

7th Sunday of Easter (Year A)

Acts 10

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius.' He stared at him in terror and said, 'What is it, Lord?' He answered, 'Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.' When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.' So Peter went down to the men and said, 'I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?' They answered, 'Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.' So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshipped him. But Peter made him get up, saying, 'Stand up; I am only a mortal.' And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; and he said to them, 'You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?'

Cornelius replied, 'Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. He said, "Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea." Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.'

Then Peter began to speak to them: '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. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 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. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Acts 16

Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us.

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, 'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.' She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, 'I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.' The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.' The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They answered, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, 'Let those men go.' And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, 'The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace.' But Paul replied, 'They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves.' The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. After leaving the prison they went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.

Instead of flying through the second third of the Book of Acts like we “power walked” our way through the first third, I have decided to lift up before us today two great stories of the middle portion of this book of the Bible. The first one, which Terry read so eloquently, concerns a vision the Apostle Peter had in the midst of being visited by a very unlikely character who would, likewise, become a member of “the Way.” The second is a dramatic retelling of Paul and Silas in prison. But, as to the first story...

The camera opens up by telling us of a man, a Roman man, by the name of Cornelius. Not only is he a Roman man (A.K.A. not meant to be friendly with the Jews) but he was a Roman *soldier*. Definitely not someone you would expect to be cozy with this seditious movement that would come to be known as Christianity! Cornelius, we are told, despite being a Gentile, was nevertheless a God-fearing man who gave to the poor and prayed constantly to God. One day, as he is praying, a vision comes to him and Cornelius sees an angel of God appearing to him. Like practically every person in the Bible who encounters an angel of God, he is besieged with terror. The angel reassures him that his presence is a good thing. He tells Cornelius that God has noticed his piety and wants him to send for a certain man that you and I know to be the Apostle Peter. Cornelius obeys and sends men to find this follower of “the Way.”

Meanwhile, at Peter's current residence, he feels compelled to pray and seeks the solitude of a rooftop to do so. As he devoutly prays upon his perch, he begins to feel peckish and gets the munchies. In

his hunger-induced trance, Peter sees a vision that is even more bizarre than our friend Cornelius'. Peter sees the heavens open up and something like a sheet being lowered from the heights. In the sheet were all kinds of four-footed creatures, both reptiles and birds; so, basically, full of things that a good Jew, such as Peter, would never be allowed to eat by Biblical mandate. It would, nevertheless, be a tempting sight for someone as hungry as Peter. A voice from the heavens bellows and beckons Peter to kill and eat and have his fill. Peter, however, even in his hunger trance, knows better. He knows that this must be a trap, a trial of temptation to see if he will forsake the Biblical laws that he has followed his whole life. Politely, Peter says "thanks but no thanks. I know better than to eat that which is unclean."

But the voice from the sky will have none of it. God says these following prophetic words: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Like all important Biblical things, this exchange happens three times to make underscore its importance.

Peter wakes from his trance and wonders its meaning. Was God just talking about food or was God perhaps talking about something, or someone, else? As Peter ponders the premonition, he hears a knock at the door. Lo and behold, it is Cornelius' men telling him to come at once to see him. Peter must have been fearful. By any account, a few Romans knocking incessantly at the door of a follower of Jesus would be cause for concern. However, their intentions, it turns out, are peaceful and he welcomes them in and gives them shelter.

The next day, Peter goes with them to visit with Cornelius, this Roman Gentile, with his family and close friends. Upon their introductions, Cornelius brings Peter up to speed with his vision and suddenly everything clicks! Peter understands that these visions by both himself and Cornelius were no mere coincidence! Rather, it was the work of the Spirit! Peter understood that the bizarre, trippy dream of his was God's way of saying that all people, even Gentiles, were to be welcomed into God's family. Gentiles were not profane, not unclean, but rather a part of creation no less than the Jews and, therefore, God called it good! Societal norms would dictate that a Jew like Peter should have no contact whatsoever with a Gentile like Cornelius, much less his entire family and friends! However, as we have seen so far in the Book of Acts, especially with the turnaround of Saul the Enemy of Christianity becoming Paul the Poster Child of Christianity, the Holy Spirit makes it a habit of inviting the most unlikely of characters to be the bedrocks of God's new movement.

This text calls us to look around us - no, not here in this room, but all around us as we go about our weeks - to see who God just might be calling us to minister to and with. Perhaps we have work to do with that heroin addict down the street. Or perhaps the undocumented immigrant who landscaped your yard this weekend. Or perhaps that person who your family has hated all these years for a transgression done long ago that no one can even remember. Whoever it is that is unlikely, even they can and are being called to do their part. And here's the good or bad news depending on how you feel about this situation: there's nothing you and I can do about it. The Spirit will have her way and it's our job as disciples to heed her voice.

Today's second story is an equally bizarre one. Remember that mean guy named Saul that was employed by the Roman Empire to terrorize Christians? Well, he now goes by "Paul" and he's done a complete 180. He is now the poster child for the very religious movement that he had dedicated his life to destroying. Now, he has dedicated his life to its cause. Paul is traveling around with his companion, Silas, and spreading the Gospel through word and deed.

