

MOVED BY THE SPIRIT

As the community of believers grew, new apostles—people who hadn't been close to Jesus, or even known him when he was alive—joined in the mission of sharing the Holy Spirit. Many of them were as filled with the Spirit as the original disciples, and powerfully touched people with God's word. But it soon became even more dangerous work.

Last week we heard how the religious leaders wanted to stop Peter and John from teaching and healing. When one of the new apostles, Stephen, offended some people with his teaching about Jesus, they got some men to go to the religious leaders and tell them that Stephen was saying bad things about Moses—even about God. The lies convinced the leaders, and they had Stephen arrested. In front of the judges Stephen didn't back down, but kept on speaking about Jesus. He had harsh words for the leaders: "You stubborn people!" he told them. "You always resist the Holy Spirit! Your ancestors killed the prophets, and now you're disobeying God's laws on purpose!" That made them so angry that they grabbed Stephen and dragged him outside, where they threw stones on him until he died. His last words were, "God, don't blame them for what they're doing!"

After they killed Stephen the religious leaders decided it was past time to break up this Jesus group once and for all. Led by a Pharisee named Saul, soldiers went from house to house in Jerusalem looking for believers and throwing them in prison. But lots of the believers managed to escape the search, and they scattered to other towns and cities where they could find places to stay. It was a terrible and scary time for them, but something good came out of it too: everywhere they went, the believers told people the Good News about Jesus.

A man named Philip, for example, escaped to Samaria. People there wanted to hear him talk about Jesus—all the more so when he started to do miracles and cast out demons. It felt like a festival, people were so excited, and lots of them joined the community of believers.

Before long, Philip heard word from God to "Go south!" So he headed down the desert road that leads towards Egypt. As he was walking along he was passed by a well-dressed man in a fancy carriage. Now, Philip didn't really have anywhere he had to be, so when he heard a whisper from the Holy Spirit saying "catch up to that carriage, and walk along beside it" he did just that. Jogging up to the carriage, he heard the man reading out loud from the book of the prophet Isaiah. Philip knew the man was important—it turns out he was an official in the Ethiopian government, going home after visiting Jerusalem—but with the Holy Spirit backing him up he didn't hold back from talking to him.

"Do you understand that book you're reading?" Philip asked the official.

"Why no, I don't!" the man replied. "How can I, if no one teaches me?" He'd been reading the part in Isaiah where the prophet says, "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter; like a lamb he was silent in front of the shearers." He invited Philip into his carriage to continue the conversation: "Tell me, is the prophet talking about himself or somebody else?" So Philip told him how Isaiah was really talking about Jesus, and went on to tell him all about what Jesus had said and done. As they rode and talked, the official noticed a stream by the side of the road. "Look, there's some water!" he said. "Can I just get baptized right here?" So he stopped the carriage and they went down to the stream, where Philip baptized him.

When they came out of the water the Spirit snatched Philip away. The official never saw him again, but he went on his way rejoicing. Philip found himself further north, in a town called Azotus; he preached about Jesus there, and then travelled north to Caesarea telling everyone the Good News along the way.

Wondering Questions

I wonder why Stephen and Philip felt that it was so important to share the Good News?

I wonder why the Ethiopian official was in such a hurry to get baptized?

I wonder if it felt strange for Philip to move around like that?