

There is Good News
Sunday, May 19, 2019 | Greystone Baptist Church
Acts 11: 1-18 & Revelation 21: 1-6

I don't really watch the news anymore. Not since I realized it was affecting my physical well-being. Sometime ago I realized that as I listened to the reporting I could feel my blood pressure rise and my mood decline. I feel a little guilty about it, so I try to stay apprised of current events by reading online newspapers (ones with names that would be nationally recognized and generally accepted as valid sources of information). I have started applying my research skills learned in graduate school to my daily life as an informed citizen, meaning I try to find primary resources before I let myself get all worked up over the spin I read in a headline. It's exhausting, really, to try to figure out the truth about the events that are unfolding in our daily lives.

In addition to all of that, the topics about which our news sources report seems to be heavily skewed toward all that is wrong in our world. There's news about school shootings, and protests. There's news about political corruption and violence. There's news about natural disasters and opioid epidemics. It seems like the only positive news might be found on the sports page... but then again, if our team isn't victorious, even sports news is bad news.

Fake news and bad news seem to be the only news that is available. This is a day and age with more news opportunities than ever before but it seems despite the possibilities, we have lost the good news.

The situation isn't much brighter for churches either. The headlines about churches tend to be about embezzlement, fraud, sexual abuse scandals, perpetuating hate crimes and discrimination based on race, gender, and a myriad of other evils. Oh, and let's not forget the ever-recurring news that participation in religious institutions in this country is on the decline. Bad news all around.

It's quite a predicament for people of the Gospel, which literally means "good news."

So, what is this "good news" and is there any left for us? For the church? For the world?

It seems like news has been reduced to a litany of talking points shared by opposing sides of every possible issue. Republican and Democrat. Liberal and Conservative. Pro-Life and Pro-Choice, there are no more conversations, no more listening, and worst of all, no more relationship. Beneath all the talking points, real stories about real people living real lives are suffering under the yoke of ever-growing ideological divides.

This isn't new, culturally, politically, or spiritually. And I believe that the Bible has something to say about it.

Peter was a Jew, a follower of Jesus, and a father of the early church. A good part of the book of Acts follows him as he works to expand the Gospel message, bringing healing and new life to every corner of the world. In today's reading, he has returned to Jerusalem from a mission trip northwest of the city.

While Peter was in Joppa he had a vision, one in which he is called to eat all kinds of food that was ritually unclean. This pushed the boundaries of Peter's religious beliefs and practices so Peter denies his hunger and says, no. But the voice persists, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." He awakens from the trance and doesn't know what to make of this vision. The talking points, if you will, contradict what he's learned at church. Soon after he awakens, three men show up and ask him to come with them to Cornelius' house.

Cornelius was a Roman Centurion living in Caesarea. Meaning, he worked for the emperor's army and lived in the capital city. Well, Caesarea wasn't exactly the capital, but it was the closest place to Jerusalem where Romans were stationed. Jews occupied most of Jerusalem but officials from Caesarea didn't want to live there as much as they wanted to rule the people as part of their empire. The Jewish people had pretty much figured out how to make this arrangement work, with the exception of a few major catastrophes, you may remember when Pilate came to town to deal with a little upheaval led by Jesus of Nazareth.

So, when Peter goes to Caesarea to visit with Cornelius, he's literally risking his life. To be fair, Cornelius' reputation in the Jewish communities was good. He was said to be a God-fearing man. But given the recent history between the authorities and those in early Jesus movement, I imagine Peter still had some reservations.

What could a Roman Centurion possibly want with Peter, follower of Jesus and proclaimer of the good news?

Peter goes anyway.

Peter's very presence in the home of Cornelius is wrought with scandal. Jews were not supposed to associate with Gentiles, much less those who worked for the enemy (Caesar). There were religious laws prohibiting their association and those laws were very specific about forbidden behaviors. According to Peter's own customs, it was risky to visit Cornelius, but it was forbidden to stay in his home and dine with him at table. These actions make Peter ritually unclean and they will raise some questions when he goes back to Jerusalem.

There would be questions about his alleged betrayal of the covenant and covenantal identity. Had Peter's faith been compromised on his journey to distant lands? Had his relationship with Gentiles weakened his faith commitments by rotting his beliefs from the inside out?ⁱ

I can just imagine how news of Peter's actions might have been reported upon his return. "Missionary Returns after Dining with the Enemy," "First the Gentiles, then What?..." I can imagine the conversations at the ancient barber shops. "It's a slippery slope once we start compromising on our beliefs.... Bless his heart, I think he means well, but that's just not *our* faith anymore... he's not *our* kind of Jew." Before Peter even returned to Jerusalem, I'm sure there were folks dug in on all sides simply because of what they'd heard. He couldn't possibly fit in back home after he'd been communing with Gentiles.

For Peter and the early church that is emerging in the book of Acts, circumcision is the issue. Jews are circumcised, Gentiles are not. We might be tempted to think about this as a personal issue beyond which the church has grown over time; but this understanding diminishes the fact that circumcision was the very foundation of the Jewish faith. It was a ritual, a sacrament, a physical sign of a sacred covenant that bound Yahweh with the people. This was the bedrock of faith and the foundation upon which faith was built. Furthermore, circumcision was divinely ordained. Ever since Abraham, God has called Jews to become circumcised to signal their commitment to faith.

As the Gospel spreads beyond Jerusalem and out into Joppa and Lydda and Caesarea, there are many who claim to be believers yet remain uncircumcised. Worse yet, they have no plans to become circumcised.

