

Acts 8:26-40 (NRSV)

[Philip the apostle, one of the original twelve, had gone into Samaria, north of Jerusalem, to preach the gospel and now God plans to send Philip to a new mission field.]

²⁶Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³²Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

³³In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

The Holy Spirit not only sends Philip out to spread the Good News, he provides some very surprising transportation!

The gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are two volumes of a single literary work. Together, they tell the story of Jesus and the early church spanning more than six decades. The hinge point of the two volumes, ending the first and beginning the second, is Jesus’ ascension, i.e., his return to the Father. Before disappearing into the clouds, Jesus tells the gathered disciples that “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). This command from Jesus wasn’t new, but a reiteration of a promise made long before.

A promise made and kept

God makes many promises in Scripture. God promises Noah that never again will he destroy all life with a flood (Genesis 9:11). God promises Moses that he will rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 6:2-8). Jesus promises his disciples (that’s us too!) that the Father would send the Spirit of God to help them and be with them forever (John 14:16).

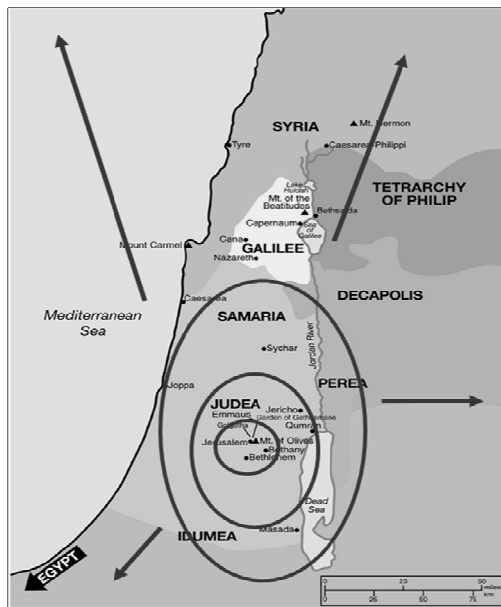
God made some wonderful promises to Abraham as well. God will make Abraham’s family into a great nation. God will make Abraham’s name great. But the promise to Abraham that shapes all of God’s subsequent promises is this: “all peoples on earth will

be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:2-3). This is the purpose of it all; the end to which the other promises point. One day, all the nations will come to God.

God did not choose Abraham merely for Abraham’s own sake. God did not save the Israelites from Egypt merely for their own sake. Rather, this was how God set about to renew and redeem all of humanity and all of creation from the damage wrought by the humans’ rebellion in the Garden of Eden. When the children of Abraham, i.e., the people of God, heard God well, they understood that they were God’s “treasured possession” and “holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6) so that they could be the ones *through whom* God would rescue his good creation. More than 700 years before Jesus, the prophet Micah (4:1-5) spoke of a time when the nations would “go up to the mountain of the LORD,” beating their “swords into plowshares” and their “spears into pruning hooks.”

Strangely, the followers of Jesus claimed that in his death and resurrection, God had kept his promise, he had been faithful to his covenant with Israel. Peter and the disciples, all Jews themselves, claimed that Jesus was not only the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, but also the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Jesus is not only, they said, the savior of Israel but the savior of the world. The time had come to fulfill the promise made long before to Abraham. Jesus’ disciples were to “make disciples of all nations,” (Matthew 28:19) and to be Jesus’ “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

“To Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth”



As illustrated by this map, you can think of Jesus’ geographic instructions in terms of concentric circles that center on Jerusalem and then extend outward to Judea and then Samaria and then all the world.

Acts 1-7 concentrates on the work in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit arrives during the festival of Pentecost and Peter rises to preach a stirring sermon in the temple courtyards. 3,000 come to faith in Jesus Christ that day.

As the new community begins their life together, they devote themselves to learning and fellowship, to sharing meals and prayers. Peter and John

not only teach, they perform miracles (Acts 3). They are arrested and released (Acts 4). The community learns what it means to be a Spirit-formed people with whom God, in the person of the Spirit, is present. Two people not only test the Spirit, but they lie to the Holy Spirit as well. They both die as a result (Acts 5).

