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theme: Divine Appointment (Acts 8:26-40)

materials: Bibles, news story, link to Rembrandt's sketch:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/lorenmarie/3385892165/lightbox/>

welcome

Show, if you can, the Rembrandt sketch of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch, but don't tell people what scene is being depicted. What do people think is going on in the sketch? What can they tell about the characters from the way they are sketched?

Bring in a news item about your neighbourhood, city, country or world that you can discuss with the cell. Where do you see God in this story? Ask other members of cell to bring in stories to discuss in subsequent weeks.

worship

Where have you seen God this week? Where have you experienced divine community this week? Read **Isaiah 56:3-8**. Then pray for the Church in Africa. At the end of the Leader's Guide below you will find some information to read out about the growth and spread of Christianity in Africa in modern times. Pray also for your Church, that it will not be divided in any way along racial or cultural grounds, and that your evangelism and service would include people from all races and backgrounds.

If you are in Canada, check out the "Prayer Cast" called "This Prayer Hour Has 22 Minutes" on Tuesday nights, 11:11 Eastern Time, at www.24-7prayer.ca

word

Read **Acts 8:26-40**

How is this story similar to the one we looked at last week, in which Philip evangelises to the Samaritans? How is it different?

How does Philip end up meeting the Ethiopian man?

What do we know about the Ethiopian man?

Why is it noteworthy that God has chosen to have Philip bring the gospel to him in particular?

Why can't the man understand the passage he is reading from the Hebrew Scriptures?

Why would this be the perfect passage to prepare the Ethiopian to accept Jesus?

What does this story tell you about evangelism?

What does this passage tell you about what the Church is meant to be like?

How has racism damaged the witness of the Church?

How is your cell / Church inclusive?

What requirements are there to be a part of the community of God? What barriers are there?



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witness

Where are there racial or ethnic divisions in your city or neighbourhood? How is your cell or Church working to overcome them, and to be a people who show the impartiality of Christ when it comes to these false divisions?

action points

Pray together, asking for divine appointments this week, people who are prepared to receive a word from the Lord for you, or who may be ready to receive Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. Pray for boldness to approach and speak, and for the words to say. Then be ready each day for the Lord to put people in your path. Report back to cell next week how it went.

leader's guide

When Jesus' disciples had asked, after his resurrection, if he was now going to restore the kingdom to Israel, his response to them showed just how limited their perspective was, and how expansive his kingdom vision: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (**Acts 1:6-8**).

Last week we saw the evangelistic efforts of Philip in Samaria, a place where the young Church would have been very unlikely to go had it not been for the persecution in Jerusalem. In that story, a thousand years of sin and bad blood had been overcome by the righteousness and blood of Jesus, as Jewish Christians came and laid hands on new Samaritan Christians, and witnessed the Holy Spirit baptize them and bring them as full members into the Church. This was an opening, the first steps into the great worldwide mission that Jesus had given to his apostles. The passage this week takes us even deeper into that mission.

The new community of Jesus followers was to be an inclusive one, not in the sense that everyone was in automatically, but that no one would be excluded by virtue of class, gender, race, or background. Absolutely everyone would be granted the opportunity to receive or reject the gospel message of Jesus, and if they received it, would be welcomed in. No sins, not even the historic sins of the Samaritans, were too much for God to forgive. This is the fulfillment of the great promise in **Genesis 12:3** that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." It is also the fulfillment of Simeon's prophecy over the infant Jesus, who saw the salvation of God through Jesus "prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles." (**Luke 2:29-32**) It was still a steep learning curve for the new Church, not least for apostles such as Peter, but it was something that the Lord desired and would have in his new covenant people. Stephen had said that God could not be contained within walls made by human hands; God also cannot be restrained by the walls of division created by human hands and hearts.

Philip, fresh from having begun living out the radical implications of this forgiveness and inclusivity in Samaria, is now instructed by God to go to a place where he will meet someone else who needs to hear the gospel. Philip, obedient and ready, travels to this desert road on the way to Gaza.

On this road he sees a fellow traveler. This man is from Ethiopia (present day Sudan), almost certainly a black African, an important official in the court of Candace (mother of the King), a eunuch, and connected in some way to Judaism. The Ethiopian is probably a Gentile, but had just been in Jerusalem at the Temple, and was reading Hebrew Scriptures, so he was probably what was called a "God-fearer", someone who would not or could not adhere to the full Jewish Law but who was trying to serve the Lord to the best of his ability. How this



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man had become connected to Judaism we don't know, but we do know that this connection had prepared him perfectly for the encounter he was about to have with Philip.

