

The time between Easter and Pentecost is a time full of fresh wonder. Jesus is risen and ascended – but his presence is palpable. The disciples have become bold. Vast crowds of people have heard the good news of God’s great act of love. But most of this ‘fresh wonder’ has happened within the family.

Sure, some Roman soldiers were amazed – and possibly even led to faith in God – by the events at the cross and empty grave. But Jesus’ death and resurrection has not drawn much attention outside the Jewish community.

The notion of Messiah – the allusions to Elijah – the rituals and the remembrance around Passover that have suddenly taken on new meaning – These are Jewish things. But the world is bigger than the Jewish community. God’s love extends beyond the limits of any one culture’s imagination.

Two things happen simultaneously in this morning’s extended reading. First, we are introduced to someone whose existence might surprise us. Cornelius – a ‘God-fearing’ centurion. A well-placed soldier, highly respected, who honours God.

Converts to Judaism were not unusual, but this is an unusual convert. Wealthy. Powerful. A commander of one hundred soldiers, charged with keeping the peace. Cornelius comes from outside the fold.

He is given a vision – told to send for a man who will bring God’s message. Though terrified, he sends trusted servants and soldiers in search of Simon Peter – THAT Simon Peter. One of the twelve – the provisional leader of the group. The stubborn, impulsive, loyal Simon Peter, who is, even at that moment, receiving a vision of his own.

Both men are advised to reach out – to trust – to go beyond their comfort zone. Cornelius – who knows the law – invites this ‘friend of the condemned’ to his home. Peter – who knows the law – accepts the invitation against all common sense. Why? Because they were tuned to the Spirit of God.

Both Peter and Cornelius do strange and courageous things. Not necessarily because they are courageous – but because they have learned to be faithful. The road to that learning is full of missed opportunities and bad decisions. Peter has, more than once, run afoul of the authorities. At one point, under the gaze of the Council, the leadership is astounded by Peter’s plainspoken faith. The disciples have seen Stephen killed for it – have heard of others imprisoned and harassed – so Peter knows he is taking a chance.

As for Cornelius, he too has seen how fine a line there is between the favour of Rome and the anger of Rome – especially where faithfulness is concerned. Both remain faithful. Both find their trust is rewarded.

Peter has his view of the world challenged and expanded. Cornelius and his household hear about Jesus.

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These days, if we think about folks who are ‘outside the fold,’ we usually think about that great, uncertain quantity that we call ‘the unchurched.’ The folks who ran away or slipped away – or who never darkened the doorstep at all. We might – in a moment of weakness – also consider those who honour the holy in the practice of different faith traditions – but the zeal to ‘convert the heathen’ is (mostly) a habit of our troubling past.

We are urged to a kinder, gentler approach, but still – our call beyond the community – our mission outside the fold - calls for a bold and courageous faithfulness. We too need to be tuned to the Spirit of God.

This has been the task of the church since that first Easter day. To look beyond. To take faithful chances. To trust in God. And here at St. John's – after 140 years of taking faithful chances, we would do well to heed the lessons on offer in Acts chapter 10. The world beyond these walls is a challenging, chaotic mess. We are not the biggest organization in town. We have a good reputation, but a small audience. We are proud of our history, but worried about the future. And this morning we are comforted and challenged just as Peter is comforted and challenged. Look beyond, says the vision of God. Do not call profane what God has called clean. Trust that God's reach - God's grace - God's love – all extend beyond the limits of our imagination.

We are reminded by this morning's lesson from Acts that we can never encounter someone who is not loved by God. There is no part of Creation that God doesn't call 'good' – no matter the impression that humans have made. We are invited to follow in faith the leading of the Spirit – that same Spirit of generous love and fearless grace that raised Jesus from the dead.

We celebrate 140 years of faithfulness in this place – but we are reminded – by the stories we share – that our ancestors took chances for the sake of the future. Their vision was for us, and our children's children. This is where the Spirit of God would lead us. Beyond the moment – beyond our uncertainty – beyond fond remembrance – to a brand-new thing.

We will take time to consider this as a congregation this spring. We will gather together, and ask ourselves “Where is God leading us?” God’s vision is broader than ours, but we are invited in Christ to share it. We are challenged, in Christ, to take chances in the direction of God’s vision. With faith – and in the company of Jesus – that is what we will do.