

A Promise Kept

7th Weekend after the Epiphany – February 18/19, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Acts 11:4-18 (NRSV)

[After baptizing Cornelius, a Roman centurion and Gentile, into the family of believers, Peter returns to Jerusalem to explain why he did this.]

⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵“I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” ¹⁸When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

Our God is not only the great Promise-Maker, our God is the great Promise-Keeper. God’s promise to Abraham that all peoples would be blessed through his family begins to blossom in Peter’s encounter with a Roman army officer.

A promise made

God makes many promises in Scripture. God promises Noah that never again will he destroy all life with a flood (Genesis 9:11). God promises Moses that he will rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 6:2-8). Jesus promises his disciples (that’s us too!) that the Father would send the Spirit of God to help them and be with them forever (John 14:16).

God makes some wonderful promises to Abraham as well. God will make Abraham’s family into a great nation. God will make Abraham’s name great. But the promise that shapes all the other promises comes at the end: “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:2-3). This is the purpose of it all; the end to which the other promises point.

God does not choose Abraham merely for Abraham’s own sake. God does not save the Israelites from Egypt merely for their own sake. Rather, this is how God has set about to renew and redeem all of humanity and all of creation from the damage wrought by the humans’ rebellion in the Garden of Eden. When the children of Abraham, i.e., the people of God, heard God well, they understood that they were God’s “treasured possession” and “holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6) so that they could be the ones through whom God would rescue his good creation. More than 700 years before Jesus, the prophet Micah (4:1-5) spoke of a time when the nations would “go up to the mountain of the LORD,” beating their “swords into plowshares” and their “spears into pruning hooks.”

*I’ve fallen behind in my *Thru the Bible* reading. What should I do?*

First, take comfort knowing that you are not the only one. Several people have asked me this question in the past week.

Second, remember that the reading plan has only 25 readings each month, leaving a few days for catching up. I’ve had to use them myself.

But, if you’ve fallen so far behind that you are inclined to quit rather than catch up, then you ought to just start anew with the readings for that week. You can always go back and read portions you missed after the end of the year.

Staying with the current weekly readings is important. Each week, the Scripture passage on which the sermons and the background studies are based will be drawn from the *Thru the Bible* readings for the week before.

For example, today’s Scripture passage from Acts 11 is part of the more than twenty chapters from Acts that we read last week. This week, you’ll be reading Leviticus, from which next Sunday’s sermon will be drawn.

A promise broken?

When things are going badly, it can be pretty hard to remember, much less have confidence in, God's promises. The Jews of Jesus' day had enough problems hanging on to their own identity during the Roman occupation, much less remember that they were the ones through whom God would save the world. Ever since the Babylonian exile hundreds of years before, the Jews had been under enormous pressure to assimilate, to become more like the peoples around them. In Jesus' day, this meant becoming more Greco-Roman. But the Jews steadfastly clung to their belief that the one true God, YHWH, had chosen them and they waited anxiously for the day when the entire world would see that they had been right all along. They also clung to certain symbols of their "separateness:" e.g., circumcision, the Sabbath, and their distinctive food laws. After so many centuries of oppression, the Jews surely wondered whether God would ever keep the promises he had made to Abraham.

A promise kept

Strangely, the followers of Jesus claimed that in his death and resurrection, God had kept his promise, he had been faithful to his covenant with Israel. Peter and the disciples, all Jews themselves, claimed that Jesus was not only the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, but also the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Jesus is not only, they said, the savior of Israel but the savior of the world. The time had come to fulfill the promise made long before to Abraham. Jesus' disciples were to "make disciples of all nations," (Matthew 28:19) and to be Jesus' "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

The conversion of Cornelius

The story of this ever-widening geographic and ethnic circle of God's blessing is told in the book of Acts. The work of God and the apostles¹ begins in Jerusalem, moves on to near-by Judea and Samaria, and then, in Acts 10, reaches the pivotal point – the carrying of the Good News to the Gentiles.² When we grasp how BIG a moment this is, it is easy to understand why Luke makes this his longest narrative in the entire book of Acts, spanning sixty-six verses. There are a few very important things to notice about the story.

- First, this is all God's doing. Peter and Cornelius seem almost passive, along for the ride. God uses angels and visions to move events along.
- Peter, a Jew, is taken aback by the God's insistence that, in essence, it is acceptable to eat pork. The much-protected and cherished food laws of the Jews had been set aside. They would no longer mark out the people of God.
- No sooner does Peter recover from the dream about pigs, than he has to go see Cornelius, a respected and God-fearing³ man, but a Gentile nonetheless. When Peter sees the Holy Spirit poured out on Cornelius and his household, he proceeds to baptize them in the name of Jesus Christ.

