Spirit Led

Goal for the Session  
Adults will celebrate and follow the example of those, like Philip, whom God’s Spirit uses to open Scripture and faith to others.

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Acts 8:26–40

WHAT is important to know?  
— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Paul W. Walaskay

Luke tells us a great deal about these two men. Philip is one of seven Greek-speaking Jewish Christians appointed to tend to the needs of others (Acts 6:1–6). The Ethiopian is in charge of the treasury of the Candace, the official title of the queen mother, head of the government in Ethiopia. That he travels by chariot attests to his status. That he possesses a scroll of the prophet Isaiah attests to his wealth. Moreover, we are told that he is a eunuch, a not unusual situation for one whose life is devoted to serving in the queen’s court. As a castrated male, he would not have been granted access to the temple (see Deuteronomy 23:1).

WHERE is God in these words?  
— From “Theological Perspective,” Karen Baker-Fletcher

Notice the text’s description of how the Spirit of God moves Philip to act and teach. When the messenger of God says to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza” (v. 26), Philip immediately gets up and goes. Upon seeing the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip runs to the chariot where the eunuch, in charge of the queen’s treasury, is sitting. He immediately asks the eunuch if he understands the passage from Isaiah (53:7–8) that the eunuch is reading aloud.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?  
— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Thomas G. Long

As the gospel moves into the world, it gathers under the wings of God’s mercy more and more of those who have been lost, pushed away, and forgotten. “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” asked the eunuch. “Absolutely nothing,” whispered the Spirit. So the eunuch commanded the chariot to stop, and he was baptized right on the spot. Walls of prejudice and prohibition that had stood for generations came tumbling down by the breath of God’s Holy Spirit, and another man who felt lost and humiliated was found and restored in the wideness of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?  
— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Barbara Brown Taylor

It is Philip’s grounding in his tradition that enables him to recognize God’s leading—even when it leads him places no human authority has told him he may go—and to act in the power of the Spirit. If we were to surrender control of our own travel plans for even an hour, where might the Spirit send us? How many of our accidental encounters with other people are really divine appointments? How can we learn to tell the difference between the two?
Focus on Your Teaching

Some adults may be uncomfortable with the sexual identity of the individual Philip ministers to in today’s lesson. God’s Spirit often leads us to unexpected places and persons. In this story God uses a willing Philip to open the doors of Scripture to one accustomed to closed doors. While many people are fortunate not to endure permanent social rejection, most have experienced closed doors at some time. Encourage participants to relate to the eunuch’s feelings of rejection and how liberating it must have felt when Philip included him. Today’s story seeks to be gracious toward all. In the end, it seeks our leading by God’s Spirit.

Lead me, Holy Spirit, to the ways and to the ones you would have me go.
Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome adults to the session. Introduce any visitors or guests as needed.

Light the taper candle. Invite participants to silently consider someone who has been a guide in their life. The person may have guided them in vocation, family, faith, or life in general.

Form pairs. Ask participants to spend a few minutes telling each other how the guide made a difference in their life. What leading did that person provide? What understandings did he or she teach?

Gather the group together. Affirm the value of guides in life and faith. Explain that the opening prayer ritual will consist of each person lighting one of the votive candles in remembrance of that guide. As they do so, they are to name the guide (first names are fine) and offer a brief word of thanks for what their guide made possible.

When everyone has lit a candle and offered thanks, say these or similar words:

For all these persons who have guided us, we give you thanks. Open us now to this study, that we might be led by your Spirit in the ways that guide others into your welcome and grace. Amen.

EXPLORING

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Eunuchs, Isaiah, and the Gospel). Read and discuss the material on the sheet to provide background on characters and issues that are central to today’s text. If there is time, have participants silently read Acts 6:1–5 and Acts 8:1–13. Ask the group to call out words and phrases that they see as important descriptions of Philip and the early church based on these passages.
Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 3 (Water in the Desert). If you have not already done so, ask for three volunteers to play the roles of Philip, the Angel, and the Eunuch. If they have not had time to prepare ahead of time, give them a few moments to look over their parts and make plans for how they will act this out. As they do, set the stage by designating an area of the room for the performance, and placing the two chairs on stage left to represent the chariot. Place in the center strips of blue crepe paper or fabric to represent the water. After the dramatic reading, invite responses from the group—and from those who had roles in the reading.

