

**Now What? The Baptism of Our Lord: January 9, 2011 (Acts 10: 34-43)**  
**The Rev. Rich Simpson, Holden, MA**

Preacher's Note:

*On this weekend, the news cycle has been dominated by reporting about the assassination attempt on Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords of Arizona, an attempt on her life that left six others dead. I'm sure many came to church this weekend hoping to hear some sort of theological reflection about this tragedy.*

*I am not one to "shoot from the hip," however, and (for better or worse) it takes me some time to sort through information and come to even tentative conclusions, before I can find words to speak more publicly. In addition, to be very honest, while I saw a bit on the news late Saturday afternoon, I just didn't know on Sunday morning what I knew by Sunday afternoon in terms of details. That's not an excuse; simply an explanation for not addressing this in my Sunday sermon.*

*That said, I think this sermon, read in the context of these events, has everything to do with a Christian response - even if it is more implicit than explicit. For a more explicit commentary on this shooting, you might check out my blog, at <http://rmsimpson.blogspot.com/2011/01/congresswoman-gabrielle-giffords.html>*

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One year ago, I was at St. George's College in Jerusalem for a program called, "The Palestine of Jesus." I went there looking to better understand the context and ministry of Jesus. I found that and much, much more. We saw a lot of churches, but one that had a special impact on me was on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, called "St. Peter in Gallicantu." The Church is run by the Augustinians of the Assumption, the same French order that runs Assumption College. It was quite amazing to walk into the gift shop there to buy a stole and talk about mutual friends; yet another reminder that it is a small world after all.

*Gallicantu* is Latin for "the cock crowed." That church is dedicated to St. Peter; but not to his successes; rather to his biggest failure. When the chips were down, Peter deserted and denied the One he had previously proclaimed to be "the Christ." He said he'd follow Jesus anywhere. But then he got scared. There is a statue outside of that church of Peter, warming his hands by the fire. You may recall how his Galilean accent betrayed him and a servant-girl says, "surely you know this Jesus, for you, too, are a Galilean." And Peter responds: "I have no idea what you are talking about, I don't know the man." *Cock-a-doodle-doo*. Gallicantu.

Well, for many people that low point would be the end. But with God all things are possible. For Peter, in that end was a new beginning: a turning point that allowed him to truly live into the name Jesus gave him: *Petros*; the rock. That new Peter is the one we see preaching in Acts 10 today, the pivotal chapter in Acts. Peter is now boldly proclaiming to anyone who will listen what he once claimed in secret at Caesarea Philippi: yes, this Jesus really is the Messiah. In the tenth chapter of Acts, we are once again in Caesarea. But to make sense of the reading we heard today we need to back up to the beginning of the story.

The narrator introduces us to a Roman army officer named Cornelius: a God-fearing man of prayer. Well, that all sounds nice. But he's still a Roman soldier. He's still a Gentile. He's still not us, as far any first-century Jew is concerned. He may be a decent guy and all, but he's still part of a foreign

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occupying power. Anyway, *that* Cornelius has this vision around 3 o'clock in the afternoon. The vision is pretty clear: 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; nevertheless, Cornelius sends a detail to Joppa.

Around noon the next day, Peter has his own vision. He is up on his roof praying and 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, including the ones good Jewish boys are never supposed to eat. And a voice says: "*Peter, kill...eat.*" And Peter says, "no way Lord. I've kept kosher my whole life. I've never eaten anything unclean. (Well, I did think once about trying these baby-back ribs at Outback's that just smelled amazing, but I didn't do it, Lord, I swear!)" 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."

Now this makes no sense to Peter. It may not seem like a big deal to us, but for Peter it went against everything he'd ever been taught. Keep in mind that Peter isn't a Christian; the term doesn't even yet exist. Peter is a Jew who happens to believe that Messiah has come and his name is Jesus. He's been a faithful Jew his whole life and he expected, I'm sure, to die that way. He doesn't think of himself as "converting" to a new religion when he claims Jesus is "the Messiah" because at this point there is no "new religion" – just a debate among Jews about whether Jesus is the messiah or not. So Peter sees himself as in deep continuity with the religion of Abraham and Moses and David. And everybody knows that to be a Jew is to keep Torah: all of it, not just the convenient parts. It's to be set apart to be God's holy people. The whole point of keeping the Sabbath holy and being circumcised and avoiding certain foods is about resisting the dominant culture. And besides all that, it's just what his mother taught him to do. It's "tradition."

Cornelius' men arrive from Caesarea, knock on the door, and they find this rather befuddled apostle. They ask him to make the return trip and to travel thirty miles back to Caesarea. The "rest of the story," as Paul Harvey might say, is history. Peter goes, he and Cornelius have a conversation about the visions they have been having, and then Cornelius says: "let's have some lunch. I've got this great chef from Louisiana who makes a mean crawfish and sausage gumbo." And Peter, still hearing those words "kill and eat" in his head, says, "*I'd love to...*"

Basically, that's what it comes down to here. It's not about whether or not Peter keeps kosher in his own home, with his own family. It's about whether the death and resurrection of Jesus really has broken down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. It's about whether or not Peter can sit at table with someone outside of his tribe and eat what is put on the plate. It's about whether he will be defined by separateness, or by hospitality. He chooses the latter.