As the community grows, organization is needed and the apostles tap Stephen and others to see to the daily needs of the community, freeing the apostles to pray, to preach, and to teach (Acts 6). This same Stephen is also arrested and then stoned to death (Acts 7). The Holy Spirit is the one at the center of action across these stories. The Spirit is referred to 23 times just in the first seven chapters of Acts.

In chapter 8, Luke tells us that after Stephen’s stoning and the severe persecution that followed, the believers do not back off. Instead, Philip heads north into Samaria to preach the Good News. Samaria was not Jewish, though the Jews understood them to

be like distant cousins who had removed themselves from the proper worship of God. Many Samaritans respond to the word and Peter and John head to Samaria to make sure that the people are properly baptized and received the Holy Spirit, who is God's gift to all believers (Acts 8:14-17). Not surprisingly, the apostles must teach the Samaritans and, in particular, a man named Simon that the Good News is neither magic nor is it for sale.

You'd think that Philip would get a rest, but no. One of God's angels shows up and tells Philip to head back toward Jerusalem and make his way south on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. On the road there is an Ethiopian eunuch¹, a man of very high status, the "Secretary of the Treasury," to the Ethiopian queen. Here is Willimon's description of the man:

Luke's audience would be fascinated with this Ethiopian. In the Greco-Roman world the term "Ethiopian" was often applied to black people. The Odyssey speaks of "far-off Ethiopians ... the furthestmost of men" (1:22-23). In other words, here is a person from an exotic land, the edge of the world, timbuktu, someone whose dark skin made him an object of wonder and admiration among Jews and Romans (cf. F. M. Snowden). This warns us not to consider the Ethiopian as a despised or deprived person—quite the opposite. He is a powerful, though exotic, court official, a well-placed and significant person who is receptive to the truth. He beseeches Philip to interpret for him and then to baptize him. Here is an earnest inquirer who reaches out and is graciously included into the actions of God.

The Spirit then tells Philip to run over to the chariot. After being directed to this place by an angel and now the Spirit, Philip surely grasps that this man is the one whom God wants him to meet. The eunuch is reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asks the man if he understands what he is reading. The eunuch replies that he can't, for there is no one to guide him. So Philip sits down with the man and helps him to see that the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 has come and it is Jesus. Then, the man orders the chariot to stop so that he and Philip could go down to the water's edge. There, Philip baptizes him. Then, surely to the eunuch's astonishment, the Spirit "beams"² Philip to Azotus, which is ancient Ashdod and is about 23 miles north-northeast of Gaza.

What is most important for us to grasp in these stories is that the Spirit of God is the one who is guiding things along and making things happen. The Good News is to spread ever outward and we are not speaking only of geography.

The Good News has spread from the Jews to the despised Samaritans and now to this Ethiopian. He has made a long pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which in itself was a measure of devotion among the Jews. The man studies Scripture as well as he can and worshipped the Lord God as well as he could, for eunuchs were not allowed in the temple. His castration means that he can never be a Jew, no matter his devotion to God (Deut. 23:1). The irony here is that the man is one of the outcasts he reads about in Isaiah, where God promises that even the "eunuchs who keep the Sabbath" and "hold fast to the covenant" will be given an "everlasting name that will not be cut off" (56:3-8). It is through Christ that this outcast is brought into the people of God.

God made a promise. God has kept that promise. And now God, in the person of his Holy Spirit, is working through his people to see that through the proclaiming of the Good News, truly, all the families of the earth will be blessed. For just ahead in the story lies Peter's encounter with a Roman Centurion named Cornelius, who will be the first "fully-Gentile" person to come to faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 10).

¹Eunuchs often held important position in ancient middle-eastern kingdoms because they couldn't have children on whose behalf they would conspire against their employer.

²With the new movie out, it seems an appropriate time for a Star Trek reference! Besides, I can hardly imagine a better way to think of Philip's experience.

