

Sermon

“God’s Impartiality”

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, January 9, 2022

Baptism of the Lord

Prayer for Illumination:

We hear, Lord, the announcement of your great love for all the world and we give thanks as we consider your love for those who we love. But what of those we disdain? What about our enemies? What about those toward whom we feel we have a justified animus? We are maybe not so thankful that you love them too. Your grace is a scandal because it keeps reaching out to people we think undeserving.

And yet, we gather to hear the “voice of the Lord,” powerful, mighty, awesome. A voice capable of:

† *breaking the cedars of Lebanon.*
† *makes Lebanon skip like a calf,*
† *flashing forth flames of fire.*
† *shaking the wilderness;*
† *strips the forest bare;*

Before this mighty voice we are left to simply murmur “My My!”

So, send you mighty Word today and let it break up our harder hearts. Let its fire refine away our impurity, let it shake us out of our apathy, and strip away our pretense until we are found again in your grace and are glad to be included with all the others your love so tenaciously claims. Amen.²

Psa. 29:0 A Psalm of David.

- 1 Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.*
*2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;
worship the LORD in holy splendor.*

- Psa. 29:3 The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over mighty waters.*
*4 The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.*

- Psa. 29:5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.*
*6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.*

- Psa. 29:7 The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.*
*8 The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.*

- Psa. 29:9 The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, “Glory!”*

- Psa. 29:10 The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.*
*11 May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!*

Acts 10:34 Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36 You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. 37 That

message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39 We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40 but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 41 not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

I. The task of all churches and of each of us as individual disciples is to discern what God desires and busy ourselves with that work, whatever it may be.

A. Romans 12

Rom. 12:1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

B. And yet, discernment is a notoriously tricky business and it has proven difficult to sort out the difference between our own petty impulses and God’s serious work of redeeming the world.

- 1. This is never seen more vividly than in the arguments among people of faith about who deserves to belong to the community of faith.**
- 2. Since my ordination in 1993 these concerns have too often dominated the church’s life usually organized around “ordination standards.”**
- 3.**

B. Habbakuk 2

Hab. 2:1 I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what [the Lord] will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am [corrected].

I love the humility of Habbakuk, who knows that even when he is faithful in “keeping watch,” and listening to what the Lord will say, — he nevertheless must be ready to be “corrected.”¹

II. The Early Christian Church history contained in Acts is the history of the first Christian community discerning what God wanted and who belonged.

A. Chapter 2 — Pentecost

B. Chapters 6-8 Taking the Gospel to Samaria / Hellenistic Jews

C. Chapters 9-10 The Gospel for *Gentiles too!*

Thus, Acts is the narrative of how the Spirit of God keeps claiming *in ever-widening circles* people who were considered outside the community of God’s “chosen people.” Chapter 10 is another example of this . . .

D. God’s impulse to include the whole world is not new!

1. Genesis 12 — “...so that the whole world will find its blessing through you...”

2. Isaiah

¹ The Hebrew here is quite tricky and the KJ translation has been abandoned by more modern translations which render the sentence a little differently. Though I see the reasons for the changes in modern translations, I nevertheless like the sentiment that is rendered in the KJ and have chosen to use it here. PHL

Is. 19:23 On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

Is. 19:24 On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, 25 whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.”

3. Gospel According to John

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son

- E. Chapter 10 in the Book of Acts is simply God continuing to do what God has been doing from the beginning.**

III. Cornelius

- A. A man devout before God.**
- B. A man of prayer (to whom? certainly not Yahweh!)**
- C. A generous man who shared with the poor . . .**

IV. Peter

- A. Faithful,
reckless,
serious,
impulsive, and
“tuned in” to God.**
- B. A devout Jew who knows the instructions about cleanliness**
 - 1. Which he took to mean “Next to godliness!”**

BOTH are approached by God in remarkable revelations!

† Cornelius — “There is a Jew you need to listen to . . .”
• Send for him

† Peter — “You must not call profane . . . what God has made clean.”
• Go to him . . .

- V. You know the rest of the story . . .
- A. They *BOTH* respond in faith.
 - B. Peter comes, preaches
 - 1. The Spirit comes too!
[This is a Gentile Pentecost!]
 - C. Cornelius and all others are baptized . . .

- VI. This story has sometimes been heard as a frightening story
- A. It is always a challenge for those of us who presume that we are already “in” to imagine letting others in we think are not qualified.
 - † Especially if we can justify our exclusion by some form of . . . “but *they* are *unclean!*”
[I remember once having an infant presented for baptism by parents that some of my congregation thought “unqualified.” I and the Session approved the baptism because, thankfully, our access to the sacrament is not contingent upon the faithfulness of our parents, but is about the child and God.]
 - B. The opening chapters of Acts are the reminder that the church *belongs to God* are we are *all* God’s guests — invited by the same Spirit.

1. For those who want to tightly control things . . . the Spirit has *always* been a challenging agent for change.
 - † Always agitating to include a larger circle of God's people in the circle of grace.
 - †† But if this story has sometimes been heard as a challenge to the *status quo*... ††

VII. It is *also* a story which has been heard as a joyful story of *Good News!*

- A. It is Good News that God continues to love this weary world
- B. It is good news that God is in charge of who is included
- C. It is good news that we have brothers & sisters in faith we have probably not yet found who are (no doubt) being shaped by God even now as was Cornelius in preparation for our meeting them.

VIII. So this cautions us to have a proper humility about the limits of what we are able to know concerning God's grace.

- A. We can profess our own faith joyfully and passionately
 1. Without the need to pass judgement on the faith of another . . .
- B. We can claim our loyalty to God in our own tradition . . .
 1. Without thinking that we are required to have an opinion about other traditions. . .

- C. We can give thanks for the grace of God which we are confident claims us and redeems us . . .**
- 1. Without suggesting that we know the limits of God's grace . . .**

I believe that the Office of Theology and Worship have said this well in a small paper they wrote a few years ago about the nature of Jesus and of God's salvation in him. This is only a small excerpt from the paper — and I would like to close with it because I think that it says beautifully what I sense Acts 10 is trying to teach us today.

*Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to place their faith, hope, and love in him. No one is saved by virtue of inherent goodness or admirable living, for “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” [Ephesians 2:8]. No one is saved apart from God's gracious redemption in Jesus Christ. Yet we do not presume to limit the sovereign freedom of “God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” [1 Timothy 2:4]. Thus, we neither restrict the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith in Christ nor assume that all people are saved regardless of faith. Grace, love, and communion belong to God, and are not ours to determine.
[From Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ lines 155-168]*