

Easter Week 6, Acts 10:44-48

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So in our reading from the book of Acts today, we are being dropped right in the middle of a fast moving story. Peter is telling Cornelius and his household about Jesus and as he does, they are being drawn in to believe. Before Peter can even finish what he has to say, the Holy Spirit is poured out on these people and it says that “The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” What’s the big deal? Why are these circumcised believers who had come with Peter so astounded?

Well, from their perspective, something unprecedented was happening. God was doing something in these people’s lives, these GENTILES, something that SEEMED to overturn thousands and thousands of years of history.

Throughout Jewish history, God had told the people of Israel that to be a part of His special chosen people, you needed to take on certain practices encoded for them in Jewish law. It goes all the way back to Moses and the Exodus. God liberates them from slavery and bondage in Egypt. He leads them through the Red Sea into the wilderness and eventually into the Promised Land. Now when God rescued them from Egypt, He told them that you shall be for me my special, set apart, chosen people. And the way that you live out that identity is to follow my commandments. It included commandments about how you looked out for the alien and stranger, how you structured your time, how you worshiped, what you ate, how you farmed so that the poor would be taken care of, how you shaved your beard... all kinds of things. So things like Sabbath keeping, eating a kosher diet, and circumcision became identity markers about what it meant to be a part of God’s special, chosen people. And all of this was God’s way to create a distinct people that lived out a radically different lifestyle so that through them, He could show the rest of the world what it looked like to be in relationship with Him – a sort of display people, a showcase of what it meant to follow the true and living God.

Now throughout their history, Israel kept falling away from these commandments. And when they did, they would suffer the consequences – God will allow them to be taken over by enemy powers. When the Israelites would get their act back together and follow God and his commandments, they would experience freedom and renewal. This up and down cycle of falling away from God and experiencing judgment...coming back to God and experiencing freedom and renewal would happen over and over and over again. And it all revolved on their faithfulness to His law – how committed they were to live out their identity as God’s special chosen people by obeying these commandments – commandments such keeping the Sabbath, eating a kosher diet, and circumcising every male child.

The book of 1 Maccabees is a historical work written in the 400 year period between the end of the OT and the beginning of the NT. In it we are told that at one point, the enemy ruling power was trying to force every Jew to forsake their laws. In one case, it says that it was a crime to circumcise your kids and every mother that was found to have circumcised their child would face the death penalty. Both the mother and the child would be executed. [The mother would be executed with their infant child tied around the mother's neck. They would be thrown off a high cliff.] And so during this period, Jewish freedom fighters would rise up to fight for their freedom, fight for the freedom to do as God had commanded them, to fight for the right to keep the Sabbath, eat a kosher diet, and circumcise their children.

Now, in light of this brief review of history, let's go back to the Acts passage. What's the big deal with Cornelius and his household receiving the Holy Spirit? Why are Peter's colleague so astounded at this? Here's the deal: The Holy Spirit is the ultimate sign of God's acceptance into His family. In Ephesians, Paul writes about how when we believe we are marked with *the seal* of the Holy Spirit. It's like God's royal seal placed on us that says, this one is mine. And what's more, the way that the Holy Spirit was given to Cornelius and his household looked just like what happened to Peter and the rest of the Jewish Christians back at Pentecost. If you remember the story, after Jesus had been raised from the dead and then taken up to heaven, God poured out the Holy Spirit upon all of the early believers who had been gathering for prayer. And when that happened, they all started speaking in other languages. And that's exactly what happened here for Cornelius and his household.

And Cornelius and his household were all Gentiles. Earlier in Acts 10, it tells us that Cornelius was a centurion in the Italian cohort. So picture Russell Crowe from Gladiator with a thick Italian accent. A battle hardened soldier who had risen in the ranks to be put in charge of 100 men. He was a part of the occupying force put in place by the Roman Empire to keep people like Peter and the Jews in check. But now here he is hearing the good news of Jesus from Peter and he believes, he has faith, he believes in Jesus. And God sends the Holy Spirit on him, declaring him and his household, to be accepted by God.

But here's the thing – Cornelius and his household, these Gentiles, had received the Holy Spirit without having to be circumcised, commit to eating a kosher diet, commit to keeping the Sabbath, commit to keeping Jewish law. It was all because they believed.

