

May 1, 2022    The Third Development    Acts 10:23-35

This morning we turn to a story which represents a third development in the history of the rise of the Christian movement. Jesus was crucified, pronounced dead, and buried. Then on Easter morning, the Sunday, the news breaks that Jesus is risen. HE is seen by the women, then by the disciples in the upper room, Thomas not being present, the following Sunday HE is seen again by a gathering in the upper room, and Thomas is there.

The appearances of Jesus, risen from the dead, are a second development. Many Jews become believers. They believe Jesus is the Messiah, that there is salvation in HIS name. And then following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost something else happens. So we turn to the story of Cornelius.

Basic information: Luke is the most careful historian, in his telling the story of Jesus. That does not mean his Gospel account is “better” than Matthew, Mark, or John. But for the modern mind, Luke is consistently careful to tie the details of his account to place and time, in an era that has neither modern clocks, nor the modern calendar. And it is Luke who writes, once again to Theophilus, (Acts 1, verse 1) to tell Theophilus what happened after the resurrection of Jesus. The story was not over when the 40 days were completed in which Jesus appeared to the disciples and “gave convincing proofs that HE was alive.”(Acts 1:3)

Up to chapter 12 Acts is primarily about Peter as the leader of the Christian cause. Saul is converted in chapter 9. In Chapter 14 a transition occurs and the story begins to focus more and more on Paul's ministry. All of these things are related to the 3<sup>rd</sup> development, in which the faith reaches a whole new set of people. They are not Jews. They are Gentiles, part of the whole of humanity in the non-Jewish part of the world. That whole story starts with Peter's experience with Cornelius.

The place is Ceasarea. Today it is called Ceasarea Maritima, which simply designates it as the city called Ceasarea located on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Numbers of places in the Roman province of Judea were given the name Ceasarea. This is the one on the Sea Coast. Herod had a summer palace there. There was a stadium which regularly featured chariot races. I have walked that track. There is the ruin of grand Theater there. It was a sea port of significance to the Roman Empire.

Cornelius lived there. He was a centurion, whose military service made him a part of the Italian Regiment. He was not Jewish. He was a Roman. But like many soldiers stationed in so called foreign lands, he was affected by the culture and while he did not convert to Judaism, he was affected by the religion. The faith of the Jews with its focus on the Law of the Old Testament could be baffling to a Gentile. But many of those serving in the military found the morality of

that faith attractive. They would gather at the windows of the synagogues, and listen to the teaching...the sermons. And they became a recognizable group. The Jews referred to them as the God-fearers. They found the 10 commandments impressive. They were touched by the story of Moses. And they were interested in the teachings of Jesus.

These soldiers have seen warfare all of their lives. It is personal. It is brutal. And their hearts are warmed by kindness and gentleness of the lifestyle of many of these people. They experience an awakening. The presence of God. Love for others as a way of service. It changes them. We are told in Acts 10:2 that Cornelius was devout. A man of prayer. He was God-fearing. A man with a measure of faith. And that thread affected his family. Had he married a Jewish woman? Or was his Roman wife as affected by all this different kind of religious experience as was he? We are told he gave to the needy. We are told he made time to pray regularly.

One day this battle hardened soldier, an officer, had a vision. He saw an angel who addressed him by name, and to whom he responded with the question, "What is it Lord?" Luke tells us Cornelius experienced fear in the presence of this messenger. He is told to send to Joppa, another community on the Mediterranean Coast, for a man named Simon, called Peter. And Cornelius is given the address where Peter can be found. The house of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.

Cornelius has means. He is not poor. He sends two servants with a soldier, hand picked, who is devout...another

God fearing. He shared his story and sent them to Joppa. While all of this is happening in Caesarea Maritima, things are happening in Joppa. Peter has a vision. Peter's vision involves an invitation to eat meat from the animals on the list forbidden in the Law as unclean. "Surely not Lord," Peter replies. The point is, Peter is not a Gentile. And Peter hears the reply, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." Peter hesitates. The response is repeated. Peter does not eat. He hears the response a third time. The forbidden food is wrapped into a sheet and taken up, as it were into heaven. Peter struggles as he tries to process what he has seen and heard.

His thoughts are interrupted by the arrival of unexpected company. A delegation has arrived at the gate. And one of the men calls out, "Is Simon who is known as Peter staying here?" Peter responds. He greets them with the confession, "I am the man you seek. Why have you come?" The men replied. I assume the God fearing soldier does the talking and the others nod in agreement with the details. Peter learns they have come from Cornelius the centurion who has had a vision of a holy angel, who has instructed them to hear what Peter has to say.

Peter is not new to these kinds of things. The pieces click into place in his mind. God fearing Gentiles. The unclean made clean by God. He does what a Jewish man would normally turn down. Peter invites them into his house to be his guests. Peter gets it. There is a new development taking shape.

He follows the leading of the Lord Jesus. His guests are fed and they stay the night.

The next day they start out on foot for the home of Cornelius. Their party has grown. Peter has invited a number of the “brothers,” understand witnesses of the risen Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit, to go with him.

When they arrive, they are expected. And Cornelius has called together the equivalent of a house party, his relatives and close friends. When Peter enters his home this Roman Centurion kneels at his feet. Peter makes him rise to his feet saying, “I am just a man.” He also addresses the gathering, explaining that a Jew does not normally do this, entering the house of a Gentile. He explains God has adjusted his perspective on the Jew/Gentile thing. And he asks, “Why have you sent for me?” Cornelius shares his experience and Peter responds. He begins by clarifying this third development. “God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him (which means believe in HIM) and do what is right, (which means they live their faith in the real world). Peter verifies that they are indeed aware of Jesus ministry, and that HE is risen, and Peter has brought with him witnesses, so that it is not just his word concerning Jesus.

Some of those with Peter are surprised when Cornelius, his relatives and friends receive the Holy Spirit speak in tongues, and praise God. Peter asks the question, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?”

And he gives the order to his colleagues from Joppa to do just that. They were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. And Peter at least, remained with them for several days.

This is important. And it should be noteworthy to us. We are not people of Jewish stock. We are Gentiles. Members of non-Jewish ethnic groups. It began with the ministry of Peter, and would flower and flourish under the ministry of Paul. The faith in Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, seen of many, has suddenly begun its world wide spread. This is how the faith we treasure has come to us as the gift of God. This is how Jesus has come into our lives and affected and changed the world. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Development is the recognition that when Jesus said He would suffer and die for all...HE meant all. Praise God!

Let us pray;

Heavenly Father, Saving Son, ever present Spirit; we praise you for the grace poured out upon the world in Jesus Christ. We praise you for the witness of those who recognized the extent of YOUR love for the peoples and people groups that make up the population of the world. Help us to ever remember that following Jesus is an act of faith made real by doing what you reveal is right in the written word of Scripture. Walk with us. Talk with us. That we might be blessing to others in this corner of the world you made and created. Amen