

The Baptism of Our Lord: First Sunday after the Epiphany

Text: Acts 10: (1-33), 34-43

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Is it Easter already? It does come very early this year, although I do know it's not quite *this* early. But I think of this text from the tenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles as an Easter text. In fact it is one of the readings appointed for Easter morning all three years of the lectionary cycle, and over the years I have preached on it in that context. It is an Easter message—which is to say it is a word of new life, a word of hope, a word of good news.

But today is the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord—the front end of the season of Epiphany which will be somewhat truncated this year precisely because Easter does come so early. The word *epiphany* comes from two Greek words *epi-phanos*: literally “to shine forth.” It is a season where we reflect on the ways that Christ is shining forth in the world, the ways that Christ is “made manifest.” That great Epiphany hymn that we sang last weekend (“Songs of thankfulness and praise”) speaks of the myriad ways by which “God-in-man” is made manifest:

- manifested by the star to the sages from afar
- and manifest at Jordan's stream
- and manifest at Cana in Galilee
- and manifest wherever good comes from ill
- and manifest on mountain height, when we get to the Feast of the Transfiguration in a few short weeks.

Here at St. Francis in this Epiphany season 2008 we might add that God is made manifest as we gather next weekend for our Annual Meeting, and when we gather the weekend after that to participate in the celebration of the ordination of a priest. Through it all, even when it is shortened, this season gives us the chance to ponder the mystery of the Incarnation and the ways that God is with us and is being made manifest among and through us.

All of which is to say that this text from Acts 10 is not just an Easter message, but an Epiphany message—and it is initially an epiphany for good old St. Peter.

As we consider it, we need first to remember another congregation in another time and place. It was a congregation that was daily being pushed out of its comfort zone—being pushed into the world in mission, pushed to live the meaning of their Baptismal Covenant even at the risk of their own lives. As First Church, Jerusalem found its voice, the people who were part of that movement began to shatter old boundaries and inspire hope even in the midst of a declining Roman empire. The good news began to spread from that community, led by Peter and the other disciples, to the north and south and east and west. And as it did, lives were changed. As it did, the community itself was transformed, because with a risen Lord, stasis is not an option.

Think of Peter on the last few days of Jesus' life, still getting it all wrong. He had confessed Jesus to be the messiah at Caesarea Philippi but then got confused about what that meant: he wanted victory without the cross. And then on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus wants to wash the feet of his disciples, insisting again that the power of love is stronger than the love of power. And again Peter resists. Even more poignantly, this Peter who said he would follow Jesus wherever he led ends denying that he knows the man, even when his northern accent betrays him. So the cock crows, and Peter

weeps: a failure, a broken fisherman who risked it all and then when the chips are down blew it. End of story.

Well, not quite. Because here is the thing: Easter day isn't just about new life for Jesus. Brokenness becomes the path toward healing; death becomes the way to new and abundant life.

The early church, in its wisdom, was not afraid to portray Peter as a kind of loveable buffoon in the gospels, as someone whose heart is in the right place but who is constantly getting it wrong. But that is because they also knew Peter to be a *rock* in the Acts of the Apostles; they knew that having encountered the risen Lord and radiating the Holy Spirit, Peter was a man on fire, a man on a mission!

So in the tenth chapter of Acts, we find ourselves back in Caesarea again—back to the place where Peter first claimed Jesus as “the Christ.” The narrator calls our attention to a Roman army officer named Cornelius: a God-fearing and generous man of prayer. Well that all sounds nice; but he's still a Roman soldier (the imperialist pigs!) He's still a *Gentile*. He is still part of a foreign occupying power and worse still, he's *unclean*. You don't associate with people like that and everybody knows it! If you see him in the Big Y looking over the spare ribs and licking his lips you try to duck down toward the produce aisle but if he does catch your eye you smile politely—because after all you are supposed to love your neighbor. But some neighbors are best loved from a distance!

Anyway, Cornelius has this vision: around 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the narrator tells us. He sees an angel and the angel says, “Cornelius: send men to Joppa and find a man named Peter.” Joppa is about thirty miles away, so this isn't just around the block. But he trusts his dream, knowing that dreams are one of the ways God chooses to speak to people, one of the ways God breaks through when our defenses are down and even though some dreams may seem crazy (and this one seems a lot crazy,) Cornelius sends some men to Joppa.

