. I mean I KNOW that there is a trick to it. And I know that there is a logical, rational explanation for it. But I can't figure it out.

Then there is the part of me that doesn't want to know. I ENJOY being baffled by magic. I ENJOY the surprise and the "NO WAY" effect. Watching a good magician is watching an artist at work. Andy works very hard at being good at his skill. In fact, he told us that he spends 10 hours practicing on every 10 seconds he performs. That's why it is so cool. That's why it is not easily copied. And that's why it WOWs us.

There is a difference though between illusion, which Andy just shared with us, and the supernatural stuff. People have been fascinated with supernatural stuff for a long time – for thousands of years, as we see throughout the Bible. We hear of God using supernatural events all through the Bible - He has turned sticks into snakes and water into blood, he has pushed back raging rivers, crumbled city walls with the sound of trumpets. For 40 years he led the people of Israel in the desert by a pillar of cloud in the day and a pillar of fire in the night. He poured water out of a rock, darkened the sky in the middle of the day and rained down tiny pieces of bread from the sky. Jesus healed lepers, cast out demons and brought sight to the blind! God has performed some pretty amazing miracles!

But why would he do that? What was he trying to prove? Does God just randomly flex his supernatural muscles so that we will tremble in awe at his power? NO! God is trying to get our attention to show us that we can trust him. We can trust him with our lives because he is powerful, and we can trust him because he loves us. God uses supernatural miracles to encourage us to follow him.

We are starting a new series for the summer called God...Bigger than my Box. God is bigger than we realize in every way possible, and today I want to talk to you about how God's power is bigger than we can imagine. Big enough to trust.

Let's pray. God, thank you for this morning. As we wake up each morning to your creation, we see how big you are. We can say along with King David of Israel, "The Heavens declare your glory, the skies declare the work of your hand." God, we need you to be big for us this morning – bigger than the box we try and keep you in. I pray that your Spirit would take my simple words, and give them your meaning to each and every person here today. I thank you for being big enough to do that. In Jesus name, Amen.

This morning I want to tell you a story from the book of Acts, which was written to someone kind of like us. Someone who was on a faith journey, and was trying to figure out what it really meant to follow Jesus. The book of Acts was written with the goal of encouraging a friend in their faith. Luke wrote it to a man named Theophilus, who we can piece together from the text

was a Roman official, and had recently decided to follow Jesus Christ. Luke wrote him 2 books – the book of Luke and the book of Acts, and Luke tells him – I wrote these for you –

“It seemed good to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” (Luke 1:3-4 New International Version)

The book of Acts is FULL of reasons to trust God. This morning I want to look at one story of a guy who really struggled with giving up control of his life and trusting God. It is the story of Simon the sorcerer, and it is found in Acts 8:5-24, if you would like to follow along in your Bible. Acts is the 5th book of the New Testament.

Let me give you the quick context. Luke opens the book of Acts with Jesus having risen from his grave, appearing to his disciples, his core followers - meeting with them and talking to them and teaching them. Just before he finally leaves earth to go back to Heaven, he gives the command to go out into all the world, and share his message. This is known as The Great Commission. He basically said go out, tell people the news, baptize them and then teach them to follow me too. The rest of the book documents the work of this growing group of followers as they do just that. So we will pick up in chapter 8, where our story starts with one of these followers named Philip heading off to Samaria to tell people there about Jesus Christ.

Let's go through the whole story and then we can look at it in sections.

Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city.

Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is the divine power known as the Great Power." They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might 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. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin." Then Simon answered, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me." (Acts 8:5-24 New International Version)

There is ton going on in this story, and this morning I want to touch on several key points. First, I want to talk about what "proclaiming the Christ" meant and what role the miracles played in that. Then, we will look at Simon's agenda – what was he up to. And last, we are going to talk about choosing to follow Jesus, and what it means to follow him fully. What it means it trust God completely.

OK – starting with Philip.

Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city. (Acts 8:5-8, New International Version)

So, as soon as Philip gets to this city in Samaria, we have him preaching the word of God, and we have him miraculously healing people and casting out evil spirits. And people paid close attention – which is understandable with all that shrieking going on!

