

6th Sunday of Eastertide
Sermon 5.9.21

Acts 10: 44-48

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.

John 15:9-17

Jesus said to his disciples on the night of his arrest, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” (289)

In Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius. He was a centurion of the Italian Cohort. This means he was likely based in Syria and had volunteered in the Roman army several years earlier, first serving as a legionnaire before getting promoted to centurion. That’s how it was done.

He was a devout man, or so it was said. He feared God, as did his whole household—or so it was said. He gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. Or so it was said.

If all that were true, it would have been against type, let’s be honest.

One afternoon, at about three o’clock, he had a vision. In it, he clearly saw an angel of God come in to where he was. The angel said to him, “Cornelius.”

Cornelius stared at him in terror, which is quite an amazing thing. You wouldn’t think much could terrify a centurion. They were harsh, these of this rank. They had a reputation for dealing harsh punishments, most especially to the legionnaires under their command. You could argue that this was just to toughen up the legionnaires, get them ready for when things got real. Gentle training makes for wimpy soldiers. You could argue that.

Centurions also oversaw crucifixions, which were commonplace. Tacitus tells a story in *The Annals* of a centurion known as “Cedo Alteram,” which roughly translates to “Fetch Me Another.” *Lovely.*

Cornelius, though...? Maybe he was different...?

He said to the angel whom he clearly saw, “What is it, Lord?”

The angel 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.”

Then the angel left, and Cornelius 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.

It’s about a day’s journey from Caesarea south along the seashore to Joppa.

It was about noon the next day when they approached the city.

At this same time, Peter went up on the roof to pray.

Peter, of course, was the disciple on whom Jesus said he would build his church. For this, he also gave him the nickname, Peter of the Greek *petra* meaning rock. Peter, it might be implied, was hard as a rock, stubborn as a rock.

He’d also been something of a stumbling block to the workings of the gospel. He was the one who so vehemently refused that Jesus should be crucified when Jesus first spoke of it: “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” He was one who denied having been a follower of Jesus. When confronted in the courtyard while Jesus was undergoing his “trial,” he denied three times ever knowing Jesus—three times before the cock crowed twice.

Now it was Peter’s conviction that the early church would indeed be his to grow, grow with a vengeance. But it wouldn’t include Gentiles. It would only include Jews. Paul thought otherwise. Paul meant to take this new message to the ends of the earth, and would have the other apostles do the same. But Peter thought this new enterprise would adhere to the same old rules.

That’s what Peter thought.

While up on the roof, while praying, he became hungry.

He wanted something to eat.

Someone in the household began to prepare something for him, and while that was happening, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down. It was 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.

Then 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—these two slaves and a legionnaire arriving in Joppa. And I suppose these would be less frightening to see at your door than a centurion, but still...

They asked for Simon's house. They were standing by the gate. They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there.

Peter was still on the roof. He was thinking about his vision. "What God has made good, you must not call profane." It would have been a tough lesson for Peter.

The fact that it arrived to him in Joppa underscored that.

Joppa was where Jonah was to be found when the Lord sent for him to go to Nineveh, to get the Ninevites to stop being so profane. Otherwise, God would reign destruction on them. Jonah didn't want to go because he knew, as soon as he promised destruction, the Lord would change his mind about the Ninevites, and destruction wouldn't come, and Jonah would be a laughingstock.

Joppa, it would seem, was the place where prophets refused orders from their Lord.

As for Peter...? What would he do?

The stakes of this story were even higher than the stakes in Jonah's story, not least because this story likely actually happened, wasn't some comic version of a prophet struggling with his vocation, but also because religious law wasn't the only thing made precarious here. There was also the matter of basic safety. Centurions were dangerous. Those who do their bidding were *dangerous*. "Some of those who are in forces, are the same as burn as crosses." That's a lyric from the band Rage Against the Machine. They were warning of the infiltration of white supremacists into our armed forces. Well, same was true in ancient Rome. Some of those who were in forces were the same as wield crosses. And Peter would one day be himself hung from a cross, and it would have been a centurion who oversaw that whole sick practice

Not that he knew that; not that he knew he'd be crucified. But he might well have suspected it. "That's how this story ends." He might well have suspected this.

So, the Holy Spirit said to Peter, "Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them." Would that make a difference to Peter? *Should* it make a difference for Peter?

Would it make a difference to you? Your most rightly feared enemy is at your door but you should trust him and go with him...? That's some strong faith in the Holy Spirit, this most nebulous of the three persons of God.

Luke would have it no other way. Luke, whom we're considering the writer of this story, would have it no other way, he for whom the prime mover is always the Holy Spirit. In his gospel narrative, the Gospel according to Luke, the Holy Spirit is the principal actor, the prime agent in all the action. Each of the major sections of this whole gospel narrative begins at the initiation of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus does something, he does so having prayed and become full of the Holy Spirit. In fact, Luke refers to the Holy Spirit eighteen times over the course of his gospel. In Mark, it's five times. In Matthew, it's twelve.

