Sermon May 9, 2021

After studying the Bible and preparing sermons as often and for as long as I have, you’d think I’d expect to be surprised by my reading of scripture. But can you really expect to be surprised? A philosophical or semantic idea for another time.

Our text from Acts is nothing but surprising. First let me remind you of what’s going on. Remember way, way back on Easter Sunday we read the middle of Acts Chapter 10. “Oh, yes Pastor, of course we remember that. The pandemic has not completely erased any sense of time. We can perfectly recite everything that happens in church.” Riiiight.

But the beginning of the Chapter a centurion of the Italian unity is living in Caesarea – can you get any more Roman?! – and he is ‘a devout man’ praying to God with his household. Wow. Roman Jew in the military. But this centurion receives a vision to ask Peter to come to his house and talk.

Peter, formerly know as Simon, is chilling in a house in Joppa when he receives a vision that no food is actually unclean, that nothing that God considers clean can be un-holy, not even associating with those dirty gentile Romans. He then gets the message from the centurion, travels to his house and starts the sermon which we heard on Easter. “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.” Jesus isn’t just King of the Jews, as his cross proclaimed, but is Lord of all. The title usually reserved for the emperor. Peter is telling a very powerful Roman military commander that Jesus is more powerful than the Roman emperor.

And then comes the cliffhanger. We are left on Easter not hearing the reaction to Peter’s sermon about Jesus’ ministry, death and resurrection. So what you might expect from that? Peter’s head to suddenly be detached from his shoulders? For him to be kicked back to Joppa?

Actually, we then catch up with our brief reading for today: “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 45The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, 46for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 47“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” 48So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.”

I mentioned being surprised by reading scriptures earlier because, really, God is constantly doing things in unexpected places and ways with unexpected people. We Lutherans like things in good order. Generally. And we like to talk about receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit in Baptism. But the Holy Spirit got bored of Peter’s sermon and decided to just get in there! While Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. (That crazy Holy Spirit! That’s not the proper liturgical order of things! Silly Spirit.)

And these folks were more gentile than gentile, more Roman than Rome! Jews entering the house of a gentile are breaking all the holy laws. Jews eating with gentiles are breaking all the holy laws. Jews eating gentile foods declared un-holy by the scriptures are . . . wow, beyond the law! The Holy Spirit doesn’t care. The Spirit dives right in. Doesn’t care about ‘should’, or Jewish purity laws, or who is occupying whose land, or asking permission, or getting consensus. While Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. Peter asks, “Since they already have the Spirit are you all Jewish folk gonna stop God? Are you going to keep them from Baptism?” Acts 10 makes plain that God will do as God will, and that ecclesial practices, human boundaries, and ritual norms do not have the final say on the frontiers of the community.

Really this is a parallel or a foreshadowing of Pentecost which we will celebrate on May 23. The Holy Spirit comes upon all who have heard God’s word. And often Pentecost is described as the Church’s birthday, when we were given the spirit and sent to the ends of the earth to proclaim God’s word.

But the metaphor is not quite right. Pentecost is less of a birthday—and more of a block party. It does more than celebrate a historical event; it breaks out into the street and redefines the neighborhood. Pentecost is strange and welcoming and makes us question ourselves as much as it makes us question what God is up to. Every time Pentecost happens, it remakes our understanding of ourselves. Pentecost brings an ongoing, mysterious movement of God into view. And that movement is still at work in the world. We continue to be stretched in our identity, loyalties, and love in response to a resurrected God. We are a resurrection people.

And this reading from Acts points out that our ideas of baptism, of the reception of the Holy Spirit doesn’t follow easy formulas and behave as expected. In fact, baptism accomplishes more than the forgiveness of sins, more than an embodied joining between Christ and disciple – united with a death like his we rise into new life. As Acts 10 makes clear, there is a joining of identities into the body of Christ in the outpouring of God’s Spirit. In Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, male nor female. Easter breaks open all identities, there is no status quo with the Holy Spirit. In Willie James Jenning’s commentary on Acts he states, “in the home of a centurion, a rip in the fabric of space and time has occurred…that will open up endless new possibilities of life with others.”

The verses in our reading from Acts do not resolve questions or tie up loose-ends; they open up a new, beautiful set of disruptive possibilities. What does Easter mean for the world? And more to the point, **what does Easter mean for us?** The Spirit’s noisy interruption of Peter’s sermon convicts us of our desire for boxes to put the Holy Spirit in, it points out our sin of wanting only the calm and predictable and same. It asks us to see an Easter season that is not fading into completion but is, in fact, calling us to an ongoing, costly way of life.

We who hear this reading are still left hanging at the end, stunned at what this passage might mean for the ways we negotiate our lives, finances, hierarchies, and cultural comforts. Are we ready for such “rips” in the fabric of our expectations? This story’s end is not the end of the story. This end is only a beginning.

May the God of hope keep you in all joy and peace in believing so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Spirit. Amen.