There is a really important thing to remember here – Philip didn't just perform miracles, he preached the word of God, AND performed the miracles. Philip was driven not by knocking off his quota of miracles each day, but by reaching as many people as he could with the Good News of the Kingdom of God. For Luke, whenever he writes "preaching the kingdom of God" or "the name of Jesus Christ", it was shorthand for the gospel message, which is this: Through Jesus' life and death, God has made a way to restore our relationship with him; a relationship that got broken by sin. Jesus command to go out into the world meant that the gospel message was for everyone in the world. God wants a relationship, a real one-on-one relationship with every person in this world, so he needed to do something to make that possible for everyone, and the answer was Jesus. The Bible tells us:

For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23, NIV)

Work hard for sin your whole life and your pension is death. But God's gift is real life, eternal life, delivered by Jesus, our Master. (Romans 6:23, The Message)

So when Philip started performing miracles through the power of God, all those miracles just served to underscore the message he brought. It was like saying, "See! God has power and really wants you to be free! He really loves you and wants you to love him too!" It was God's way of putting his money where his mouth is! Except in the Kingdom economy, love is the currency! And when people understood the message and saw evidence that the message was true, they paid attention to what Philip said.

Someone who also paid attention to Philip was Simon, a sorcerer. As we go to the next part of the story, we learn about him:

**Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, “This man is the divine power known as the Great Power.” They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic.
(Acts 8:9-11, New International Version)**

Luke is deliberately showing the difference between the ministry of Philip and the magic of Simon. They are both supernatural in nature, and both get the attention of the people. But they are very different in a couple of important ways.

First, Luke tells us that Simon was a sorcerer. When Luke said that, he was saying something very specific to Theophilus. We shouldn't misunderstand here. We can't think Mickey Mouse in Fantasia, or Albus Dumbledore in Harry Potter. When Luke uses the words Sorcerer or magician, he was clearly identifying Simon as an agent of Satan, or the Devil. Keep in mind that the early church was a predominantly Jewish community, and that the people of Samaria were distantly of Jewish descent, and carried many of the same Old Testament beliefs as the Jews. The Old Testament teachings prohibited any kind of sorcery, as it is all from Satan.

**The nations you are about to displace consult sorcerers and fortune-tellers, but the LORD your God forbids you to do such things.”
(Deuteronomy 18:14, New Living Translation)**

Simon likely didn't introduce himself as a Sorcerer. Actually, we know he introduced himself as the divine power known as the Great Power! He had no self-esteem issues! But Luke calls him a sorcerer, and by doing that, he is telling us that Simon's powers came from the Devil. This is in contrast to Philip's power, which we are told comes from the Holy Spirit of God.

Second, we have the purpose of the 2 men. Simon's powers were used to entice others to worship him as the divine power known as the Great Power. That's basically what he had on his business cards. He definitely was in touch with the supernatural, but he used his sorcery so that the people would be amazed with him. For Simon, the sorcery thing allowed him to be all about himself! Self-worship, self-centered, self-interest, just selfish in general. It's interesting to note, that when Satan tempted Jesus in the desert, right after he had been baptized, he tempted him with 3 things:

1. **to use his power to meet his own needs, that being bread.**
2. **to worship Satan to gain authority over all the earth.**
3. **to manipulate God by commanding a miracle – jump off the highest point of the temple and expect God to save you.**

This is same as how Simon understood things, this is how he operated, because he was under the influence of Satan.

This is an important point – just because it is supernatural, does not mean it is God. You can be in touch with the supernatural, but not be in touch with God. A few weeks ago, Ken talked about

The Secret, and that is a great example of using the supernatural – the Universe, the Secret Power, whatever else you may call it, but it is not the Supernatural power that comes from God, because it leads to self-worship, not to God worship.

On the other hand, Philip preached the “kingdom of God”, and the miracles he performed were meant to encourage people to worship God. Philip never took credit or money or applause for his miracles. If you look at other accounts in Acts, they are all the same. The disciples always used miraculous signs to punctuate the good news they preached, and to point people toward God’s love. In fact, at one point, 2 other disciples, Paul and Barnabas, were preaching the good news in Lystra, they healed a man and almost created a riot. The people tried to worship Paul and Barnabas, thinking they were gods in human form, and they were quick to correct them:

Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, humans like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.”
(Acts 14:15 New Living Translation)

Philip and all the other disciples were all about helping others – offering love and grace and forgiveness.

So what happened when Philip shared this news:

But when they (the people of Samaria) believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.
(Acts 8:12-13 New International Version)

The people of Samaria chose to put their trust in God, it says they believed and were baptized! Even Simon believed and was baptized.

