

The Sixth Sunday of Easter – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony 5.9.21
Acts 10:44-48, Psalm 98, 1John 5: 1-6, John 15: 9-17

It has been said that scripture is the evidence of an attempt by human beings to understand and explain their experience of God. Let me say that again. When we read scripture a part of what we seek is that same understanding and explanation of our experience of God. It is experience that comes first. It was this impulse to share what had been found to be true of God that led the stories to be first told and then to be written down and passed from one generation to another. It is the desire to know God and God's presence in our lives in a real and tangible way that leads us to read what has been written not only for knowledge but for connection with the presence of God here and now. One of the ancient prayers calls people to read, mark and inwardly digest the words, stories and events of God's intimate care and love for human beings. Scripture is the path by which we go deeper, the bridge through which we come to recognize God's touch not only in the world but in our very own lives.

It is no wonder that after the resurrection, the followers of Jesus first told the stories and recounted the events, and their experiences, one to another. But as the immediacy of their experience began to fade, those early witnesses tried to understand and articulate the truth of their encounter with the living God through Jesus the Messiah. They did this in part by writing down what they knew to be the truth. They wrote in language that would be understood by those to whom they wrote. They wrote in such a way, inspired by the Holy Spirit that their words have power, truth and depth for us as well. We can find our experience of the presence of God in their words, across time and across culture. Luke was one such writer as he sought to record what God was doing in the days, months and years that followed the coming of the promised Holy Spirit. The Acts of the Apostles a portion of which we read today is just such a record.

We have lived through a very difficult time, a traumatic time in the past year or so. We have been isolated, many of us fearful and unwilling to leave our houses often, missing our community and the gathering together that was central to what we knew before. As we read the account of the early days of the church in the Acts of the Apostles, we might recognize ourselves in their experience. There was fear, trauma and uncertainty about what the future held. The followers of Jesus had been gathered around him and now were seeking ways to re-gather and to follow the instructions they had been given.

The portion of the Acts of the Apostles which was our lesson today is short and if we listen carefully, we cannot help but wonder what it was that had gone before. What had caused the Holy Spirit to fall on these people, astounding the "circumcised believers"? What parallels might we find in our own experience over the last few months with the experience detailed here? In order to see how their experience is like ours, we need to hear a bit more of what came before Peter's dramatic order to baptize those around him. That order was the conclusion of the story not it's beginning.

A bit of context. Sometimes we forget that Peter and the earliest followers of Jesus were almost exclusively Jewish. They were as Luke puts it the "circumcised believers" those who had come to see Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promise to send a Messiah. The promise in their view was to the children of Israel and did not include the gentiles. When the Holy Spirit fell on

all who heard Peter tell the story of Jesus, they were “astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.”

Here is the rest of the story of how Peter found himself baptizing a crowd of Gentiles. There was a man named Cornelius, a Roman military officer living in Caesarea. Cornelius has come to know God. He gave alms to the poor and regularly prayed. One day at prayer he had a vision, an angel spoke to him, telling him that God honored his devotion. The angel instructed him to send men to Joppa to find a man he had never heard of, Simon Peter by name. About the same time that this was happening, miles away, Peter was praying as well. Peter also experienced a vision, a sheet was let down from heaven with all manner of animals, both those allowed to be eaten by Jewish dietary law and those deemed “unclean”. A voice spoke, telling Peter to “kill and eat.” Peter being Peter responded, “surely not Lord”. Peter as a faithful Jew obeyed the law including that dietary restrictions. The voice spoke three time to convince Peter that nothing of God was “unclean”. Suddenly, everything had changed, the world was turned upside down. All of Peter’s expectations about the future were challenged.

We have over the past several months experienced just such a momentous change in our lives. We are wearing masks, social distancing, and not gathering in large groups. Our world, and especially our spiritual world of church, fellowship and worship our world has been turned upside down. Now as the possibility of a re-gathering seems likely, the future will be a challenge, not exactly like it has been before.

At the very moment that Peter was wondering about the meaning of his vision, the men sent by Cornelius arrived. The Holy Spirit spoke to Peter again, instructing him not to hesitate, but to go with these total strangers who were Gentiles. Gentiles in the experience of Jews in Palestine were to be feared not trusted. The Holy Spirit was asking Peter to trust God. It was by then too late in the day to begin the return journey, and so Peter a Jew, invites these men, Gentiles, and in one case a Roman soldier to stay with him for the night. This is totally unheard of in the culture of the time, but God’s hospitality knows no bounds.

Peter must have been wondering about the meaning of all that had happened and was happening to his world. We, like Peter might be wondering about the meaning of all that has happened in our world as well. We might well be wondering about coming back together soon. We might be wondering about what our worship and fellowship might be like. As we wonder, we can think about Peter’s experience. When the world changes and we wonder about meaning, God will provide the opportunities to engage with the changed world. We will be invited to offer hospitality to many of those we have yet to encounter. God’s hospitality knows no bounds.

The next day, Peter, some of the believers from Joppa and the men sent by Cornelius return Caesarea. Meanwhile, Cornelius has gathered all of his friends and relatives to hear what God through Peter would say to them.

Cornelius had no idea who Peter was, whether he would come or what he might say yet he was willing to invite those he knew to come and hear. Cornelius trusted God. Peter knew a bit more, he knew that Cornelius was a Gentile, a Roman, a military officer. None of these attributes in the eyes of a Jewish follower of Jesus, were good. Yet, Peter too trusted God. Cornelius risked inviting those he cared about, Peter risked speaking of what he knew of the presence of God. Invitation and story, the two components that made it possible God the

Holy Spirit to act. Through the combined obedience of two unlikely partners, people who did not know the power of God came to find it in their midst.

As we begin to re-gather and to return to what has been described as the new normal, we may find like Cornelius that we have opportunities to invite others to gather with us. Like Cornelius these may be friends or relatives who seem to hunger for some way to explain or understand the experience of the pandemic. It may be those who simply are searching for something more some way to ascribe meaning to their experience. If we are alert to the possibility and willing to speak, God will provide the openings to do so. Like Cornelius we have simply to trust God.

Like Peter, we all have a story to tell, the story of what our faith has meant to us during these trying and traumatic times. We are not required to have the answers, only the story. We will have the words to say, if we like Peter are willing to trust God for those words. They will likely not be many words, not be particularly eloquent, but they will be given by God and will be recognized as heartfelt and true. We have only to provide the hospitality of God, that which knows no bounds.

The story of Cornelius and Peter as told by Luke, show us the way forward from the past into the future God has planned for us. The impulse to share our story with those around us is the impulse of the Holy Spirit. If we respond by being open to telling that story, telling of our experience and our understanding of God's presence with us, the Holy Spirit will fall on those to whom we speak. Trust God, that is all that is asked of us.