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“The Revolution Comes to Us”

Part V of the Sermon Series, “Catching Up With the Spirit.”

Acts 10:1-23a

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Acts 10:1-23a (NRSV)

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. ²He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. ³One 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.' ⁴He 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. ⁵Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; ⁶he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.' ⁷When 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, ⁸and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

⁹ About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. ¹²In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ¹⁴But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' ¹⁵The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean,



you must not call profane.’¹⁶This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. ¹⁹While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, ‘Look, three men are searching for you. ²⁰Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.’ ²¹So Peter went down to the men and said, ‘I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?’ ²²They 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.’ ²³So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.

Sermon:

Like many parents in the pandemic, I have not had much free time. But somehow, I have made the time to watch the beautifully told Netflix mini-series, *Unorthodox*.ⁱ It is based on Deborah Feldman’s memoir by the same name. The story opens with the protagonist, Esty, a 19-year-old bride in an unhappy arranged marriage, looking out at the streetscape of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The thin eruv wire that surrounds her Satmar Hasidic community hems her in.

One day, with cash and a few papers stashed in her waistband, she breaks that barrier and travels alone to Berlin, looking for her mother who herself fled the Satmars and her alcoholic husband when Esty was a child.

Without giving too much away, in Berlin Esty is confronted with a world so different from her home. She grew up in an insular community steeped in religious ritual and strict moral codes. In Berlin, she meets other young adults, men and women, who live as equals, not bound by their genders or ethnic identities. Watching the four episodes in this short series is like watching a conversion unfold. It doesn’t happen all at once, but it is a slow, gradual awakening.

Growing up in South Carolina, it wasn’t unusual for a fellow high school student to ask the age-old Bible belt question, “When were you saved?” Although I had never seen the literal light, I guess there must have been a lot of Damascus road experiences happening in my hometown.

Author Anne Lamott describes her conversion experience as sensing the presence of Jesus. She writes, likening that divine presence to a little cat at her heels:

...everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left.

And one week later, ... I went back to church, ...and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing between the notes,



weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me.

[After going to church] ... I raced home and felt the little cat running at my heels, ...and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said “F--- it: I quit.” I took a long deep breath and said out loud, “All right. You can come in.”

So this was my beautiful moment of conversion.ⁱⁱ

In Anne Lamott’s account, there is drama, music, resistance, community, tears, cussing—her description is quite illustrative.

I have never had a good answer for the question, “When were you saved?” beyond the pat Reformed response: “About two thousand years ago.”

Conversion is a big theme in Acts. It is the focus of our text for today. It takes shape in the room of a soldier and on the rooftop of a tanner. Luke is describing in Acts 10 the door through which we, Gentiles, enter in. This chapter is the pivot, the turn that makes everything before it and after it intelligible and open for me and for you.

Here, for the first time, we Gentiles fully appear. Cornelius is us, but not typically so.ⁱⁱⁱ He is a man of war, bound to the Roman state. He is a master, an owner of slaves. He is a ruler, a leader of men. He is what so many men and women in this world aspire to be—a strong, self-sufficient individual. Cornelius is for many an aspiration. He is also an anomaly.^{iv} He is a God-fearer. He stands at the door of Israel and knocks, praying the prayers of God’s people as though he is one of them, following the gestures and rituals of worship, embodying the hopes of God’s children without them even knowing it. In this way, Willie James Jennings says, he is a living contradiction. He is in the old earthly order, but his actions are preparing for the new kingdom.

Cornelius doesn’t know it yet, but God knows him by name. He will learn what all of us who come after him have discovered, that God hears and answers prayers. God pays attention to Cornelius, and God pays attention to us.

In our text, God sends an angel to Cornelius, so then Cornelius sends two slaves and a soldier to Peter. The powerful, self-sufficient man must search for and find Peter.

From a soldier’s bidding to a rooftop vision, our scene shifts. “[Peter] became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance” (v10). Now, God comes. The timing is perfect. God comes to Peter in prayer, Israel’s first and deepest gesture. And God comes to Peter in the moment of hunger, a being’s deepest truth. “Prayer and hunger, hunger and prayer—these will be the pillars on which God will build the future of the creature. These are the pillars on which God will constitute the new order.”^v Hunger and prayer go together, completing each other in God. In the moments that follow, the divine word comes to a hungry creature.

In the second vision in only eleven verses, the revolution descends on a sheet. Its four corners stretch beyond what Peter can imagine. In his hunger, Peter beholds his horror. The sheet



contains animals, clean and unclean, appropriate and inappropriate, appealing and repulsive, all there together. “Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat’” (v13).

