

Bringing the Good News

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Good morning. This morning our text is going to be from the book of Acts 10, that's chapter 10, verses 30 through 43, and if you're able to, if you could please stand for the reading of the scriptures.

30 And Cornelius said, "Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing 31 and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. 32 Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' 33 So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord." 34 So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36 As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), 37 you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39 And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, 40 but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, 41 not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. 43 To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Our Father, as we come to you this morning, we glorify, we magnify your name. We ask indeed, Father, that this morning you would give us eyes to see and ears to hear, hearts to receive from your gospel. We thank you for your word to us, Lord, and we ask that

truly you would speak to us this morning in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Thank you. You may be seated.

Three years ago, a little over three years ago the Lord blessed us in a very special way and we were able to purchase our first new home and so this was, you know, this was something we weren't accustomed to and I don't know if you're familiar with this but when you move into a new neighborhood anymore into a new home, you get inundated with sales people, you know, so we had numerous door-to-door salesmen, I mean, you'd actually see the day we were moving in people would stop us to just take a few minutes of our time, that's all they needed, and you would see these vans, these white vans pull up and out would come 10 young men with clipboards and, you know, when you first move in, they'd stop and then on the weekends they would come all day long, on the weekdays they'd start at 5 o'clock in the evening until 10 o'clock at night and they would just be ringing on your doorbell. You know, at first, you know, you try to be kind to these people and you say, "Well, thank you so much," and you'd take a few minutes to listen to them and then you'd tell them, "No, thank you," then you'd tell them, "No, thank you," and then you tell them, "No, thank you. No, thank you," for about 10 times and then finally they would leave. You know, they were selling security alarms and, you know, we'd all actually have people say to us, "Well, okay, but after it happens you can call us," almost threatening to break in our house themselves. And then I never realized how deadly the air in my house was or what kind of horrible illnesses I was going to get from my water, and I didn't know how filthy our carpet was either, and it's amazing how many kind of bugs there are in New Mexico.

As it happened, we had, you know, it happened very quickly and this was at the time the interest rates were falling so we signed a purchase agreement on Labor Day, by November we'd moved into our house. Now we had neglected one item, we forgot about one thing. I had just taken my son to college in Indiana and that was at the end of August I'd taken him to Indiana to school and we hadn't even planned on buying a house at that time but he was at school and we moved and we forgot to tell him where we lived. You know, so he was at school and it just so happened the President of the college was talking in chapel one day and he was saying that he was talking about different stresses that they were going to have deal with and guess what the number one stress was? If your parents moved while you were at school.

So we got to November before Thanksgiving and Bridget was ill and I had to take her and she had surgery and they operated on her. So I came home and put her to bed and, you know, I was just tired, I was exhausted, we'd moved in and, you know, Bridget had been sick, all these things were going on and these salesmen just kept coming. Now it was about 8 o'clock at night and there goes the doorbell and a little bit earlier I had received a phone call from my mother and she said, "Could you tell me again how to get to your house?" And I thought it was kind of strange because she had been to our house before several times and so I told her the directions one more time and then the doorbell rang not too long after that, and I looked out the peephole and I saw this young man

there. So here I go, I opened the door and I said, "What do you want?" I was just a little bit cranky. I wasn't too welcoming to this young man and I said, "Don't you know what time it is? You know, I don't have time to talk to you." I didn't listen to a word he said and then finally I realized he looked familiar, he looked just like one of my son's friends and so there comes my son from around the corner of the house and said, "Dad, dad, stop, it's me!" And then I got upset because I thought, "Oh great, I spent thousands of dollars and put this kid in college and now he got kicked out." You know, as it turns out he had just, you know, he had Fall break and it slipped my mind completely and he had gotten a ticket and he'd been able to come home and surprise us. You know, and poor Bridget, she thought she was hallucinating because there was her son and she was in bed.

You know, so I was not happy to have somebody come to my door, even my own son and sometimes, you know, that's the attitude that we get and because we have that, you know, we put that onto other things, you know, thinking that maybe if we go to this neighbor or go to that person they don't want to hear what we have to say and sometimes we get in the impression and sometimes it's deserved that when we are bringing the gospel, we're just another salesman. And as we look at this scripture text here, we see that there's a radical change that's about to take place in the church, that these Jewish Christians who had gotten somehow the idea that the gospel is exclusive to them, they were realizing that it was not just the gospel for them but that they were to be a blessing to all peoples.

