



Philip Baptizes the Ethiopian

Birth of the Church

About the Story

Last week, we first heard about Saul, a religious man who was persecuting Christians in Jerusalem—among them, Stephen. At the point of today’s story, Saul’s persecution has caused many Christians to flee Jerusalem. This week we meet a preacher named Philip walking along the road outside of the city. Like Stephen, Philip was chosen to serve the early church in the story we just read in Acts 6. His ministry within the community became a ministry of preaching. We follow Philip on a most unlikely and extraordinary encounter.

The Point:

We can learn about God through the most surprising people. The story invites us to recognize that we do not encounter God in the obvious places. The Holy Spirit often sends us into unknown places to learn about God from persons we may not otherwise meet. These people often become unexpected teachers to us: persons who experience life and God from perspectives other than our own.

After Philip leaves Jerusalem, an angel of the Lord visits him and directs him to the road leading to Gaza. Here the angel points Philip “toward the south,” but the original Greek phrase may also be translated “go at noon.” The implication of a noon setting makes the circumstance of today’s story all the more out of the ordinary: in the high desert, hardly anyone would be venturing on a walk in the scorching sunshine of noon. And yet, Philip does meet someone—a life-changing someone.

The Ethiopian eunuch was, without question, “other”—in terms of race and gender identity. However, as a high court official in the office of the queen, he held esteemed social status, though it was a complicated social status since he was also an outsider in the temple in Jerusalem. In the story, the man’s reading of Scripture tells us he was extraordinarily intelligent for his time and place. While Philip is the one who initially preaches to the Ethiopian man, it is the Ethiopian who initiates the baptism and who invites the conversation by asking questions about Scripture. So it seems the two men preach to each other.

Who Are Eunuchs?

A eunuch was generally defined as a man who had been castrated, most often with the purpose of serving royalty. Eunuchs were given high rank and trust because they were assumed to be deeply loyal—that is, they would never try to overthrow a king since they were not eligible to become kings. Eunuchs were Gentiles and did not fit within traditional gender roles, so they would have been likely considered “others.”

Last Week/Next Week

Last week's story ended with the stoning of Stephen. In the portion of chapters 7 and 8 we did not read, Saul began persecuting the church and the disciples begin leaving Jerusalem. Today, we find out where one of them decides to go. Next week, we will sit in on the first church council meeting. Not surprisingly, the conversation will include a debate—this time about the necessity of circumcision in Christian identity.

Opening Prayer

You may check in by mentioning a new person you have met recently, or by praying together:

Holy Spirit, you call us into new places and new encounters. Open our eyes to see you in this story and in the neighbors we encounter in our everyday lives. Amen.

Into the Story

Today's story is about learning from strangers. Pair up a neighbor and share three facts about yourselves that most people do not know. The idea here is to begin opening your eyes to the ways new encounters teach us about people, and about God.

Learning the Story

Philip, an early church leader, meets an unlikely person along the road—and both leave the meeting changed. This story illustrates the power of the gospel to break down cultural and geographic boundaries.

Read Acts 8:26-28 – Philip's Unlikely Encounter

- ❓ An angel (or “messenger”) of the Lord sends Philip on a journey, and Philip “got up and went.” The angel seems to offer little information about the ultimate destination and purpose of this trip. Have you ever been sent on a mysterious journey? How would you feel if you were Philip?
- ❓ Along the road, Philip sees the Ethiopian eunuch studying the prophet Isaiah. Does anything surprise you about this scene?
- ❓ For Philip, the Ethiopian would have been an “other” in terms of race, social class, and gender identity. Who is “other” to you in your community? In your church?

Read Luke Acts 8:29-35 – The Eunuch's Unlikely Encounter

- ❓ For the Ethiopian, Philip also would have been an “other” in many respects. What do you imagine the Ethiopian was thinking as Philip approached him?
- ❓ We only read about the Spirit speaking to Philip. How do you think the Spirit might have also been speaking to the Ethiopian?
- ❓ Why do you think the eunuch was reading this particular passage from Isaiah?