Jewish dietary laws don't tend to get Christians all worked up; they don't even tend to get most Jews worked up very much these days. So try this: imagine that Peter's name is Seamus and he's Irish Catholic and Cornelius' name is Paddy and he's Orange Irish and they both live in Belfast. Instead of a non-kosher meal together, they find a nice quiet pub and they sit down and drink a couple of pints of Guinness and throw some darts, and before you know it they are singing Danny Boy together.

Or imagine Peter is a Russian Jew living in west Jerusalem and Cornelius is a Palestinian Muslim living in East Jerusalem. One day, because of a dream/ prayer/vision—call it what you will, they decide enough is enough. And they sit down and share some hummus and olives and feta together; and

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in that shared meal they discover that God shows no partiality, and that what unites them is much greater than all that divides them.

Or imagine yourself, and someone in your life from whom you have become estranged. Who knows how it all started or who is to blame? But in this new year of grace, one of you picks up the phone and before you know how it came to pass, you find yourself at Starbucks over a skinny caramel macchiato. You make peace, and grace abounds.

When Peter makes that little sermon we heard today, that's what he's talking about. *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.* These words echo down through the centuries and take on flesh whenever the walls that separated people come down and there is healing and reconciliation. In those moments when we discover this truth for ourselves, something like scales fall from our eyes. It's not mere sentimentality. The truth is that when Peter sits down with Cornelius to eat, it is very likely to upset his parents and his friends. Some of them may even decide that they can no longer sit and eat with him now that he has made himself "unclean." They may not understand why he needed to do this. It may cost him dearly. And the truth is, maybe he doesn't fully understand why he needed to do this either. But he comes to believe it is of God's Holy Spirit and he trusts that, and it leads him to an epiphany—to a revelation about who he is and who God is and more importantly about what God is up to in the world, and who God means for him to become.

Peter no longer lives in fear every time the cock crows. He lives by grace, one day at a time, continuing the work that Jesus began. Remember that what most got Jesus himself into trouble with the religious establishment had everything to do with whom he was willing to sit down and eat. Jesus ate with Jewish sinners and tax collectors; and look what happened to him. Now Peter is pushing things even further, eating non-kosher food with non-Jews.

Peter and Cornelius break bread together. They become *companions*. Literally they "bread with" each other. They become agents of peace and reconciliation, and after they eat, the Holy Spirit falls on all of them, and they are astounded. That is how they finally know that this really is of God. And then Peter says, "*how can we not baptize this guy? I mean I know it sounds crazy—and I know it goes against everything I've ever been taught. But let me tell you I've seen a guy raised from the dead, so from there pretty much anything is up for grabs!*"

Things are out of control! The Holy Spirit is loose! And the Spirit messes up our tidy little worlds. Discipleship isn't about tranquility. This season of Epiphany, a time when we remember all the ways that God is made manifest in our world and in our lives, is about transformation and new life. The angels have stopped singing and the shepherds are back to work in their fields and the donkeys are back on the farm. But everything is different. *Everything* is different.

Tradition is important: it reminds us that we are rooted in a holy, catholic, and apostolic faith. But the paradox is that it is in this holy, catholic, and apostolic faith that every now and again we encounter God's Holy Spirit—that same Spirit that Peter and Cornelius encountered, that same Spirit that leads people to new discoveries, to new truths, to new visions, to new dreams, to new and abundant life. Christ is alive. And the Spirit is at work. This Epiphany season is about paying attention to what the Holy Trinity is up to, and then to join in that work that God is doing in the world. Always that work is

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about the power of hope over fear, of life over death, of breaking down walls so that strangers can become companions.

Normally on this weekend when we remember Jesus' own baptism in the Jordan River, we would celebrate Holy Baptism. Due to scheduling issues, we have a bunch of baptisms early next month, but none this weekend. That's ok. In a few minutes, we'll renew our vows and remember that like Peter and Cornelius we have been called to risk living into the vision and calling of the Baptismal Covenant. I've said it a million times, but I'm going to say it again: we don't baptize people, young or old, as "fire insurance." It's not like getting vaccinated. We don't baptize people for "just in case." We baptize people, of all ages, for the same reason that Peter found some water and baptized Cornelius and his family: to welcome them into a community where there truly is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female; just us. So that we might join in the work that Jesus started: so that we might be instruments of God's peace in the world.

*We share by water in Christ's saving death.  
Reborn we share with him an Easter life  
as living members of a living Christ.  
Alleluia.*

*A new creation comes to life and grows  
as Christ's new body takes on flesh and blood.  
The universe restored and whole will sing:  
Alleluia!*

(Fred Pratt Green, Hymn #296, verses 2 and 4)