

Explore the Bible: Accepting

May 4, 2016

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for May 22 focuses on Acts 10:9-48.*

The Buffet of Heaven

The Apostle Peter always is mentioned first in the lists of apostles in the New Testament. His place as the presumptive leader of the Twelve in the Gospels is made explicit in Acts. The former fisherman was the first to answer: "What about you? Who do you say that I am?" (Luke 9:20). He was the only disciple to volunteer to walk with Jesus on the sea, the only one to take a swing at one of the crowd arresting Jesus, and he was the first apostle to be faced with the prospect of Gentile believers. (Philip the evangelist already had baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, but Peter's situation was the one that brought the issue to the forefront of the church.)

The particular object lesson Peter's Lord used to get his attention is, at least to this minister, equal parts powerful and comical. Conventional wisdom says don't go grocery shopping when you are hungry, because you will end up buying more than you need. Peter, at least, discovered if he prayed while he was hungry, he was going to get more from the Lord than he bargained for. Instead of manna, the heavenly meal offered to the hungry apostle was a knapsack full of a menagerie. Peter was hungry, and Jesus opened the zoo, and Peter was invited to get to butchering.

Our grocery store culture is a far cry from the agricultural world of the ancients, or even our grandparents, for whom the slaughter and preparation of an animal was commonplace. Peter, however, likely faced in his vision animals he wouldn't even have known where or how to begin to clean. Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 provide extensive lists of the animals declared "unclean" for the Jewish people. They include predatory

birds, ostriches, bats, moles, mice, geckos, crocodiles, camels, rock badgers, rabbits and, most famously, pigs. Some or all of those creatures would have been in that sheet.

The vision, of course, is a parable about the new covenant. God is at work in a new way, not to devalue what went before (the Law), but to fulfill its purpose through Christ and the Spirit (to lead the nations to God). Peter was thoroughly aware of the new work God had done in and through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Even then, however, years after the resurrection, years after the gospel had been spread, the Holy Spirit called Peter and the rest of the church to reckon with the idea that there was even more God had in mind.

Many Voices, One Message

It is fascinating the way God brought together the players of the drama in Acts 10. An angel approached Cornelius, a God-fearing Roman centurion stationed at the major port city of Caesarea. God called to the military man with a messenger of his own heavenly army, with orders to dispatch and transport personnel. Cornelius organized a detail of two servants and soldier to follow the orders to the letter. God met Peter through a vision and the voice of the risen Christ in his trance, then through the urging of the Holy Spirit while awake (Acts 10:19). How willing would Peter have been to accept an invitation from a Roman centurion without that preparation?

Peter brought some fellow brethren from Joppa along with him to the meeting, a testament of the Spirit at work in the community. Cornelius called a crowd to his house of friends and relatives to receive Peter and hear his message. After Peter's message, the Spirit was given to this crowd of new believers, who spoke in other languages. It seems clear this instance of speaking in tongues was intended once more to make the meaning of Peter's vision unmistakable. In the same way that Peter, the Twelve and the

rest who were present in the Upper Room received and manifested the presence of the Holy Spirit, so also these Gentiles had done the same. Through an angel, a vision, the voice of Jesus, the urging of the Spirit, preaching and testifying about Jesus, God orchestrated the meeting, and through the power of the Spirit, God confirmed Peter's closing statement, "*Everyone* who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10:43).

Ongoing Testimony

It would be pleasant to say all the believers universally rejoiced at this new movement of God's Spirit. Instead, we find in Acts 11, Peter had to defend his actions against criticism (Acts 11:2-3), and so he told the whole story again, invoking the witness of the other believers who were present for confirmation before the church rejoiced in what had happened. In Acts 15, when the church gathered to discuss the Gentile question, Peter summarized the story *again*, Paul and Barnabas spoke about their experiences, and James, Jesus' half-brother, turned to Scripture for guidance. Change is hard. Including those we had grown used to keeping out, or at arm's length, is hard. But salvation in Christ is offered to all who will believe and receive forgiveness in his name.

Think of the differences between Peter and Cornelius. A Galilean fisherman turned apostle and a Roman centurion! Across racial boundaries, national allegiances, wealth, power, influence and more, the Spirit drew them together so the lost could be saved and a new community, a new family, formed from those who had been divided.

The message of the gospel is the same now as then—salvation in the name of the crucified and risen Lord. The Spirit still is at work to break down barriers and bring together those who from the world's perspective have every reason to stay separate. Where is the Spirit at work in your community in this way? Will we be willing first of all to answer the Spirit's

call to draw together in this way, and then to continue to testify to this work wherever it is resisted?