Let me read you this quote from Dr. James Julius Scott. "It seems that the predominant view among at least Judean Jewry of the first century held untenable either the possibility of the Gentiles obtaining God's favor without first becoming a naturalized Jew, a proselyte, or that the uncircumcised had any place among God's people and work. Experiences of Gentile domination in the late monarchy, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC and threats from Hellenistic culture from the 4th century BC onward served to harden Jewish attitudes against the Gentiles, it also stimulated the growth of protectionistic and isolationistic barriers and attitudes against all but essential associations with Gentiles. The Old Testament commands include circumcision, Sabbath, and kosher regulations. During the intertestamental period special emphasis was placed upon these three and other prohibitions, including restrictions upon dining companions. They had been turned first into instruments for protection of racial, cultural, national and religious identity and then into emblems of Jewish superiority, privilege and exclusivism. Post-biblical Judaism displayed a variety of attitudes toward non-Jews, almost all of them negative. Gentiles were godless, idolatrous, unclean and rejected by God. Dealings with them made Jews unclean. The implications of all this on the question of suitable candidates for Christian salvation, entering a favorable relationship with God, must be stressed. Without information to the contrary, many in the Jerusalem church would assume the requirements for admission into their messianic community would include that Gentiles become proselytes to Judaism."

So as we come in here into this text, we, first of all, are faced with a God-fearing Gentile named Cornelius. Now that's something that's contradictory to what Peter and the other apostles had assumed, to even to think that there was a God-fearing Gentile was something that didn't enter into their thinking. As we look at this man Cornelius, he, first

of all, lived in Caesarea which was a Roman city, it was a city that Herod had built really to pay homage to the Caesar, and he was a soldier in the Roman army, he was a centurion that led between 300-1,000 men. But Cornelius was also a devout man. He was of that group of people that were Gentiles and they were not full proselytes to Judaism but that they still kept the law and they still kept the prayers and they still sought God. From the text it also explains to us that he was a generous man, he gave alms, and he was a prayer man. He truly sought God with all his heart.

Now as the text goes on, we see that Cornelius was in his house and he was praying and he has a vision of an angel of God. Now this angel comes to him and says to him, "Cornelius, your prayers have been heard. God has listened to you, a Gentile." He said, "God has also remembered the generous alms that you've given to his people." And then the angel gives him some specific instructions and he says, "You're to send for Simon who is called Peter," and he tells him where they are to go, he tells them that he's in the house of this Simon who's a tanner. And so Cornelius, you know, is obedient to this and he brings some of his servants and a soldier who's a devout soldier and he gives them instructions and tells them what to do. So they go forth out to speak to Peter, to find him.

Now on the other hand here, we have Peter who's a God-fearing Jew, he's an apostle, you know, he was truly one of those special messengers that God has divinely chosen, and Peter was a true disciple of Christ. As we look at his life, we see his weaknesses, we see the great things that God has also done through him and we realize that he is just a man but he is truly a devout man, he has truly become the leader of the apostles.

Now as Peter is up on top of the house and he's in prayer and it appears that he's waiting for lunch, he goes into a type of a trance and he has a vision, you know, and this vision looks like it's a sheet and the actual term is a sail that is let down from heaven, and it's a picture of this sail that's let down from heaven something that Peter would be familiar with, and Luke himself puts words in there that talks about it's held by bandages. Now inside of this sheet, you know, Peter looks at this and it's filled with all types of animals and reptiles and birds, and Peter had been hungry and he'd been in this trance and so the Lord speaks to him and he says, "Peter, rise up; kill and eat. There's plenty of food here, Peter. Eat." Now Peter does something here that I don't think I've been brave enough to do and he tells the Lord no. He tells the Lord, "No, you've made a mistake. Do you remember who I am? I'm one of your people. I'm following your rules. By no means, Lord, I've never touched anything unclean." Which is not exactly the truth because where is he? He's in the house of a tanner.