Around noon the next day, Peter has his own dream. He is up on his roof praying and he has this strange vision. He sees the heavens opening and something like a large bed sheet being lowered and on it are all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds. And a voice says: “*Peter, kill...eat.*” Now that sounds like the voice of the devil to Peter; it sounds like a voice of temptation to be resisted. So he responds:

. . . no way...I've kept kosher my whole life and I've never eaten anything unclean...well, maybe I did once gaze lovingly at net full of shrimp on a fishing trip me and the boys once took but I swear I didn't eat one!

But the vision happens three times, and three times Peter hears a voice that says: “what God has made clean you must not call profane.” And so he starts to wonder: maybe this isn't a temptation at all. Maybe it's an *epiphany*. Maybe God is trying to invite him to see things in new ways and to act in new ways.

But this still makes no sense to Peter. It goes against all he has been taught his whole life and it would totally freak out his kosher grandmother! Peter isn't a Christian, remember. That term comes later and doesn't even exist yet. Peter is a faithful *Jew* who believes Messiah has come and that his name is Jesus. But as Peter would have understood that it doesn't mean he is “converting” to a different religion. He remains a devout Jew and he is expected to continue to keep Torah; all of it and not just the convenient parts. And the heart of Torah is about being set apart. It's about keeping the Sabbath holy (Saturday, not Sunday!) and about circumcising your kids and about avoiding certain foods. None of that was supposed to change when messiah came!

Well, you can see where this thing is going: Cornelius' men arrive from Caesarea and knock on Peter's door and they find this rather perplexed apostle and they ask him to go with them, which is to say they ask him to travel thirty miles back to Cornelius' home for some lunch. Apparently Cornelius has this new chef from Louisiana who makes a mean crawfish and sausage gumbo! And the "rest of the story," as Paul Harvey might say, is history. These two guys get together, they exchange visions, and they figure out that God is doing something new here.

Now let's be honest: Jewish dietary laws don't tend to get Christians all worked up. I've had fun entertaining you as I've tried to faithfully tell the story. But now I want to move from preaching to meddling. Because if the story is to stick for us, then we have to realize what a radical thing is happening here. So imagine, that Peter is Irish Catholic and Cornelius is Protestant and they both live in Belfast, and they find a nice pub and sit down and share some shepherd's pie and a couple of pints of Guinness. Or imagine Peter is a Palestinian Muslim and Cornelius is a Russian Jew living on West Bank and instead of that gumbo they sit down over a cup of borscht and a falafel. Or imagine that Peter is a traditionalist Anglican from Pittsburgh and Cornelius is an openly gay priest from Newark and they are both at a Super Bowl party rooting for the Patriots to complete a perfect season and over a plate of hot wings they re-discover that whether they agree with each other or not about various issues facing the Church they are still one in Christ—still part of the same Body and called to share in the same work.

Worlds collide in Acts 10. That we are used to seeing—on both the international stage and much closer to home. But usually when worlds collide, violence erupts because of fear and mistrust and old hatreds. But in Acts 10, instead of violence, there is healing. There is reconciliation. There is a pretty intense epiphany: *I truly understand now*, Peter says, *I get it! God shows no partiality.*

And so Peter and Cornelius break bread together. They become companions. (Literally they "bread with" one another—*com-panis*.) They get a sense in their bones (that they believe is of God) that it's time to find common ground and reconciliation and healing and new life. *They come with joy to meet their Lord, forgiven, loved, and free.* What then is to prevent the community from baptizing Cornelius? (Which is to say, what is to prevent the community from welcoming Cornelius and his family and including them?) It's a rhetorical question and the deed is done.

This bizarre dream about clams and shrimp and pork chops coming down on a sheet from heaven is ultimately about inviting us to become more aware of the ways that God is being made manifest in our lives wherever old barriers are broken down—wherever bridges of reconciliation replace walls that divide. And I submit to you that most of the time it is a heck of a lot easier for us to stay entrenched in our own safe havens so that our little worlds can remain intact. But maybe all those all worlds are dying anyway (and need to die) – because our ideologies are just that and are human-made constructs, not God-given gifts. God is creating, even now, new heavens and a new earth. So maybe fidelity is about letting go of those old divisions (that zap way too much of our energy and passion and strength) and simply come to the table where strangers become friends, where God gives us the gift of companions for the journey.