

“A Trailblazing Spirit”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Acts 10:1-20, 25-35, 44, 47
June 23, 2019 - Second Sunday after Pentecost

The risen Christ, just before he ascended to heaven, spoke to the apostles and told them: “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”¹

Our New Testament reading this morning begins in what might as well be the ends of the earth for the apostles — the beautiful seaside city of Caesarea Maritima. It was Caesar-town, a place awash in pagan Gentile culture. It’s a place someone might go for business, but certainly not for religious reasons, especially if you’re a Jewish follower of Jesus who follows all the rules of the faith regarding what’s clean and unclean, what’s sacred and what’s profane. An upright man like old Peter has no need to associate with Caesarea Maritima or any of its inhabitants. But there’s this guy...

When we hear that Cornelius is a Roman centurion, we’ll be forgiven for immediately thinking “bad hombre.” But we quickly learn that he’s a pretty cool guy, for a Gentile. We hear that he “feared God” — a phrase that pops up in the Bible when someone external to Judaism “gets it” and is worshiping the one true God, even as they live outside the community of faith.

Cool guy or not, Cornelius is one of *them* — a Roman, an army commander, a representative of the foreign invaders. Peter is in Joppa — modern Tel Aviv, on the coast, south of Caesarea, more comfortably in Jewish territory. And these two guys really ought to remain apart. There are boundaries between them that it would be unwise for each to approach: cultural, ethnic, and religious boundaries. They could just both go about their business, worshiping the same God, staying on their own sides of the lines, living concurrently and without trouble.

When I set it up like that, even before hearing the story, you know that the boundaries are going to be crossed. Our question will be whether God is really interested in messing with these boundaries, or if I’m just trying to lead the witness. I’ll shut up for a second so we can listen to the Word of God:

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One 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.” He 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. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.” When 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, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large

¹ Acts 1:8

sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he 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." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

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. They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them."

On Peter's arrival [in Caesarea] Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; and he said to them, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?" Cornelius replied, "Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. He said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say."

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

More than three thousand people have died in the desert of Arizona attempting to cross into the United States since the year 2000. Since 2004, volunteers with the group No More Deaths/No Más Muertes have gone into the desert to leave jugs of water, cans of beans, and blankets in the most treacherous parts of the borderlands. No More Deaths was founded in 2004 by the local Catholic bishop, Jewish leaders, and a Presbyterian Minister. In January of last year, No More Deaths posted a video that showed Border Patrol agents gleefully emptying and destroying water jugs that had been left for thirsty people².

Kristian Perez Villanueva of El Salvador and Jose Sacaria Goday of Honduras climbed a fence to enter the U.S. and walked for eight hours through the desert. They found a gas station, and a man there by

² Jordan, Miriam. "An Arizona Teacher Helped Migrants. Jurors Couldn't Decide if It Was a Crime" at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/11/us/scott-warren-arizona-deaths.html>.

the name of Irineo Mujica offered them a ride. He dropped the two men off at a house called the Barn — a base camp for No More Deaths where volunteers meet up, store supplies, and head out from to search the desert for the bodies of those who didn't make it. The Barn is about thirty-two miles from the border, in the small town of Ajo.

Kristian and Jose found no one at the Barn, so they hung out for a while and used the bathroom. Forty minutes later, Scott Warren — a 36-year-old geography teacher — arrived at the Barn and discovered the men. He asked them a few questions and began the No More Deaths protocol: screening for first-aid needs and providing food and water and clean clothes. Hungry, dehydrated, and with blistered feet, Kristian and Jose asked if they might rest for a few days.

Three days later — a few hours after the video of the water jug smashing was posted — Border Patrol agents arrived at the Barn and arrested Kristian, Jose, and also Scott Warren.

The Barn had been under surveillance, and agents had seen Scott Warren standing outside and talking to Jose and Kristian. From one agent's testimony: "I was watching the defendant pointing to the north and moving his hand around to different landmarks to the north of the Barn, and I watched the two Hispanic males that were with them just kind of following around where he was looking."³ Agents could see, but not hear, but it was clear to them that Scott was telling the men how to get around a checkpoint. Scott claims that he was following No More Deaths protocol in helping the men get oriented to their surroundings.