Now I have a friend that he's another chaplain in a rescue mission, and this man, you know, he's a nice man but he loves to hunt, and every once in a while he'll drive up to the mission after hunting on the weekend and, like, he was down by White Sands and he had one of those, I think it's called an oryx. He drove up with one of those on the back of his pickup truck. You know, other times you'll see, you know, out of the back of his truck you'll see these hooves sticking up or horns or, you know, fur dripping off and blood dripping off his truck and, you know, other people you'd worry about but with him you know that he's out there hunting.

A tanner was not a clean profession. You know, usually they may work and live outside of town, and usually they worked right by the seashore so that there on the rocks by the seashore they would, you know, they'd process their hides. You know, so Peter was not exactly telling the truth by saying he never touched anything unclean. Also, what had just happened a time before there? Peter had touched a dead body. Now thankfully the dead body became alive again but I don't know if there's anything in the law about that, I haven't ever read it. So God was already beginning to work on Peter. So God was working on this Gentile, placing within his heart a desire and a hunger for righteousness. God was working on Peter to prepare him to bring his message to these people that he considered unclean.

Then finally, God says to Peter, "Peter, what I have cleansed don't you call them common or unclean." So in just an instant God does away with those type of dietary laws and he starts to bring them, the apostles, to the point where they begin to realize that way back in the book of Genesis he had told them, "You are a special people to me but you're not my only people. I'm going to bless you but you're also supposed to bless others." And he began to work in the lives of these men and so the Holy Spirit speaks to Peter and he says, "Three men are coming. Go with them because I have sent them," which is a little bit strange for God to say that. Three men are coming. Go with them because I have sent them, because in order to send somebody you had to have been there with them and so God is saying, "I was there. I was there at Cornelius' house and I've spoken to him and I've sent these men. So you need to go with them and don't hold back. You just need to do what I've told you." So Peter, he breaks another regulation and he invites these Gentiles in to stay with him, and then finally he accompanies them without hesitation after they spent the night.

Now look at verse 23 in chapter 2, it says,

23 So he invited them in to be his guests. The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. 24 And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25 When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. 26 But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." 27 And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. 28 And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. 29 So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me." 30 And Cornelius said, "Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing 31 and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. 32 Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' 33 So I sent for you at once, and you have

been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

Now, of course, when Cornelius fell down and worshiped Peter, Peter didn't allow that and he told him, "No, I'm a man too. I'm not an angel. I'm not a vision. I'm just a man." And so Cornelius as he recounts to him, "I sent for you as soon as I received word," and he says something to him, "and you were kind enough to come." And so Peter walks in and here's a house full of Cornelius' closest friends and his family members just sitting there, just waiting, just hungering, just thirsting to hear the word of God.

So then scripture says, "So Peter opened his mouth." He came to allow God to speak to these people, to use him, and he says, "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality." And another way that you could read that is, "Truly I am now just beginning to understand that God shows no partiality. I'm just beginning to perceive what God is trying to say, that anyone that in every nation, anyone who fears him is acceptable to him." He's not saying to him, he's not coming like some people are teaching nowadays that everybody is saved and you just have to tell them. He's not saying that but he is saying that these people are considered special by God and the Holy Spirit has begun to prepare their hearts to give them a hunger, a desire to hear the word of God. They're not already saved, they need to hear the message. It is by that message that they will be saved but they also must believe the message that Peter will bring from the word of God.

Let me read to you from Isaiah 56. It says,

3 Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and let not the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." 4 For thus says the LORD: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, 5 I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. 6 And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant-- 7 these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." 8 The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, "I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered."

Then from Isaiah 65,

1 I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation that was not called by my name.

If you remember the eunuch, he was studying the scriptures in Isaiah and he was saying, "Somebody needs to explain this to me." Here Phillip appears. Now for a eunuch, he was not allowed into the temple. He had no part, no hope of being of God's people but as Dr. William Willimon says, water is thicker than blood. He was not born into that nation but God was saying by the water of baptism, this water is thicker than any blood you have. And perhaps you've realized that in your own life, that you have closer relationships with those of the body of Christ than maybe some of your own family. So as Phillip preached the good news to this man, he said, "What keeps me from being baptized?" Nothing.