In Luke's second book, though, this, the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit initiates things fifty-seven times. It's as if the Holy Spirit is now the main character of the story, now that Jesus is gone, ascended to heaven. What void Jesus left, the Holy Spirit fills, and fills, and fills. This is the advantage of being disembodied: you can be everywhere. You can be in both Caesarea, working Cornelius, and in Joppa, working Peter, arranging a convergence.

The question is, is the Holy Spirit enough? This most nebulous of the three persons of God, this most ethereal of the three ways we might imagine God as manifest amidst the creation and history and the living of our days: is it enough?

Would it make you trust the centurion's soldier and slaves now knocking at your door?

Once, in the middle of the night, I saw a man standing in the doorway of the room where I slept, the outline of him filling the frame of the only way out. It was maybe two in the morning, a summer night that had been hot in the upstairs bedrooms, something that often makes us Goodmans all move to the basement room to sleep.

That's not what made us midnight refugees that night, though. It was that the boys, then maybe nine and seven, had been playing with their nerf guns all afternoon, had opened the screens of their bedroom windows so they could shoot from up there to the yard below.

Much later, with them asleep in their beds, and Jesse and me trying to fall asleep, he and I kept having to swat mosquitoes. What was going on? We turned on our light and discovered the ceiling alive with mosquitoes. Same was the case in the boys' room, where the screens were still open, which we then discovered. We closed them. We carried the boys, still asleep, to the basement, and settled into our make-shift bedroom, our summer refuge.

Tobias woke up still later in the night unsure of why he was in the basement. Always a sound sleeper, he went upstairs to look for us but didn't find us. It had him venturing out, to our neighbor's house, Dave, who still remembers this as one of the most unnerving nights of his life, the neighbor's little boy banging on his door in the dark to say he couldn't find his family next door and could Dave help?

Dave brought him home, and together they searched the empty bedrooms, until they eventually decided to look downstairs.

By the time they got to where we were sleeping, I had drifted out of sleep. Without my glasses or my contacts in, I could just make out this figure filling the doorway—and I knew it was okay. I could *feel* it; I could feel it in my body. I could feel that he was not a threat to me, to us. Whatever was happening, whatever strange, even unnerving circumstances that had brought us to this mixed-up moment, we were not in any danger from this outlined figure filling the doorframe.

How did I know this?

Once, following worship in Monterey, I came back into the sanctuary having chatted with congregants at the front door while they left. A family now lingered inside, and I was to meet them because we were going to give them money, support for getting them through hard circumstances they found themselves in.

I'd met the mother and one of her children earlier in the week when she stopped into the church. Younger than I, with several children, her smallest one, in a stroller, seemed unwell. A brain tumor, the mother explained. They were having to make many trips to Boston Children's. The expenses. The time it all took. Could we help?

The church's parish council had a quick meeting later that same day about this. (I don't have a discretionary fund to draw from there.) We decided, yes, we could help. \$500, as big a gift as we ever give.

I called the mother that evening and told her to meet me at church on Sunday following worship, which she did, this time with all her children, and with their father. They were in the sanctuary, had come in the side door while I'd stood at the front.

When I came in, I felt him from where he was in repose on the back pew against the back wall at my left shoulder, and I knew with hardly a glance, "That man is evil."

And I wondered whether this woman and her several children were actually free. And I wondered whether this sick child was actually sick with a brain tumor. The man sat up from his repose. Handsome, confident, he took the check from me without standing up.

When I got home, I did an internet search, had to dig pretty deep. A family of grifters with a sickly child was making its way around the country, an age-old scam. Short articles in local newspapers—Seattle, Houston, one even with a tiny picture. Now, Monterey, Berkshire County.

How did I know?

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.”

That’s what they said.

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.”

This—this whole thing—is what comes before the rather banal reading we just heard. This double-vision story, wherein the Spirit of the Lord works two angles to bring about an encounter between two quite different people has us arrive at this otherwise rather boring point. Earlier, this double-vision technique brought together Paul and Ananias. Now it was Cornelius and Peter. A story that never makes it into the lectionary readings, it’s too long to fit but too good to skip—Peter’s conversion, for that’s as much what it is as anyone else’s. “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people,” he wondered aloud, having once been so dead set against people like us being included in this endeavor of love. “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

The Holy Spirit: it’s a problem. The Holy Spirit *problematizes* our world of rules and regulations, assessments and evaluations.

So, the church: it would, apparently, dwell amidst this problematic.

Are you okay with this? Because it means you have to lay all that aside—those rules and regulations, assessments and evaluations, those standards of status and self-presentation. It means you have to trust the Holy Spirit, trust how it stirs in your gut or in your body or in this gathered body. It means you have to follow, follow, walk the path that often shows itself only as you go, step by step, stone by stone. It means you have to abide in God, and allow God to abide in you. This is the ballast—God’s abiding presence in you and among us, this and only this.

Are you okay with this?

I am.

So, let’s keep going.

Thanks be to God.