What did the reading reveal most clearly about each of the three characters?

Read the excerpts on Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Acts 8:26–40). Discuss the insights into the text brought by each of the excerpts.

Return to Resource Sheet 2. Ask:

- In light of the information on the sheet, what might have prevented the eunuch from being baptized?
- What might have prevented Philip from baptizing him?

Possible avenues to explore would be: sexual identity; up to this time believers were mostly Jews; and race (the Greek root *aithiopia* literally means “burnt face” and thus is as much a statement of ethnicity as national origin).

Discuss:

- Where does the Spirit lead Philip, and through Philip, lead the church, in this passage?
- What are the implications for following that same Spirit’s leading today?

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. The Ethiopian Eunuch—Today
   
   Recall the ways in which Resource Sheet 2 related the multiple stigmas attached to eunuchs in that time. List on newsprint folks who are similarly stigmatized today: socially, religiously, and sexually. Have each adult select one person or group listed on the newsprint and reflect silently on this question:
   
   What is one thing you can do this week to break down the barrier of that stigma and reach out to that person or group?

   Encourage adults to carry out that action by the leading of God’s Spirit.

2. Actions to Extend the Circle
   
   Philip was led by the Spirit to see there was nothing to prevent this individual from being baptized. In baptism, the eunuch is welcomed into the fellowship of the church. Talk about what actions of welcoming are not only possible but needed today toward
those traditionally left on the outside looking in. Identify one or two specific actions that individuals and/or the group as a whole can take in the coming week or two to extend welcome to an outsider. Covenant with one another to do this.

3. **Following the Spirit’s Lead**

At first glance, the story of Philip the evangelist being led by the Spirit is rather hard to believe, but encourage the group to examine their own lives for the intervention of the Spirit.

Invite them to recall some experience in which they felt led by the Spirit toward some action or word. Explore in small groups what individuals understand being led by the Spirit means. They might consider these questions:

- How is the Spirit’s leading discerned through the life of the community?
- How might the Spirit’s leading result in change or transformation for the community?

Let the passage on Philip and the eunuch inform these conversations. Then ask:

- How do the ways in which the Spirit leads Philip (and perhaps the eunuch) speak to the Spirit’s leading of our lives today?

End this activity in prayer, giving thanks for the guidance of the Spirit in our lives.

**CLOSING**

Gather the group around the votive candles that were lit during Gathering, reminding participants that the candles were lit in remembrance of the guides they named. Affirm that this session has explored the way God’s Spirit led Philip to serve as a guide to the eunuch—and as the one who baptized him. Invite adults to share what this passage and session has revealed to them about the way God’s Spirit leads and opens the church to new ways and new ones.

Offer this prayer:

> May the Spirit lead you this week to where, and to whom, you are most needed. Go as God’s servant, go with God’s love, go and bring God’s grace to those you meet on the way.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for May 13, 2012, or e-mail it to participants during the week. Encourage adults to read all the lectionary texts, with particular attention paid to the focus scripture, prior to reading the resource sheet.
Focus on Acts 8:26–40

WHAT is important to know? — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Paul W. Walaskay

Luke tells us a great deal about these two men. Philip is one of seven Greek-speaking Jewish Christians appointed to tend to the needs of others (Acts 6:1–6). The Ethiopian is in charge of the treasury of the Candace, the official title of the queen mother, head of the government in Ethiopia. That he travels by chariot attests to his status. That he possesses a scroll of the prophet Isaiah attests to his wealth. Moreover, we are told that he is a eunuch, a not unusual situation for one whose life is devoted to serving in the queen’s court. As a castrated male, he would not have been granted access to the temple (see Deuteronomy 23:1).

