

Acts 11:1-18 The Message

11 ¹⁻³ The news traveled fast and in no time the leaders and friends back in Jerusalem heard about it—heard that the non-Jewish “outsiders” were now “in.” When Peter got back to Jerusalem, some of his old associates, concerned about circumcision, called him on the carpet: “What do you think you’re doing rubbing shoulders with that crowd, eating what is prohibited and ruining our good name?”

⁴⁻⁶ So Peter, starting from the beginning, laid it out for them step-by-step: “Recently I was in the town of Joppa praying. I fell into a trance & saw a vision: Something like a huge blanket, lowered by ropes at its four corners, came down out of heaven & settled on the ground in front of me. Milling around on the blanket were farm animals, wild animals, reptiles, birds—you name it, it was there. Fascinated, I took it all in.

⁷⁻¹⁰ “Then I heard a voice: ‘Go to it, Peter—kill and eat.’ I said, ‘Oh, no, Master. I’ve never so much as tasted food that wasn’t kosher.’ The voice spoke again: ‘If God says it’s okay, it’s okay.’ This happened three times, and then the blanket was pulled back up into the sky.

¹¹⁻¹⁴ “Just then three men showed up at the house where I was staying, sent from Caesarea to get me. The Spirit told me to go with them, no questions asked. So I went with them, I and six friends, to the man who had sent for me. He told us how he had seen an angel right in his own house, real as his next-door neighbor, saying, ‘Send to Joppa and get Simon, the one they call Peter. He’ll tell you something that will save your life—in fact, you and everyone you care for.’

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ “So, I started in, talking. Before I’d spoken half a dozen sentences, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as the Spirit did on us the first time. I remembered Jesus’ words: ‘John baptized with water; you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’

So I ask you: If God gave the same exact gift to them as to **us** when we believed in the Master Jesus Christ, how could I object to God?”

¹⁸ Hearing it all laid out like that, the leaders in Jerusalem quieted down. And then, as it sank in, they started praising God. “It’s really happened! God has broken through to the other nations, opened them up to Life!” *This is the Word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.*

Friends, rising to the occasion because we must, & giving of ourselves to others even when we haven’t planned for it is often the Christian way of life.

~It’s dealing with life’s unexpected turn of events.

~It’s the surprise that catches us off guard.

~It’s the ask that comes out of the blue, that we are ill-prepared for, or just inconvenienced by.

But I reiterate—Rising to the occasion because we must, & giving of ourselves to others even when we haven’t planned ahead for it is often the Christian way of life. Why? The Spirit moves, and when it does, we follow. The Spirit moves within us—nudging, pushing, guiding, leading—and we follow.

Because it's the need that must be filled,
~a medical emergency that changes everything in an instant,
~an injustice against the least, the lost, and the last.
~a time of fear that immobilizes and threatens someone's safety, security & wellbeing.
~a response to a natural disaster.

Rising to the occasion because we must... and giving of ourselves—of our precious time, of our varied talents, skills and abilities, giving our treasure, yes our hard earned money or goods, giving in such ways of ourselves TO OTHERS...even when we haven't planned for it, is often the Christian way of life... this Way of Generosity...of doing unto others because of what God has done for us.

Oh friends the Spirit moves and we are called to follow. Even when it is hard, even when it's inconvenient, even when it's scary and amidst uncertainty, even when others may not agree. We are called to RISE...because we MUST as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Today we begin a three-week preaching series that explores The Way of Generosity for Christ... To step in that threshold of possibility and opportunity...to rise up...To make a difference in a hurting and needy world.

It's what Peter did in today's passage from Acts. He reviewed for the questioning leaders back in Jerusalem why he rose to the occasion & was hanging out, dining with gentiles—people who do not abide by kosher laws, not circumcised, Gentiles!

So Peter shares the vision he received from God and his actions that followed, directly in light of Pentecost, where tongues of fire—the Holy Spirit of God—descended upon all those gathered from various nations, what we celebrate now as the birthday of the church.