So, the "tough spot" that Peter is in when he returns home in Acts chapter 11 with the good news that there are believers as far away as Caesarea is unimaginably difficult.

New Testament scholar, Willie Jennings, describes the situation this way: "This is an impossible assignment for Peter because he must explain the inexplicable. He must suture together a known faithfulness with an unknown faithfulness and bring together obedience to ancient Word and Spirit with obedience to Spirit and present Word. Indeed, nothing has changed, but everything has changed..."ⁱⁱⁱ

Peter's journey began with the good news that Peter intended to proclaim. He went out seeking to share the redemption and resurrection power of God made known through Jesus. And in Peter's mind, this good news would win converts that would show their commitments through circumcision. Peter would learn what prophets, pastors, and people of faith have been learning for millennia: the good news goes both ways.

Yes, we have good news to bring to the world. News that nourishes where there was hunger, news that heals where there was illness, news that offers new life where there was only death. This is indeed good news!

Too often we confine that good news to our own ritual practices, just like Peter did, until his beliefs were challenged through vision but more profoundly through relationship.

Peter has no scriptural witness that speaks to his situation. He has no prophetic call other than his vision, his experience, and his ability to receive the good news through a new relationship with Cornelius. In the presence of his new friend, the expansion of the Gospel beyond the covenant ritual of circumcision is undeniable. “The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out *even* on the Gentiles,” (Acts 10:45).

Despite the persistent testimony of scripture reminding us over and over again that God is doing a *new thing*, we sometimes struggle to accept the newness when it comes. Like those who remained in Jerusalem and received Peter when he returned, we search our past for concrete images to guide us into the future. When we do this, we limit the God’s activity and deny the living Word that is unfolding all around us, giving testimony to the *new thing* that God is doing here and now.

What began in Genesis with God hovering over chaos, creating something out of nothing continued through the story of Israel as they discovered that God could live outside of the Jerusalem Temple. And then through the testimony of Jesus of Nazareth, we learned that God’s invitation was for all people – even those who were previously excluded from society and religious practice. Now, through the experience of Peter’s vision and his emerging relationship with Cornelius, the good news is expanding to include even the uncircumcised Gentiles.

Lucky for you and I – who are Gentiles – Peter was willing to vulnerably speak out on behalf of the *new thing* that he had experienced. He was willing to return home with the good news that he had received on his journey. He was willing to place himself on the line as a bridge between the past and future church. Peter listened to the Spirit when she whispered in his ear: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane,” (Acts 10:15).

Over time and in every generation, there is tension between the past and future church. God’s Spirit continues to expand the good news and sometimes, we struggle to hear it. In our own denomination the good news has expanded around us and eventually within us, changing our understanding of slavery, integration of schools, women in the workplace, women in the pulpit, and so much more. With each expansion there is a temptation to hold onto the ancient Word and ignore or even resist the living Word that is here, in our midst, moving and actively creating a new thing, a new world, and a growing faith.

Sometimes we resist it because we’re overwhelmed by news and none of it seems to be good. If we believe the headlines and talking points that drown us in media noise then there is no nourishment for the soul, there is no healing for the sick, there is no new life... can there really be good news?

Maybe our ears are tuned into the wrong thing. Maybe what is needed is for people of faith to look for news that sounds less like faith formulas and theological talking points

and more like jazz. What if the good news that we both bring and receive could flow like an unpredictable melody and rhythm that speaks to our souls and revives us to the joy that we find in Christ?

What might we learn if we resist the predictability of the past (which statistics tell us are failing anyway) and we lean into the unprecedented improv of the Spirit, trusting that God is doing a new thing and inviting us to participate in it?

As Christians, two thousand years removed from our origins, it has become easy to forget that we were once the questionable new addition to the table. We are the Gentiles and without Peter's vision and Peter's bold testimony to the believers in Jerusalem we may never have been welcomed and included at Jesus' table.

Because we have received the grace of God through the ever-expanding revelation of the Spirit, we must continue to open ourselves to the living Word and the ever-present Spirit who are bringing us good news even now.

As I listened to the news this week and as my social media feeds were drowning in commentary from Al Mohler and Beth Moore, from Alabama and New York, and as I felt stuck between two dug-in sides of the religious and political aisles, I found myself longing for the improvisation of the Spirit revealed through testimonies of people of faith like Peter and Cornelius. And I wonder if anyone has a vision like that of Peter and like that of John who wrote these words in the book of Revelation:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth;
For the first earth had passed away,
And the sea was no more.*

*And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem,
coming down out of heaven from God,
prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*

*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying...
...see, I am making all things new." (Revelation 21: 1-3 & 5b)*

If the nightly news tells us anything at all, it tells us that our whole world is crying out for the good news of the Gospel, the good news that there is goodness and healing and resurrection hope. And if that news plays out like jazz as it did for Peter, the question is, can we hear it? Can we adapt and open ourselves to the beautifully unpredictable melodies that ring forth as God's love grows throughout the world? Can we learn and hear the Gospel from those whom we least expect to know it? And when we hear it... will we add our voices and begin to sing along not knowing which notes might be needed next?

We may not like the nightly news, and we may not find much hope in the old news, but since we are people of the Gospel, then we must believe and proclaim the good news of Christ which is that even when things seem hopeless, even when there seems to be no way, even when it looks like only death and violence and hatred on the horizon, even now, God is doing a new thing. This is indeed good news.

ⁱ Willie James Jennings. *Acts: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Westminster John Knox Press: 2017. 116.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*