Read Acts 8:36-39 – The Eunuch Is Baptized

- ❓ The eunuch notices the water and asks to be baptized. How do you think Philip reacted to the eunuch's request to be baptized?
- ❓ After the baptism, the two men never see each other again. Have you had life-changing encounters with someone you have never seen again?
- ❓ What surprises you about this story? What challenges you about it?

Bible Connections

- ✚ The laws kept the eunuch from full participation in temple worship (Leviticus 21:17-23; Deuteronomy 23:1).
- ✚ The eunuch is reading Isaiah's prophecy as Philip meets him (Isaiah 53:7-8).
- ✚ Another mention of eunuchs (Matthew 19:12).

Supplies

- ✚ Pens or pencils
- ✚ Slips of paper
- ✚ Optional: guitar or piano, hymnal or Internet-connected device

Living the Story: Worship

Today's story is one of mutual learning and gratitude. This story is not merely about the eunuch learning from Philip or being saved by him. Instead, Philip also leaves this meeting with an outsider changed and enriched.

As your spiritual practice today, worship using a song from another culture to see how you can learn about God from someone different than you. Look in your congregation's hymnal for options or search online for the suggested songs below. Before you begin singing, or listening, think or write about moments when you have learned about God from an unexpected teacher. Give thanks for these teachers by saying these moments aloud in between refrains.

Suggested songs:

“Cantad al Señor” (Oh Sing to the Lord)

“Jésus, je voudrais te chanter” (Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song)

“Jesu, tawa pano” (Jesus, We Are Gathered)

Closing Prayer

Holy Spirit, we give thanks for all persons in our lives that teach us about your grace and mercy. Open our eyes to see you in the face of our neighbors. In your name we pray. Amen.

Bible Nuts & Bolts: Bible Resources

Many resources for reading the Bible are available in print and online. Looking at resources allows us to read the Bible with greater understanding of culture, context, and language. For example, resources can teach us more about the landscape and conditions of the road between Jerusalem and Gaza or the ways eunuchs were and were not included in general society. Check your church's library for printed resources or search the Internet to learn more. Search for concordances, study Bibles, and commentaries written by biblical scholars.

At Home

- ✝ Take the time to have a conversation with a stranger or neighbor you do not know well. Be open to hear what they may teach you.
- ✝ Read the day's news, paying attention to stories of persecution and intolerance. Pray for those affected by injustice.
- ✝ Think about a local community you do not know or understand in your town or neighborhood—perhaps the LGBTQ community, a certain age group, a Native American tribe, etc. Make a concerted effort to learn about this community and the history and hopes of its members.

Daily Readings

Sunday – Read Acts 8:26-39

A preacher named Philip meets an Ethiopian eunuch along the road and they learn from each other about the grace and mercy of God. Strike up a conversation with a stranger today. See what they have to teach you.

Monday – Read Acts 9:1-19

Saul, a religious zealot who participated in the stoning of Stephen, encounters Jesus and becomes a follower of Christ. Pray for God to open your eyes to God's grace today!

Tuesday – Read Acts 9:20-31

Saul begins preaching in Damascus and Jerusalem, though many are afraid of him and do not trust that he has truly become a disciple of Jesus. Who in your life is deserving of a second chance? Take steps to provide that chance!

Wednesday – Read Acts 9:36-43

Tabitha, a woman devoted to acts of charity dies—and Peter resurrects her. In honor of Tabitha, donate one box of clothes to a local family or organization.

Thursday – Read Acts 10:34-48

Peter preaches to the Gentiles, saying that salvation comes through faith, not ethnicity or other cultural identifiers. Write this on a nametag and place it near your mirror or work desk: "My name is [your name here]. I am saved through faith."

Friday – Read Acts 11:19-30

The church expands to Antioch, and the term "Christians" is first used in relation to teaching about Jesus. Today, open yourself to a conversation about Jesus with a friend, a family member, or someone you do not yet know.

Saturday – Read Acts 12:6-19

An angel leads Peter out of prison, where he was sent for preaching about Jesus. Pray for all victims of religious persecution.