WHERE is God in these words? — From “Theological Perspective,” Karen Baker-Fletcher

Notice the text’s description of how the Spirit of God moves Philip to act and teach. When the messenger of God says to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza” (v. 26), Philip immediately gets up and goes. Upon seeing the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip runs to the chariot where the eunuch, in charge of the queen’s treasury, is sitting. He immediately asks the eunuch if he understands the passage from Isaiah (53:7–8) that the eunuch is reading aloud.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives? — From “Pastoral Perspective,” Thomas G. Long

As the gospel moves into the world, it gathers under the wings of God’s mercy more and more of those who have been lost, pushed away, and forgotten. “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” asked the eunuch. “Absolutely nothing,” whispered the Spirit. So the eunuch commanded the chariot to stop, and he was baptized right on the spot. Walls of prejudice and prohibition that had stood for generations came tumbling down by the breath of God’s Holy Spirit, and another man who felt lost and humiliated was found and restored in the wideness of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do? — From “Homiletical Perspective,” Barbara Brown Taylor

It is Philip’s grounding in his tradition that enables him to recognize God’s leading—even when it leads him places no human authority has told him he may go—and to act in the power of the Spirit. If we were to surrender control of our own travel plans for even an hour, where might the Spirit send us? How many of our accidental encounters with other people are really divine appointments? How can we learn to tell the difference between the two?
In ancient times a eunuch was a castrated male servant who was trusted to perform social functions for royalty. Ideally they were castrated before puberty; therefore they were deemed safe to serve among women of the royal household.


The eunuch encountered in Acts 8:26–40 fits that description. But there is far more to the meaning of this encounter than that definition alone provides. Eunuchs were stigmatized sexually, socially, and religiously for the impairment they bore. Sexually, they could not engage in procreation. Socially, they did not fit the mold of “maleness” and were viewed as deviants. Religiously, statutes in Deuteronomy 23:1 and Leviticus 21:17–21 prohibited them not only from serving in the the priesthood but even from access to the inner courts of the temple. In short, eunuchs formed a sexual minority that faced significant hurdles with regard to participation let alone respect in their communities. It was as if the service they rendered was acceptable—but they were not.

That view, though underscored in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, is not unanimous in the Old Testament. In an oracle of salvation proclaimed in Isaiah 56, the prophet announces this stunning reversal of perspective.

. . . do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a dry tree.” For thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

—Isaiah 56:3b–5

In powerful language and imagery that reverses status, Isaiah pronounces a hope—a gospel, in its literal meaning of “good news”— to a group formerly without hope. Acts 8:26–40 is an unfolding of that Isaiah’s hope and gospel by means of Philip’s Spirit-led ministry. For of all persons, a eunuch is baptized. Where, and to whom, might Spirit next lead the church to practice gracious inclusion? The book of Acts is only the first stirrings of the answer to that question!
Dramatic Reading Based on Acts 8:26–40

Stage left: Eunuch seated on one of two chairs, reading a scroll
Stage right: Philip walking
Stage center: Angel standing, heading toward Philip

Angel: (pointing to chairs) Hey, Philip, I need you to go thataway with me.

Philip: Whatever you say.

Philip takes two steps toward the chairs.

Angel: Hey, Philip, catch up with the guy in the chariot!

Philip: Whatever you say.

Philip jogs toward the chairs. At the same time, the eunuch starts reading Isaiah 53:7–9 aloud.

Philip: Say, there, does what you’re reading make sense?

Eunuch: How can it make sense, if I don’t have someone to guide me? Hop in!

Philip sits in the other chair.

Eunuch: Listen to this. “As a sheep led to slaughter, and quiet as a lamb being sheared, he was silent, saying nothing. He was mocked and put down, never got a fair trial. But who now can count his kin since he’s been taken from the earth?”! If you don’t mind my asking, just who is this guy being talked about? The prophet? Somebody else? Me?

Philip now leans close to the eunuch, and begins speaking and gesturing.

Angel: (facing group) In case you’re wondering, my man Philip is working his way from Isaiah’s words to the good news about Jesus. (turning to face the “chariot”) Hey, watch out for that water ahead!

Eunuch: Why, look! Here’s some water now. So, what’s to prevent me from being baptized?

The eunuch pulls back on imaginary reins to stop.

Eunuch and Philip stand, take a step, and then act as if they are wading into water.

Angel: (facing group) That’s what I like to see—somebody who thought they had no hope finding hope, and getting baptized besides. It’s been a good day! But there’s more work to do.

The angel grabs Philip and the two run out the nearest door.

The eunuch gets back in the chair, with a big smile and a loud “Praise be to God!”

THE END—OR, ACTUALLY, THE BEGINNING!