



# “Guardian of the Way”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

January 22, 2006

Our New Testament lesson for the morning comes to us from the book of the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 11:1-18. It is the story of Peter's vision from God and the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius's house. This passage is actually a retelling of a rather remarkable experience that had unfolded for Peter in the chapter before. Our author Luke is a good teacher - he knows that repetition is key to memorization and actually tells this story three times in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> chapters of Acts. First, he tells us about Peter being led to Cornelius, eating in his home with his family, and sharing the Gospel with them. Then he has Peter preach about it, and now in our text for today our author again has Peter retelling the story - it is sort of like a Biblical version of TiVo - Luke doesn't want us to miss a thing. One would think he's trying to tell us something. We begin our passage after the action - after news of Peter's involvement with the conversion of the first Gentile household had spread like wildfire and gotten back to the officials in the temple in Jerusalem.

“Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, “Why did you go to un-circumcised men and eat with them?” Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, “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. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The 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. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If 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?” When 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.”

“So, how many souls have you have saved?” I sat across the cafeteria table trying to figure out what about my new acquaintance's experience of me made her think that I would be inclined to participate in a conversation that started like this. “Um, I'm Presbyterian,” was all I could manage by way of response. “I've saved 73 souls,” she chimed in, “but I'm really just getting started.” I seemed to have slipped into an alternate universe and my Reformed sensibilities were beginning to spin in my head. Suddenly giving hospital tours to chaplaincy internship candidates didn't feel like such a great idea. I tried to regroup with a discussion of mystery and predestination - grace that goes before all things and my belief that only God saved souls, not people. I may have mentioned Calvin. She was quiet for a moment and looked very thoughtful, “So you really don't know how many souls you've saved?” “No,” I said. “I guess not.” And was struck by the variety of belief systems between us - each representing two very diverse traditions

within Christianity, each with a different take on who was 'in' and who was 'out' in the kingdom of God, each equally convicted about the means by which you measure success in the ministry.

Good news travels fast, and news of Peter's encounter with the Gentiles had beaten him to Jerusalem. The elders in the temple there had their own clear ideas about who was 'in' and who was 'out' in the kingdom of God, and in their minds the Gentiles certainly would have been among the latter. Cornelius was not only a Gentile, he was a Captain in the Roman military - a commander in the occupying army of the dominant and oppressive ruling culture. In their minds his household represented the religion of Caesar, which was no religion at all. One of the few things that the Jews had over the Romans was their conviction that theirs was the one true religion of God - they were his people. So when the Spirit of God descended upon them at Pentecost in chapter two of the book of Acts, and the good news of Jesus began to spread among them, and the apostles had taken up their commission to go out into the world and make disciples of all nations, it would stand to reason that Peter's community of faith had had their own ideas about how and to whom the church was to extend. After all, Jesus was king of the Jews.

Peter may have had his own ideas about the growth of the church himself. It seems that to him the state of the Hebrew union was pretty clear, so to speak. Laws regarding purity and impurity, and preserving your ritual purity as the chosen people of God had been in place for centuries and he was a good practicing Jew. It's not that Jews didn't have relationships with Gentiles - they just couldn't touch them, take food from them, eat with them, go into their homes, borrow their jackets, or marry them. Which makes the council's question to Peter in Jerusalem regarding his dinner companions all the more poignant, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" What were you thinking, Peter, to put yourself at risk and us as well and besides, this is our Good News, not theirs, remember?

That certainty about the way grace is supposed to work and how God is supposed to operate is a pretty powerful thing, isn't it? So pervasive and powerful that Peter received a vision from God that the ancient designations of 'clean' and 'unclean' were now obsolete and it still took the Word of God three passes to convince him that times were changing. That he had to accept the fact that the convictions that he had held for so long about the law and life of faith were subject to a new order, and the designations about people and things that he had once lived by were now meaningless. I've heard it said that ministry would be a lot easier if God would just get out of the way, and I wonder if Peter would have felt the same. For God would show him that his aptitude as a disciple would be measured not by his ability to follow the law, but by his ability just to show up and be open to the movement of the Spirit.

That certainty about the way grace is supposed to work and how God is supposed to operate is so powerful that the leaders of the temple were shocked into silence when Peter recounted the story of how he too had resisted God's vision of a new reality. Of how he had no choice but surrender to an obscure request of the will of God to go to the home of this Gentile captain and eat with his family without fearing or judging them, and without fear of bringing judgment upon himself. And at that point when, much to his surprise the Holy Spirit broke forth on that family, and the memory of the most ecstatic day of his life at Pentecost came flooding back, filling him with familiarity, what else was he to do then but baptize them? "And as I began to speak," he said, "the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I

remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If 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?"