Scott Warren was charged with conspiracy to transport undocumented immigrants and two counts of harboring them. The anti-harboring law has generally been used to prosecute profit-seeking smugglers and employers who intentionally recruit workers who are undocumented. Former U.S. attorney-general Jeff Sessions had directed federal prosecutors to prioritize harboring cases a few months earlier. Facing up to twenty years in prison, Scott Warren's trial began on May 29.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights called for the charges to be dropped, pointing to Arizona's migrant corridors as some of the world's deadliest, with temperatures ranging from 120 degrees in summer to below freezing in winter.

Scott Warren's lawyers argued that, compelled by his faith, he intended only to provide basic humanitarian aid. Prosecutors argued that the case was not about humanitarian aid at all, but that Scott was shielding criminals from law enforcement.

This case was an escalation of conflict between humanitarian workers and the federal government, but it was not out of the blue. In 2017 — a scorching summer in the Sonoran Desert — several No More Deaths volunteers were arrested on federal misdemeanor charges for placing water in a federally protected wilderness area.

Just a week and a half ago, Scott Warren's case ended in a mistrial after the jury was unable to reach a verdict. We'll know by next Tuesday whether there will be a second trial.

I don't claim to know what all the best answers are for all the very complicated issues at the Mexico-U.S. border. But these things I do know: we are in trouble when we dehumanize the children of God,

³ Jordan

Christ is pushing us toward each other, and whatever boundaries we claim have been crossed long ago by the Holy Spirit.

The first vision from God comes not to Peter — not to the child of Israel, the rock upon which Christ planned to build his church — but to the Roman centurion. His longing to be a part of God’s dream has been noticed, and he is given orders on how to go get Peter. Gifted with a Holy Curiosity, Cornelius is led to someone with answers.

In just that first part of the story, God has been at work across those cultural and religious and ethnic borders. God gets this thing started before notifying Peter.

And then we turn to Peter’s vision. We’ve been studying the book of Daniel in our Adult Summer Sunday School class, and so we’ve been talking about how faithful people *died* to hold onto the laws of the Torah and how monstrous oppressive rulers outlawed things like the dietary codes of Leviticus in order to strip the people of Israel of their identity. Now along comes this sheet with a smorgasbord of supremely un-Kosher goodies and poor Peter, who must’ve been remembering all the times he didn’t quite get it while in the presence of Jesus, is sticking to his guns until the voice of the Spirit informs him that God is up to something new. “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

It’s not “Hey, you’ve been following those rules for no reason,” but instead a message that a very active God is engaging in some transformative work. Peter will eventually get it: God has widened the circle, taken a Gentile into the family, and this Holy Spirit is going to always be out ahead of the Church, not waiting on us to see or notice or offer our approval.

Peter has been transformed in his worldview as he addresses those who want to hear from him in Caesarea: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.”

Peter then talks for a bit — we skipped over this part — about who Jesus is and what happened to him and what the commission of his followers is now. And then the Holy Spirit interrupts him:

“While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.” Peter gets the message — his sermon has gone on too long — and so he asks, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

Following the leading of the Spirit, Peter has made a dramatic transition in just forty-eight hours. He has gone from cautious and restrictive to a wide-open, cup-overflowing, let the waters roll down posture. He knew who and what was in and who and what was out. Now he knows more.

Our sanctuary remains bathed in the rainbows of our Easter and More Light Sunday celebrations, which reflect the Church’s call to keep listening, keep visioning, keep asking the Spirit, “What do we need to learn from you? What have we missed? Whom have we neglected? Lead us, O Spirit, in a path of courage, to the ends of the earth!”

God’s Spirit dances on boundaries like the graves that God dreams of them becoming. And who would withhold the water for baptizing...for blessing...for parching a thirst...for saving a life?

Of course, most of us aren’t prepared to head to Arizona to spend time with the No More Deaths folks — though if you are, let’s talk. But we know that ICE raids are coming, even if not today, and stories

about the conditions in detention facilities on the border and much closer to home — right up the road in Etowah County — are more terrifying and tragic than anything Netflix or HBO can muster, particularly as we hear about how children are being treated.

So perhaps the Spirit is not beckoning you to the border in the desert, but to engage with the boundaries you see within your daily travels. I wonder where you see dehumanization of God's beloved. I wonder what Holy Curiosity you have — and to whom you might be led to find answers.

Friends, do be careful. Seeking to follow God's Spirit has been known to lead the faithful to places they never expected, to meet people very unlike themselves, to have visions of God's ever-reforming world, and to be utterly transformed in the way they testify to God's grace. When you decide if you're in or out, just remember that you've been warned.