How many of you were at the Baptism service last weekend? It was fantastic. We had 35 people go public and declare their faith in Jesus Christ and be baptized. They did what the people of Samaria did almost 2000 years ago! By being baptized, they declared publicly their commitment to follow Jesus. Baptism declared a new beginning for the Samaritans and for the people of The Olive Branch who made that decision. They have a fresh start to life, with God in control.

What I like about this part of the story, is that when the love and grace and forgiveness of God were placed beside self-worship, self-interest and just a general selfishness, love, grace and forgiveness won – the people believed and were baptized! Philip wasn’t God, he was just a human like us. But because he was a follower of Jesus, God gave him His strength to love and heal and care for people. It helps me to hear stories about that. Because every day, we are faced with the same choice: will we offer love and grace and forgiveness or will we only take care of ourselves. When we meet someone in trouble – do we help, even when it is inconvenient, or do we give up our time and maybe even our money to help? When we others make mistakes, do we blast them out of the water, or offer to help correct it? God is willing to share his strength, if we are willing to let him lead. Every time we choose love, grace and forgiveness over ourselves, we are showing people the kingdom of God.

That strength not only extends to you and me, but to US – the church! God always intended that his church would be a place that would have the power to reject the stuff that steals the joy of the world we live in – like poverty, oppression, racism, persecution, exploitation and discrimination. When Jesus was pumping up his disciples for the mission they had ahead of them, he promised them,

**“I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it.”
(Luke 16:18, New Living Translation)**

As a church, we are given the power and authority to overcome the powers of hell! We are meant to offer healing to the sick, and freedom to those held captive by disability or addiction or persecution. We are meant to feed the hungry and share generously and sacrificially; to serve others, not wait to be served ourselves. We are meant to be a safe place for people to come and find love and acceptance, and to be the place where people can go when there is nowhere left to go. We are to be the people of The Olive Branch – the offering of God’s peace. How can we, individually and as a group, offer that kind of place? As we continue to move forward and grow, how can we challenge ourselves to do more, be more and give more? How can we increasingly be the kingdom of God? We need to continue to challenge each other to be all we are meant to be. The more we can do this, the more we can show people how much God loves them, and can be trusted with their futures!

Trusting God is an ongoing challenge for every person who has chosen to follow Jesus, and it was certainly Simon’s challenge. We can read on....

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit....Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles hands, he offered them money and said, “Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”

Peter answered, “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of the God with money! You have no part of share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.”

**Then Simon answered, “Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.”
(Acts 8:14-25, New International Version)**

Even though Simon believed and was baptized, he was still wrestling to keep the power and control of his life he had before. He wants the love and grace and forgiveness that come with the kingdom of God, but you can see that he isn’t willing to give up on his power! Simon still wanted it to be about Simon! Peter sees this and warns him that this is not the path to take, if he wants to be a follower of Jesus. Simon totally missed the point – instead of being excited about receiving God’s own Spirit, he got excited about purchasing the Samaritan distribution rights to it. Having the power was more important than being part of God’s kingdom. Simon

knew there was power in the supernatural. He saw that God's power at work in Philip was greater than his own power, and he wanted in on it. When you have a reputation as the Great Power, you need to keep up!

If I am honest with myself, I continue to wrestle with wanting to keep some power for myself. I bet some of you do too. We want all the good stuff of the kingdom – freedom, love, forgiveness, justice – but then we also go about our days making plans and decisions that aren't reflective of the way God wants us to live. If we have trusted God to be in control of our lives, then we have to trust him with ALL of our lives – our time, our money, our abilities, our relationships. What would it look like for me to trust God with it all? What would it look like for you?

I think we all have areas where we want to wrestle God for control. I know for me, I can get very busy doing stuff, even good stuff for the church, but God wants me to spend time WITH him. He wants us to take time to rest, to meet with him in the morning, in the evening and periodically throughout the day, just to check in. I am often reluctant to give up control of my time. Instead, I think, "If I don't get this done, then it will never get done." Sometimes, I am often arrogant enough to think that if I go to bed, then the world might crumble. I don't know if any of you can resonate with that! When I go on vacation, I take my Blackberry. Because sometimes I start to believe that the world might not turn properly if I am not available to answer a question, or give my perspective! Don't get me wrong – working hard, and accomplishing tasks are very important. Fulfilling commitments and obligations are necessary. The trouble comes when you stop trusting God to do what's right, and you only trust yourself! The funny thing is, when I do trust God with my time, everything important gets done – everyone I need to love gets loved, the important tasks get accomplished and my email filter gets all the junk stuff out! No – not that last one – but that would be a REAL miracle! When I am too busy to pray, or to rest, that's when life goes beserk. I am not sure how many more times I need to be reminded of that!