It is hard for us to truly understand the revelation this scene was for Peter. For so many of us, animals are for the most part natural resources, utility, and sites of consumption. There was, however, a time that revealed a different way of viewing animals, and there are people still that hold onto these old ways. The old way of viewing animals bound them as extensions of family, faith, memory, and body. For many ancient peoples, their elders would have to seek permission from the animals to eat them, and with the eating, something would have to be returned to the earth to balance what was taken. To eat the animals that were associated with a people was to move into their space of living. A sheet of animals descended from heaven, given with permission to eat, symbolized God placing Peter in the midst of the world and saying to him, “Join it, join them.”^{vi}

Peter is not so much being asked to take and consume these creatures, but rather to become a part of something that he did not imagine himself a part of before. This new eating symbolizes a new reality.

Peter “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.’” (vv13-14).

Bless poor Peter’s heart, he was a rule follower. He is a conscientious Jew, so of course his natural response was an unequivocal “no.” But if we consider Peter’s “no,” we remember the times it’s come before. When Jesus tried to wash his feet, Peter replied, “No, you shall never wash my feet” (John 13:8). When Jesus explained that he must “suffer many things,” Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him, “No! This shall never happen to you” (Matthew 16:22). And there on Good Friday night, three times Peter denies knowing Jesus, “I do not know the man.” (Matthew 26:74).

Each and every time Peter says “no,” God gives the disciple a chance to change. Throughout the New Testament, it’s like we are seeing Peter’s conversion and reconversion over and over again. God is continually revealing more of God’s self and God’s plan—and with each revelation comes a revolution, a change, an opening. God’s kingdom is growing wider and wider.

Kathleen Norris writes that for her, conversion is a progression and not an event. She writes, “Conversion is a process; it is not a goal, not a product we consume. And it’s a bodily process, not only an emotional or intellectual one. The very cells in our body are busy changing, renewing themselves, every few days. Yet we remain recognizably ourselves. That is how conversion works.”^{vii}

With God’s work, Peter is slowly being remade, and our understanding of the church is being reshaped, cell by cell, day by day.

There at Simon’s door is the future God desires. God tells Peter to go to the three men Cornelius has sent to find him. Don’t analyze, critique, or think too long and hard about it, Peter, just go with these men because I have sent them (v20).



There, at the door, Peter learns of another divine visitation—this one to a Gentile. The world as Peter knows it is turning over, and Peter turns with it. He invites the two slaves and one soldier into Simon the Tanner’s house, and together they rest and eat and talk.

In *Unorthodox*, young Esty had never left New York in her life. Perhaps the most multi-cultural and pluralistic city in the world, and she had only rarely ventured beyond the thin eruv wire that encircled her neighborhood. The boundaries that kept her separated from the outside world weren’t necessarily physical, but cultural, religious, ethnic, and educational.

I’ve been thinking a lot lately about those things that divide us that aren’t necessarily physical. We are sixteen days out from an election that feels existential. As a nation, we are divided, anguished, bruised, and broken. Some of us have lost our ability to extend grace or generosity to people whose views are different from our own. Some of us have become so jaded, hardened, and cynical.

I have Christian friends and family members who hold radically different political views than I do. I owe them every bit of love, respect, and faithfulness I can muster. The posture I feel we have all forgotten that is necessary for the Christian life is quite simply humility. You can spend your whole life trying to get it right like Peter—and still get it wrong time and time again. You can spend your whole life in devotion to the mighty powers of this world like Cornelius—and have revealed to you that what is right was this whole other way all along.

In the verses that follow our passage, Peter will listen and hear the words of God in new and unanticipated places. Listening, this will be the engine for the new world order. Listening for the word of God in others who are not imagined with God, not imagined as involved with God, but whom God has sought out and is bringing near to the divine life and to our lives. Peter will later speak that he should no longer call anyone unholy or unclean, and that God shows no partiality. In our passage, Peter is on the threshold of a revelation. That revelation is not of God’s wider palette for people, but that Peter’s range of whom to love must expand until it stretches beyond his own limits into God’s life.

The Holy Spirit has come.

Your life is bound up in mine, and mine in yours. Because the waters of baptism join us to one another. Whether we agree or disagree, God has told us, O mortals, what is good. May we answer God with each word and action that escapes us.

ⁱ Anna Winger, creator. *Unorthodox*. Netflix, 2020.

ⁱⁱ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 49-50.

ⁱⁱⁱ Willie James Jennings, *Belief: Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 103.

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v *Ibid.*, 105.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 107.

^{vii} Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 42.