And Peter has now equalized Jews and gentiles, saying one is no better than the other, for both can be and ARE with the Spirit of God. Peter rising to the occasion because he must...saying to the leaders who were challenging him: “If God gave the same exact gift of the Spirit to them, as God did to **us** when we believed...how could I possibly object to God's ask of me?” Other translations read Peter saying, “Who was I that I could hinder God? And not be united with them...with Gentiles? (NRSVUE) Peter said powerfully, The Spirit moved...and I followed!

Peter is given an extraordinary vision and an extraordinary opportunity, and it leads to a new direction for the gentile household of Cornelius, but also led to a new direction for the newly forming Church of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. Their indignation of Peter's rising to the occasion—of extending the table of Christ—quickly quieted down. “And then as it sank in, they started praising God. Saying, ‘Its really happened! God has broken through to the other nations, opening them up to life!’ Who are we to hinder...object to God's loving embrace of all?” The believers in Jerusalem then knew they needed to rise up to the occasion because they must, indeed giving of themselves to others in unexpected ways, ways never imagined or planned for. Why? Because the Spirit moves and we follow.

As a woman preacher, I love sharing about one of the earliest women preachers in Methodism—Sarah Crosby. She was a gifted teacher and counselor, and frequently led class meetings of 30 people. In 1761 when she was leading one of those meetings, over 200 people gathered to hear her speak—making it impossible to lead discussion the way she usually did. So she had to do something extraordinary...because the occasion called for it: so she preached.

At this early time in the Methodist movement, women were not allowed to preach. Friends, you need to know this happened in the time when women's public speaking was considered shameful & "unnatural", yet Sarah Crosby discovered an inner peace and spirit-filled conviction of her call. Sarah wrote to John Wesley, her spiritual mentor, for advice as the numbers continued to grow each week. Wesley stated that even though he was generally against women preachers at the time, she did what the moment had required. He came to her defense of what he described, the "extraordinary call" of her ministry as it grew from class meeting to open air preaching. Wesley acknowledged she was "filled with the spirit, and with understanding."

Sarah's leadership and others like it gradually persuaded Wesley to change his mind on this "controversial issue", and several years later he licensed Sarah Crosby And other women as preachers. Her "Rising to the occasion because she must" in the 1700s, paved the way for other women... like me, Rev Jessica Campbell, Rev Hey Young Nam Horton, Rev Patti Walz, DS Ronnell Howard, & Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi to all rise & preach the good news. Amen?

We rise to the occasion because we must...giving of ourselves to others even when we haven't planned ahead for it Dealing with life's unexpected events and surprises...this is the Christian way of life—the Spirit moves... and we follow. Like Peter, like Sarah Crosby, like John Wesley—by The Way of Necessity they followed God's call in their lives and opened up the Spirit's movement in the life of the church—changing, transforming the communities of faith they engaged.

Oh friends Jesus's purpose is not just to fill heaven one person at a time, it is also to change the one life, and another life, and another...that will change the town, that will change the community, that will change the nation—so the world will become better, something more, something greater...**right here & right now.**

First Methodist Church of Moorestown, Today we are being called to Rise to the occasion, and be the Spirit-filled change to a hurting and needy world. Our mission as a church is to Love God, Reach People, and Serve All. Our five year vision claimed and launched in January 2022 was to uniquely live this mission by three specific pathways:

- To be relevant to the community
- To engage all generations
- To embody radical acceptance of all.

This is what rising to the occasion looks like for us!

FMC faced significant challenges in 2021: Financial struggles, a worldwide pandemic, loss of membership due to the decision to become a reconciling community of faith, conflict within leadership, & a change in appointment w/2 new pastors--But under such extraordinary times, FMC rose to the occasion amidst fear, doubt, and uncertainty—and gave of ourselves for the needs of others, for the Spirit's calling to be the church...even when we were ill-prepared, uncertain of the future, and had to let go of the way things used to be.