But God, in his never-ending grace, keeps encouraging us to trust him. Each of us needs God's strength every day in order to handle the discouragement of the world we live in. God gives us his strength and wisdom to handle it all, and that is when we really know God's power is bigger than our box. He wants us to turn away from the things that hold us back, and he wants us to start fresh.

**"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"
(2 Corinthians 5:17 New International Version)**

God has given people signs and wonders to get our attention since the beginning of creation and God still gives us reminders, and in lots of different ways.

For one thing, God has given us the miracle of creation. For many of us, being surrounded by nature's beauty lifts our trust in God, because you can sense his presence and his power. Our family has a bit of a ritual – whenever we are somewhere where we can watch the sunset, we sing Taps. It goes like this:

Day is done,
Gone the sun,
From the lakes, from the hills, from the skies,
All is well,

Safely rest,
God is nigh.

We sing it at the cottage, we have sung it in the car in the city. We have sung it in Vancouver, and Calgary, Winnipeg, Hawaii and Mexico. And the message is always the same - God is nigh – God is near. When I looked up “nigh” in the Webster’s dictionary, it said “close – in distance and relationship”. God is both.

For another thing, God still heals. We have often talked about Syndey Amer, our miracle baby. When she was born, the doctors told her parents that they should prepare for the worst, that she would likely not make it. And if she did make it, that she would be severely mentally and physically challenged. Well God performed a miracle in Sydney. Sydney is a perfectly abled, perfectly healthy little girl and the doctors are amazed!

God still defeats the powers of darkness too. This building is a perfect example. In a series of small miracles, this building, which was formerly a Strip Club, went from being a dark place, full of broken hearts and dreams, to being an Olive Branch – a place where God’s love and grace and hope are shared with the community.

And God still heals relationships, frees us from addiction and greed and arrogance, and provides us the power we need to live the kind of life he wants us to.

Peter told Simon to pray – pray and ask God to forgive him for his selfish desires and pray for God to help him let go of his desire for control. Prayer is an important part of God working in our lives. He doesn’t need us to pray – Peter’s response to Simon wanting to buy God’s gift to us also showed us that God won’t be manipulated or bought off. But prayer helps us to pause and remember to trust God for it all. We are often tempted to trust what we can see: like doctors, medicine, government, technology, money or insurance plans. Again, these things are not bad – they are also gifts from God – but we can’t worship them or put our full trust in them – God asks us to trust and follow Him.

After every service, there are people waiting over here to pray with anyone who would like prayer. If you are in need of some kind of healing – physical or emotional – or if you are feeling alone, or facing some challenge in your life, we want to pray for you – just come. Because Jesus is waiting for you to put your trust in him, so he can show you life in the kingdom of God.

Andy opened today’s service with his magic because we thought it was kind of a cool way to introduce Simon the sorcerer and talk about the supernatural. And God is Lord over the supernatural, and uses miracles often to get our attention. But you know, of all the miracles God has performed, I think that the most amazing ones are the subtle ones, done without much fanfare or applause, on the interior of our hearts. God may not always change the outside situations of our lives, but if we will turn control of our lives over to Jesus, God will ALWAYS change the inside ones. The real miracle is that God will always soften our hearts, and increase our capacity to love, no matter how crusty and hard our hearts are.

Not much has really changed since Philip went to Samaria. We all still need to hear the Good News – we still need to hear that there is someone who loves us enough to want to free us from the junk in our lives that stops us from reaching our potential. The kingdom of God is still advancing, and the name of Jesus is still powerful. We simply need to trust God completely, and choose to live in his Kingdom.

Let's pray.

Lord, we thank you for being all that you are. Your capacity to love us is beyond our comprehension, and your ability to lead us is something we can hardly fathom. Father I pray that you would help each of us today to trust you more completely, having the courage to leave behind our old habits and our old ways, knowing that you can be trusted to guide us and care for us. I thank you for the all the ways you encourage that trust – those daily miracles – and I ask that you help open our eyes, our ears and our hearts to see them and recognize you in them. In Jesus name, Amen.