

Acts 10: 1-48

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, worshiped 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.

STORIES - HOW THEY SHAPE US, CHANGE US and INVITE US

This story in Acts is also one of the pivotal stories - the first full inclusion of Gentiles, with the Holy Spirit coming upon them.

SERMON

Stories - we all have them - our earliest are likely family stories -

I don't remember being three, but I do remember the cowgirl hat - there's a photo somewhere to confirm it -

Scuffed cowboy boots, likely too big and hand-me-downs from my brothers, a red felt cowgirl hat, and a holster with 2 pistols. The story goes, I'd whip around a corner, guns a blazing, ready to confront any foe. Quiet little Katy was ready to take on the world.

Yesterday, at Paulette's memorial service, we heard stories of her serving vanilla ice cream and fresh peaches, picked up at Way's fruit farm, to her granddaughter, with a side of chocolate milk.

Stories shape us; change us. Sometimes they uplift - remind us of who we are, give us courage to step into something new; sometimes they follow us like a ball and chains.

We are story keepers. Stories are how we make sense of the world, and of our lives. Stories give us context - help us relate and find our place.

Our bible is made up of endless story - from the 7 days of creation to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Some stories we struggle to make sense of, groping to find God's mercy and presence.

Some, like today's story, are pivotal ones - changing the course of history.

And, as like so many stories - this one starts on an otherwise ordinary day:

It's a typical afternoon for Cornelius, that faithful Gentile, he is praying.

Cornelius doesn't know it, but God knows him by name.
His prayers have been heard.

And on this ordinary afternoon - The angel appears.

'Send for a certain Simon who is called Peter' -

Cornelius, though fearful, acts.

Cornelius must search for Peter.

The powerful, self-sufficient man, this citizen-soldier, this God fearer must find the disciple.

This event of searching - this willingness to go out and seek, to get lost, maybe needing to stop and ask directions - it's the beginning.

The next day, with those sent by Cornelius approaching, God comes to Peter in a time of prayer.

And a vision - a sheet - full of all sorts of animals - 4 footed, reptiles and beast of the air.

A big sheet, full of those things welcomed and unwelcomed.

As commentator Willie James Jennings writes: "The revolution descends on a sheet. The sheet is everything. The sheet is radical"¹

"Get up Peter; kill and eat' - Unlike Cornelius, who though afraid, made no protest - Peter resists the divine command.

Peter is being asked to enter in - becoming, through eating, a part of something he never imagined.

Throughout history - To eat animals that were associated with a different people was to move into their culture.

God says to Peter - JOIN THEM.

This uncharted territory upends distinctions between what is clean and what is unclean. What is Holy and what is unholy.

Peter struggles to allow his vision of faithfulness to God to EXPAND

Is it possible to be faithful to the God of Israel in a new way?

The new word that God continues to speak is to accept, welcome, new people, different people that we had not imagined that God would send into our lives.

This vision is not a private one for Peter.

Company shows up on the doorstep.

The Spirit of God is on both sides of that door -

Outside are the seekers

Inside the perplexed Peter.

God asks these faithful followers on both sides of the door to transgress boundaries.

Peter and Cornelius should not be together.

Cultural codes, social and theological rules are suspended. What will happen next?

¹ 2017. Jennings, Willie James. *Acts: A theological commentary on the Bible*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville Kentucky.

God has pushed Peter over the line that separated Jewish bodies from Gentile bodies - holy bodies from unhold bodies.

They head off together - to the home of Cornelius.

This new way requires new listening. It requires curiosity - "May I ask why you sent for me?" Peter asks, and then opens himself to hear the story of faithfulness.

Listening intently, he responds:

"God shows no partiality" - what a radical statement!

"God shows no partiality".

God's welcome is much wider than Peter had imagined. God is revealing that Peter is to love beyond his own limits.

Cornelius and his family and friends, too, are listening. Ready for the new.

Peter tells the story - the unbelievable story of Jesus, who was born, lived, killed and rose from the dead.

Jesus is Lord of the living and the dead he teaches them.

The Holy Spirit has come on the Gentiles, and they witness back to the Jews.

They are a people joined to one another -

The waters of baptism signify the joining of Jew and Gentile.

God overcomes boundary and border.

What a story!

Cornelius listened, open.

Peter resisted - yet was willing to be changed, again.

God brings together Jew and Gentile - asking them to seek, to listen, to be open to something new. This welcoming of one another and of the Holy Spirit - it changed all of history.

God's story continues to ask us to seek, listen, and be open to the unexpected.

Story helps us understand who we are and whose we are.
Stories can give us courage, help us see our part in things.

Last week at a Community Oversight Board meeting, one of our members, Barrett Marshall, former legal counsel for Centre Safe, led us in a workshop regarding how to listen and be present to difficult stories.

She began by having us remember our first job interview - what were we feeling that day? What was it like to meet the interviewer? Stories were shared of ease and success, and painful disappointment.

Then she asked us to recall what it was like to share the story with another of one of the most difficult moments of our life. What was it like to share that story? How much time had passed? How did we feel afterwards? Some, out of shame or fear or sorrow had held those stories, locked deep inside, for more than a decade before telling it to someone else.

Stories are sacred pieces of ourselves.

Next Sunday Leadership Team will present a way for us to listen deeply, to one another and to the Spirit, looking at the story of University Mennonite past, and dreaming about a new story we might live into together - and will ask you to affirm this next journey.

Consider your own story - what's shaped you? What are the stories of your faith journey and who guided you along the way?

What's brought you here - to this place?

Whether you've come for decades or for the first time, you have a story of showing up here, today.

This Narrative visioning process, brought to us by Tom Beers, is a fancy way of saying we want to listen for the story God is inviting us into - and it involves us all. Each one.

Each of us will be asked to find our place in the story we create and live into together.

We talked of the decisions and actions of Cornelius and Peter - but what about the slave that sought out Peter, how was he changed?

Or the child that gathered to hear Peter speak - was her heart broken open, receiving the Spirit?

Your story matters. It belongs here.

Let's listen, together. Let's be willing to be uncomfortable together, seeing our story as part of God's story.

Who knows who might come knocking?