FMC rose to the occasion and claimed this new, spirit-breathed vision and hope for the future. And over these past three years we have risen to the occasion with so many giving of their precious time & a wide variety of talents, skills, & abilities, aligning staff structure with our vision to reach others, & giving of treasure—hard earned dollars to fund Christ's work

The Holy Spirit gave us this vision—to be relevant to the community, impact all generations, and embody radical acceptance of all—and friends in our rising much fruit has come forth.

~Over the past 2 years youth group has grown from six kids each week to 20 to 25 each and every week. Kids come from towns all around us, looking for a place that is safe, fun, and provides opportunities to discover, grow and become a person who loves God, others and themselves.

~Our very 1st Apple Festival exceeded all expectations, and impacted almost 1000 individuals bldg relationships & community with neighbors, church members, & local businesses.

~300 children came to this year's trunk-n-treat, celebrating life together in community with fun, laughter and delicious treats.

~This year's health fair partnered agencies and organizations impacting over 100 people, offering holistic well-being of mind-body-spirit.

~In June, 5 youth became members thru our confirmation program claiming Christ in their lives, committing to be part of this church family.

~In 2 weeks, 15 new members will join FMC, spanning every generation: 4 couples and single parents who have kids ranging from 22 mos to freshmen in HS, retirees, as well as other couples and singles who are both younger & those a bit more seasoned. In our new member sessions, I ask what has kept them coming to FMC. Many said because they felt like they belonged the moment they came. Naming the sense of community & connection. They also named the active ministries for all ages, & that FMC was clear & grounded as who we are as the church of JC wanting to impact the world as well as being radically inclusive and accepting of all, no matter what.

The Holy Spirit's vision for FMC is coming alive... We ROSE to the occasion because we must And gave of ourselves to others...dealing with unexpected turns of events every step along the way...Because the Spirit moves...and we follow. This is the way of Necessity for those called to follow Christ.

Friends over the next few weeks we're asking you to prayerfully consider how Christ may be calling you & I to RISE to the occasion again as we continue to follow the extraordinary vision God has given us. There is a financial gap that needs to be filled to fully fund the ministries of FMC and it begins with each one of us rising to the occasion because we must and give of

ourselves to others...even when we haven't fully planned or expected to. Our current weekly giving will not sustain the ministry Christ has called us to, and that is CLEARLY making a transformational difference in the lives of so many people. With the additional revenue stream of the MTC lease & other bldg usage, potential grant applications, aligning staffing for growth & impact...we still need to RISE to the occasion...and give generously... so that each and every generation will continue to find a home where they can belong, find healing, and grow to discover what it means to live faithful, lives of love...as they Love God, Reach People and Serve All.

Like Peter, Sarah Crosby, & John Wesley, like FMC 3 yrs ago—by The Way of Necessity we have all followed God's call in our lives and opened up the Spirit's movement in the life of the church. Today the moment demands us to rise to the occasion, and give generously. We need every person's support to make God's vision a reality, impacting each of our lives, and the lives within our the community, and the people who have yet to come through the doors of FMC. And friends, who are we to hinder God's plan for FMC?

God has called us to something extraordinary—To be a place of relevance to a broken community. To be a place where every generation is able to learn, grow, and be empowered to lead life to the fullest. To be the living embodiment of acceptance, welcome and inclusion of all people—a sanctuary of hope, safety and peace. God calls us to give generously & the need is critical now & in the future. Opportunities are ever before us... the need is now!

I ask us to rise to the occasion and give generously to help FMC meet the financial gap in 2024. Its unexpected YES...but necessary. What one-time gift can you offer to hep us close the gap? Rich and I have committed to RISE to the occasion and will give an extra month's tithe to support the extraordinary work of the Spirit that's happening at FMC. The Spirit moves and we follow, giving an additional \$1200.

I also ask us to rise to the occasion for next year's commitment, & **tithe** to FMC supporting the ongoing Spirit's movement to come in 2025. How is God calling us to give when we bring our pledge cards on Nov 24?

Friends, we rise to the occasion because we must...serving, giving...so that others in need may be blessed as we are...We rise because the Spirit moves in the heart of each believer...And we follow in this Way of Generosity. May it be so! Amen and amen.