Think about it. All of the early Christians were Jews who had come to believe that Jesus was their Messiah. They hadn't left behind their Jewish faith. They saw Jesus as the fulfillment of their Jewish faith. And so like any good, faithful Jewish, they continued living out their faith in Jesus in distinctly Jewish ways – keeping the Sabbath, keeping kosher diet, keeping up habits of prayer and fasting – as dictated by OT Jewish law. After all, for centuries now, God had been hammering home the message that “you are my special, chosen people and the way that you live that out is to follow my laws.” And when they let go of these laws, they would suffer the consequences. They had even fought wars in order to secure the right to keep these Jewish laws.

And now, here was God coming in and bypassing all of that! What's going on?

Well, I think we get it. God was doing a new thing in Jesus. In the past, God had been working with the Jews to create a special people that would be His set apart people – to live out a special calling, to be set apart from the rest of the world as a sort of display people – a display of what it could look like to be in relationship with the true and living God. But there were hints all through the OT that God did not want this to be just a Jewish thing. And now, in Jesus, this is being fulfilled and God's chosen people has opened up to all peoples with the Church. Now, God was out to make *the Church* a display people. And the Church is for all kinds of people. No longer about one ethnicity. As 1 Peter talks about when talking about the Church – “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

And it helps us see that we ought not put up unnecessary barriers to keep people out – barriers of class or gender, barriers of ethnicity or race or sexual orientation. It's all a matter of faith – believing in Jesus as the Savior of the world.

But I wonder if there is another message for us today. I wonder if God is not also trying to tell us to be open for surprises. All of us, in our own ways, can become like Peter and his Jewish colleagues – our entire lives we've become accustomed to life working a certain way. And we become accustomed to our routines, we come to expect life and church to operate in a certain way. Even today, many of us have come in expecting church to go a certain way.

And yet, the Spirit of God is always on the move. And God is present everywhere. When you pull back and think about what we do and say on a Sunday morning... it might give us pause. What's really going on here... Might there be more going on here that might wake us up and surprise us out from our slumber?

In 2 Kings, Elisha and his servant were surrounded. Enemy troops had come to kill the prophet Elisha. And so now they were surrounded. Elisha's servant is terrified. He's quaking in his boots. But Elisha is all calm. Cool as a cucumber. So the servant is all scared and cries out, “What will we do?” Elisha replies, “Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them.” And then he prays, “O LORD, open his eyes that he may see.” And then... the servant looks out and sees that the horizon is full of chariots of fire – the armies of heaven have come to protect them.

What might happen if God were to open *our* eyes? Every Sunday we say things like, “Countless throngs of angels stand before you to serve you night and day; and, beholding the glory of your presence, they offer you unceasing praise. Joining with them, and giving voice to every creature under heaven, we acclaim you, and glorify your Name, as we sing: Holy, Holy, Holy...” What are we saying except to say that we are at that moment joining in with the angels and archangels who are at that moment singing praises to God. What if God would open our eyes?

Anne Dillard has a famous quote about worship services: Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return." What might happen if we were awakened to see... truly see the God we worship each Sunday morning?

Or maybe you find yourself in darkness and despair and are tempted to give up hope that God is even there. You have grown accustomed to the darkness. And yet our God is a God of surprises. He may not always come in the nick of time to save the day... but that is the nature of resurrection – He comes after the corpse is dead and buried and then brings resurrection glory – a glory far greater than anyone could ever have even hoped for. Are you open to the God of resurrection?

Every week, we come to church – we come out of the hustle and bustle of weekly routines, out of the ups and downs of “normal” life – and we come to church. It’s my hope that Sunday mornings become a time to wake up to glory – to pay attention to surprises, a time to open our eyes to spiritual, transcendent reality – to wake up to the presence of God in our lives. We come to hear from the Scriptures to help us have spiritual vision with which to look at life. And we come to the Table to receive Christ’s presence so that our faith is renewed and our hearts quickened to His grace and mercy for us who believe.

And right now, we are in Eastertide season – a season to remember what? To remember that Christ is alive, risen from the dead. He is alive today and present with us!

So I want to say, “WAKE UP!” Wake up to a God of surprises – a God that may want to jolt you out of routines and paradigms and do something new. WAKE UP!