In Derbe and Lystra, Paul and Silas encounter a new disciple named Timothy. There was only one problem: Timothy's father was Greek which meant that he was not circumcised. Therefore, Paul and Silas had Timothy circumcised in order to prove that he had, well...skin in the game, so to speak.

After picking up Timothy and sending him in his way, Paul has a vision (there seem to be a lot of those in the Book of Acts). In his vision, Paul sees a man from Macedonia begging him to come to their help. Taking this vision as a divine message, the next day Paul and Silas set out for Macedonia. Upon arriving at their destination, they run into a woman by the name of Lydia, who is a merchant who deals in fine purple cloth. She befriends them and gives them shelter during their stay in Macedonia.

In the evenings, Paul and Silas enjoy Lydia's hospitality. During the day, they make their rounds around Macedonia spreading the Gospel.

One day, Paul and Silas meet a slave-girl who is, presumably, possessed by some malicious power. Her owners took advantage of her mental illness by forcing her to make money by roaming the streets and telling people's fortunes. She apparently takes a liking to Paul and Silas and begins to follow them everywhere, saying: "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." She would scream this incessantly as she followed them for many days.

Paul is human and every man has his limits. One day, Paul has had enough of this relentless screaming by this crazy woman and turns around to heal her, less out of sense of Christian discipleship and more out of a need for peace and quiet. Paul turns to her and compels the Holy Spirit to cleanse her of her demon and to, frankly, get her to shut up. Miraculously, the woman is healed and freed from her demonic powers of fortune-telling. Paul and Silas were happy because they finally were freed of this woman screaming behind them as they walked around the city. The slave-girl was certainly happy because she was now had peace and quiet inside of her very mind. However, her owners were not quite so happy that she had been freed of her means of their money-making.

So her owners have Paul and Silas dragged to court, publicly flogged, and thrown into prison with their ankles clasped in irons in a dark and damp dungeon.

As the hours of Paul and Silas' imprisonment ticked by, they passed the time by singing hymns and praying to God. Imagine that! Instead of panicking and lamenting, these imprisoned men are singing and praying! Then, a violent earthquake shakes the very foundations of the prison and their shackles are broken and their prison-cell door ripped open. As the dust settles but before Paul and Silas are even able to walk out, their prison guard panics, knowing that he will surely be blamed for this escape. As he dramatically draws his sword and prepares to take his own life in desperation, Paul yells for him to stop! With fearful tears in his eyes, the prison guard asks what he must do to "be saved." Paul and Silas invite themselves over to the guard's house. Once they are there, the guard and his family clean and wrap Paul and Silas' wounds. Immediately, Paul and Silas baptize the prison-guard and his entire household.

Afterwards, they return to Lydia's home to continue their evangelical journey.

Hopefully, by now we are beginning to see some common threads throughout these stories of the Book of Acts. First of all, unlikely characters are being brought into the fold. Think about it, we have Peter who denied Christ not once but three times. We have a cruel persecutor of Christians who is now the chief evangelist. We have women, with no mention of a spouse, like Lydia and Dorcas, who are becoming important witnesses of the Gospel movement. We have a Roman soldier named Cornelius who is baptized with his whole household. Finally, and similarly, we have a prison guard who is, quite literally, saved and he and his household are baptized.

In all of these things, we see the Holy Spirit moving in bizarre, creative, and powerful ways to further the spread of the Christian movement. Disastrous situations are turned around to benefit the cause of Christ. Entire households, young and old alike, are being baptized. Disciples are being imprisoned and miraculously set free. Time and time again, the Christian disciples slip through the fingers of the Romans and the religious elite.

On a final note, it is important to appreciate the differences of the Church then and many in the Church now. We live in a time of high anxiety. We are worried about our country and the politicians who are running it like a reality television show. We are worried about the financial health of our families and our communities. We are worried about this congregation and about its future with fewer and fewer young people in the pews. We are worried that we may never see again “the good ‘ole days” when these pews were filled with young families and we were known as the home for youth on our island.

When we meet anxiety and worry, many of our congregations have responded by “circling the wagons” and “hunkering down” and becoming much, much, much too insular. We are worried so we cling to that which we know and welcome only those who do not challenge our worldview. Instead of opening our doors, we close them and put our own comfort ahead of the countercultural Christian mandate to welcome all, love all, and serve all.

The early church had just as many, if not more, reasons to be anxious. Their’s was a movement that did not enjoy the political privilege it affords us today. Their’s was a movement that threatened those who followed it with the very real possibility of oppression, persecution, and even execution. However, instead of circling their wagons and hunkering down, the early Church did the exact opposite. Instead, they widened the circle and invited even more people in. Different people. Marginalized people. Unlikely people. Instead of welcoming only those who looked and acted like them, the followers of the early Christian movement intentionally welcome the “other;” no matter how awkward and difficult a task that was.

May these texts invite us to marvel in the ways that God works in our world. May these texts serve as a reminder that the very church we strive to be is an extension of the very same church you see in these pages. The same Holy Spirit who guides the narrative of these stories is the same Holy Spirit that will come upon us next week as we celebrate Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, and the confirmation of the young disciples among us. May we bask in the wonder that the Holy Spirit has her own agenda and we would do well to listen to her wisdom as we continue to faithfully seek to follow the Risen Christ.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.