Evangelism and Persons of Peace

Today's story from Acts is a story about evangelism. In Luke 10, Jesus instructs his disciples to look for those who share in their peace. In other words, the disciples need not feel burdened to proclaim the Good News to those whom God has not made ready to hear it. The disciples don't have to try to overcome those who might shake a fist at them or confront them. And when Philip approaches the eunuch, the Spirit has clearly made the man ready to hear.

How comforting this should be for all of us who get a little nervous when we hear the word "evangelism." We are not called to get in people's faces, to be rude or offensive. We are called to be loving and patient, to be prepared to tell someone of God's good news. In Peter's words, we are to be gentle and respectful (1 Peter 3:15). It is God's work to transform hearts. It is God who saves, not we. If we are open to God's leadings, if we listen perceptively, we will find that God presents to us many opportunities to speak to people of peace about God's love and the lordship of Jesus Christ.

In their book, *A Passionate Life*, Mike Breen and Walt Kallestad offer us seven "p's" of evangelism to remember when we approach, as they put it, a person of peace.

- *Presence* evangelism – This is the witnessing to Christ (spoken or not) that is available when we are simply present with a person or group. God puts people in our paths.
- *Passing* relationships – We might do no more than a little watering of the seed that God planted in someone with whom we've crossed paths.
- *Permanent* relationships – These are those who matter most to us. It is God who prepares them to hear. As Breen says, "God is never in a hurry and God is never late." Our call is to be bold when the person is ready.
- *Proclamation* – This is not about standing on street corners. It means showing outwardly, in words and actions, the love of God and the reality of God's kingdom.
- *Preparation* – Often, we are only helping prepare the soil so that another disciple might carry on the work.
- *Power* – Don't sell God short on the surprising ways that God works.
- *Perception* – The Holy Spirit will guide our abilities to perceive when a person is ready to embrace God's love . . . and when they are not.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In just the first eight chapters of Acts, the Spirit is referred to more than thirty times, most of them describing what the Holy Spirit has done or is doing. In fact, Luke's book could just as easily be named "Acts of the Spirit" rather than "Acts of the Apostles." Given that, why is it that the Spirit gets so little mention in many churches? Might part of the problem be that the book of Acts is too often ignored as well? Why would this be so? What could we do about it?
2. Philip is often called Philip the Evangelist. What does the word "evangelize" mean to you? What is your own experience with evangelism? Have you ever been evangelized? You might share some stories of occasions that you were evangelized. How did it go? How did it make you feel? Could the experience have been more positive? How so?
3. Have you ever reached out to others to tell them about Jesus? If so, how did it go? You might share some stories of your experiences. Do you find yourself hesitant to tell others of Jesus Christ? List some reasons why Christians might be hesitant? How could we overcome our fears and anxiety? What do you think of Breen and Kallestad's teachings about the "person of peace?" (See the text box above.) How does this differ from other approaches to evangelism? Do you think it would be more or less effective than other approaches. Is "effective" even the right way to think about this?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

In this week's readings we are taking a look at some passages that bear on the topic of evangelism.

<p>Monday, Romans 1:8-17 Paul longs to visit the Christians in Rome; Paul knows that he is obligated to bring the Good News to everyone (see v. 14-15).</p>	<p>Tuesday, 1 Thessalonians 1 Paul is thankful for the believers in Thessalonica. The Lord's message "rang out" from them across all of Greece (see v. 8).</p>
<p>Wednesday, Matthew 28:18-20 & Acts 1:8 Jesus sends out his disciples. This is no less true now than it was then.</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Peter 3:8-22 Peter is writing to comfort Christians who are suffering for being followers of Jesus and for doing good. See esp. v. 15-16. We are always to speak of Jesus Christ with "gentleness and respect." This can be easy to forget!</p>
<p>Friday, Matthew 9:35-38 Jesus teaches a simple message: all are welcome who receive God's gift as a child receives a gift.</p>	<p>Saturday, Luke 10:1-6 Jesus instructs his disciples that when they go out to proclaim the Good News, they are to look for persons of peace.</p>