So here God was saying that we have a place, that we have a part, and we had no more hope than the eunuch but here there were Gentiles that, people that feared God. They were prepared by God. They realized that they were sinners. They realized that God was holy. They realized that they could not save themselves. They realized that they needed the gospel. And so Peter begins to preach to them and he says, "God sent his word to Israel, to his favorite people, to his nation, but he also said to them that he is Lord of all. He also said to them that there is peace through Jesus Christ."

Then as we look on, we see that there's a fulfillment here of Isaiah's prophesy in Isaiah 61 where it says,

1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;

And so Peter says to these men and women that have been waiting, "We're speaking of Jesus Christ, the one that God has anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power. Jesus went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed, all who were held captive by the devil. Now because he did this, they hung him and they put him on a tree, they put him to death, but God raised him up on the third day, and he chose some of us as witnesses to see this miraculous event because he appeared to us, we sat down with him, we ate with him, we talked with him, and he is alive. And because we are witnesses of these facts, God has commanded us to preach and God has commanded us to testify that Jesus is the one that is appointed to judge; the one that took our place, the one that died on the cross is the one also that will judge us." And then he gives them the promise of the gospel and he says, "everyone who believes receives forgiveness through his name."

You know, in the denomination I was in previously, I wasn't a very good preacher in that denomination because at this point I would have an invitation and I'd have you all come up, but what happens next here is that the Holy Spirit makes the invitation and it's not just to the unbelievers but the invitation was, in fact, even to the believers, and it's as if God is saying, "Here I am down here with them. Where are you?" God was with Cornelius and he invited Peter to come visit him so there's an invitation for the believer and there's also an invitation to the unbeliever. We need to meet in Christ.

Now Cornelius' words to Peter after he gathered his family and closest friends is very striking. As Cornelius fell down before Peter, I don't think that he was necessarily confused and was actually worshiping Peter but it seems that he realized what a divine gift that Peter was delivering. Here in the city that symbolized the great division between Jew and Gentile, Caesarea, the city of Caesar, Peter arrives with the good news, the gospel, the proclamation concerning Jesus, the anointed one of God, that both spiritually awakened Jew and Gentile had long awaited. With gracious words from a Gentile man that would have been assumed had been rejected by God and had no real hope or hunger for the things of God, but he and his family anxiously wait for this messenger and when he arrives Cornelius says, "I sent for you at once and you were kind enough to come." A door was divinely opened for the gospel in the city of Caesarea and it's a door that God continues to invite us through. This door challenges our assumptions, our prejudice, our fears of rejection. The words that he commanded us to preach were not exclusive to the apostles but indeed also apply to us. It's so easy to fall into the trap of thinking that there's some people who are undeserving or outside the bounds of the gospel and we must not forget that even though Cornelius was a good man, he still needed to believe in the gospel, he still needed to believe in Christ, and here in the presence of God, a group of sinners eagerly received the gospel and believed.

Isaiah 52:7 says, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news." Now I'm a preacher and by the generous provision of God and his people I receive wages to preach. I preach the gospel almost every day of my life. This is my 20th year of official ministry and I've had another six years of unofficial ministry. The other day I was looking at my shoes and they were kind of dirty and dusty and the seams are falling apart, I won't show them to you right now but, you know, I preach with dirt and mud on them. I've also actually preached with someone's vomit on them or urine on them. I've actually preached when somebody's blood was dripping on them. There are some people who have spit on them as I preached. But I also know what it was like for Peter when someone has kissed them, not because of who I am or what I do, it's because of the message that I bring. I bring the gospel, the good news of Jesus and God through Jesus Christ.

Peter they're waiting to hear. We have the words to speak to them. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that they don't want to hear. Yes, there's a lot of them that don't but God is not going to let you waste your time and some of the people that you may think, "I don't want to preach the gospel to that person, I hate to sit in church with them," may be the very one that God has begun to prepare their heart. God commanded us, "Preach the gospel. Preach Christ." And God will honor his word and, in fact, as Peter opened his mouth and preached the word, God honored and confirmed the word he spoke. Amen.

Lord, you are a gracious God and indeed you have chosen people like us, Lord, and thank you, Father, for that precious possession that you've placed in our hands to bring the gospel to those who have not heard. And we thank you, Father, that there are many who are eagerly awaiting your word. Be glorified, Lord God, be glorified through Jesus Christ, be glorified. And we thank you, Father, in Jesus' name. Amen.