It is difficult for us to grasp the enormity of the controversy surrounding Peter's baptism of Cornelius. In the minds of many fellow Jews, Peter shouldn't have eaten with the Gentiles much less have baptized them into the body of Christ. Yet, Peter rightly realized that he could not stand in God's way on this. He went to Jerusalem to explain himself to the leaders of the Christian community. Later, there would be a conference in Jerusalem on this very question – must Gentile men seeking entrance into the community of believers first be circumcised . . . and avoid pork . . . and keep the Sabbath . . . and so on. The decision made by the conference was a firm "no" (see Acts 15). Yet even after the conference, there remained Jewish-Christians who taught that keeping such "works of the Law" (as Paul put it) made one a superior Christian. But they too slowly faded away. Led by Paul, a Pharisee himself, the Christians came to understand that there could be only one mark which distinguished believers from non-believers: faith in Jesus Christ. It is this faith that bound Cornelius to Peter . . . and to us.

¹"Apostle" comes from the Greek *apostolos* and is simply the word for messenger or one who is sent forth.

²"Gentile" means non-Jew. For this purpose, every person in the world is either Jewish or Gentile. There were certain visible (more or less so!) markers of who was a Jew. Jews didn't work one day each week. They didn't eat pork. All the males were circumcised.

³Some Gentiles found themselves drawn to the religion of the Jews. Such people might read Torah (in Greek) and even go to the synagogue. Perhaps even a few men underwent circumcision to become a full-fledged convert. It seems that Cornelius is well-known by the Jews and has been involved in their religious life. But he was not a convert; he had not been circumcised. Otherwise, he would not be referred to as a Gentile.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

February 19 ~ 25

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Acts 26-28; Proverbs 13:13-25 Paul defends himself and heads for Rome where he will preach the Good News under the nose of Caesar.</p>	<p>Day 2 Leviticus 1-4; Proverbs 14:1-18 Three voluntary offerings and one atoning offering</p>
<p>Day 3 Day for Reflection</p>	<p>Day 4 Leviticus 5-8; 14:19-35 The guilt offering; instructions for priests; the consecration of Aaron and his sons</p>
<p>Day 5 Leviticus 9-11; Proverbs 15:1-17 The inauguration of the tabernacle service; the deaths of Nadab and Abihu; instructions on what is clean and what is unclean</p>	<p>Day 6 Leviticus 12-14; Proverbs 15:18-33 More on what is unclean</p>
<p>Day 7 Leviticus 15-18; Proverbs 16:1-16 Still more on what is unclean!; The Day of Atonement; the beginnings of the holiness code</p>	

Sermon Notes

Reading *Thru the Bible* with us? Got Questions? Want to go deeper?

When we begin to read the Bible regularly, questions pile up. A good study Bible can help. And our library has some excellent commentaries. But it is very helpful, even essential, to explore these questions with other Christians. In Scott Engle's Sunday morning class we'll be talking each week about the Bible readings from the week before. We'll seek to get a better understanding of the readings and what they mean for us.

We hope you'll join us as we journey through the entire Bible this year.

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

February Book Recommendation

***How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, by Stuart and Fee**

Reading Scripture well is an art. This is an excellent lay person's introduction to interpreting the Bible. The Bible includes a variety of different literary forms – hymns, letters, histories, poems, gospels, etc – and each presents unique challenges. The authors examine each type of literature and provide some very helpful practical tips on making better sense of the Bible.

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The story of Cornelius' conversion is about many things, but it is surely about inclusiveness, to use a buzz-word from our own day. The Jews had fought long and hard to maintain their identity, to stay true to their Jewishness and to their God as best as they knew how. Despite God's promise to Abraham and all the expansive word-pictures of the prophets, Peter is shocked and astounded that God's Spirit would be poured out on a Gentile. God belonged to the Jews didn't he?!!

Questions of exclusivity inevitably arise for Christians. For 2,000 years nearly all Christians have claimed rightly that, in the end, we must come to God through Jesus. Faith in Jesus Christ is inescapably the boundary marker that sets apart the people of God. Yet, just as Peter was surprised, how might we be surprised? How does any notion of a boundary marker or a badge of membership work against our seeing God's work in the world? Does Jesus belong only to the Christians? Does God?

God promises Abraham that all peoples on the earth will be blessed through him. Jesus tells his disciples to make disciples of all nations. At St. Andrew, our vision statement says that we are to invite others into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another. Who are the "others?" How is it that we are to invite them? What have you done lately to be the light to the world? to evangelize – meaning "proclaim the Good News?" How could St. Andrew become a more inviting, a more evangelizing, congregation? Do you see why it is an imperative and not an option?