There are a few things to take note of from the above description of the Ethiopian eunuch. To those of a Greek mind-set, Ethiopia was the very edge of the world, the end of the earth, as far away as minds could conceive. If the Gospel could go there, it could go anywhere. The Ethiopian had just been to the Temple at Jerusalem, but he was seriously limited in terms of how far he could participate in Temple worship. As a Gentile, he could never advance farther than the court of the Gentiles. But he was also hampered by the fact that he was a eunuch. **Deuteronomy 23:1** tells us that "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord." So he is disqualified on two counts. This hadn't prevented him from desiring to worship the Lord, however, nor in attempting to understand the sacred Scriptures.

Interestingly, a passage close to the one the eunuch was reading has some powerful promises to both foreigners and to eunuchs in particular: "Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people'; and let not the eunuch say, 'Behold, I am 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 will never be cut off.'" (**Isa 56:3-5, and keep reading until verse 8!**)

God's Holy Spirit tells Philip to go to this man's chariot and witness to him. The point here is that God is initiating the evangelism himself. This is what he wants; it is no accident. Philip obeys, and overhears the man reading (or having read to him) **Isa 53:7-8**. The Ethiopian cannot understand what he is reading, because the Hebrew Scriptures require interpretation. Jesus had opened the minds of his disciples to the Scriptures (at one point during a very similar story along the road to Emmaus – **Luke 24:13-35**), and now his followers were able to open the minds of others to these same Scriptures. Philip explains to the Ethiopian that the prophet was referring to Jesus, the Son of Man who had to suffer and die. He then shared the gospel with him, and the man accepted Jesus and was baptized.

The question is asked by the Ethiopian: "What prevents me from being baptized?" And the surprising answer is: "Nothing at all." Though we have in our history held onto so many things that cause division, though it is said that Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour in the American week, the reality is that there is no barrier of race or gender or class or background to prevent this person, or any other person, from being grafted into the new community of Christ. Those old categories are not spiritually relevant. Now what matters is repentance and the forgiveness of sins by the grace of God. To receive the righteousness of Christ and to be given the Holy Spirit are the requirements for being part of the Church. And to be part of the community of Christ means to be brothers and sisters in Christ; there are no second class Christians. The more we get into Acts, the more we realize the implications of this for the mission of the gospel. If the Samaritans could be forgiven and grafted into this new community, they who were unclean and heretical and schismatic, so then could the Gentiles be forgiven and grafted in, even those as different and distant as Ethiopian eunuchs. So then could we be grafted in, when we have repented of our sins and been forgiven. So then can anyone be grafted in, even today, when they receive the forgiveness and righteousness and Spirit of Christ.

For the worship section:

Christianity is now one of the two most widely practised religions in Africa. There has been tremendous growth of Christians in Africa - coupled by a relative decline in adherence to traditional African religions. As evidence, only nine million Christians were in Africa in 1900, but by the year 2000, there were an estimated 380 million Christians. According to a 2006 Pew Forum on Religion and Public life study, 147 millions of African Christians were "renewalists" (a term that includes both [Pentecostals](#) and [Charismatics](#)). According to David Barrett, most of the 552,000 congregations in 11,500 denominations throughout Africa in 1995 are completely unknown in the West. Much of the Christian growth in Africa is now due to African evangelism rather than European missionaries. Christianity in Africa shows tremendous variety, from the ancient forms of [Oriental Orthodox](#)



Christianity in Egypt, Ethiopia, and Eritrea to the newest African-Christian denominations of Nigeria, a country that has experienced massive conversion to Christianity in recent times. Several *syncretistic* and *messianic* sects have formed throughout much of the continent, including the *Nazareth Baptist Church* in South Africa and the *Aladura* churches in Nigeria. There is also fairly widespread populations of *Seventh Day Adventists* and *Jehovah's Witnesses*.

Some experts predict the shift of Christianity's center of gravity from the European industrialized nations to Africa and Asia in modern times. *Yale University* historian *Lamin Sanneh* stated, that "African Christianity was not just an exotic, curious phenomenon in an obscure part of the world, but that African Christianity might be the shape of things to come." The statistics from the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (David Barrett) illustrate the emerging trend of dramatic Christian growth on the continent and supposes, that in 2025 there will be 633 million Christians in Africa.