Do you feel how real that struggle is? That struggle to let go of that certainty about the way grace is supposed to work? About how God is supposed to operate? This may have happened some 2,000 years ago but it is not so far of a stretch for us to see that this tension between a dynamic God and our own yearning to preserve and direct the norms of our faith and church culture, let alone our lives is as alive and well as ever. 'It didn't make any sense according to my law or my traditions or even my sensibilities,' Peter said, 'but God was opening up a whole new world and telling me that it was my own - what was I to do?' And just the few pregnant seconds of silence spoke volumes about the church's realization that a bold (and perhaps frightening) new chapter had just opened in the saga of the People of God.<sup>1</sup> "When they heard this, they were silenced. And (then) they praised God, saying, "then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." Who would have seen that coming? Theologian Will Willimon writes that, "Faith, when it comes down to it, is our often breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, "What is God doing, where on earth is God going now?"<sup>2</sup>

In a culture that values self-determinism above most all else, we can become pretty certain about the way our own lives are supposed to play themselves out, can't we? We define the vision, and we direct the steps. I'm sure we'd all say that God is ultimately in control, but don't we do just about everything we can to failsafe our fate just in case he isn't? It all happens innocently enough and in the name of prior proper planning to be sure, but it is both humbling and staggering to see how quickly and anonymously we become disciples of our own will rather than God's, resting in the confidence of our own convictions instead of recalling that ours is a religion built on surrender. As a community of faith we are so vulnerable to the tendency to believe that the success or failure of the church is in direct correlation to the number of programs we offer, or the amount of influence we can have over things that really matter and all for the kingdom, of course. At work we can see clearly where we need to be to be considered at the top of our game or the most respected in our field and our minds become fixed upon that always better way. Our personal value becomes equated with hours put in or dollars earned or the vastness of our social network and so our success or failure is so very easy to track. We see clearly the kind of graduate student we want our child to grow up to be and so to leverage the likelihood of that outcome we spend hours in the store deliberating over what kind of mobile to hang over their crib because we know where we want them to ultimately be and what it will take to get them there.

You can see how easy it is to become so entrenched in our own vision for our church or community, our lives, and our families that we forget that it is not actually about us. We become

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<sup>1</sup> William Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1988, p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

so adamant about our abilities to direct our own steps, that we run the risk of missing the fact that the Lord may have in mind a different path altogether. That he just may have a redemptive purpose in store that is different from our own and that we will never see unless we pull back the layers of our own expectations, set aside our need to program ad infinitum, and just listen. In our 'Achievement starts with A+' culture that thrives on knowing all the answers, we so rarely stop to evaluate the questions in light of our faith, perhaps because we are terrified of what we might find. Perhaps because we are terrified of what it means that, in the eyes of God, we are measured by how we surrender rather than what we take on. That ministry is about faithfulness and not success.

I've shared with a few of you at Wednesday Worship an experience that my husband and I had three years ago while traveling through Rhode Island on a cold winter morning during a time of great uncertainty in our lives. There were questions surrounding the security of his job and I was struggling far too much to discern where the next step of my vocation was to lead me. We were confused and anxious, and were returning home after visiting a city that we were absolutely certain we were to move to with opportunities we knew would be perfect for us, but that simply did not feel right once we visited. Another 'no' from God. In our disheartened state we decided to take a detour to a small island town to take in the beauty of the New England coastline in hopes of lifting our spirits. Just one bridge to cross - one that promised to be a scenic journey in itself, providing a bird's eye view of several coastal towns and a vast waterway filled with ships. You can imagine what we were envisioning as we followed signs to this bridge - dark waves crashing into craggy rocks, quaint New England homes dotting the shoreline while ships cast out their nets into the waters, and all under the watchful eye of a towering lighthouse. But these fairy tale visions were dashed when we mounted the massive bridge and found ourselves immediately encased in a fog so dense, we could not see the thick supporting cables of the bridge in front of us for more than five or eight feet at a time. Our hopes for scenic enlightenment quickly evolved into a quest for survival as we slowly drove on, combating the eerie feeling that was closing in fast upon us as we could see nothing beyond the side of the bridge, nothing of what lay far below, nothing of the ground we had covered or of the road ahead, just one small portion of the bridge at a time. With a nervous laugh my husband commented, "I'm just going to have to trust that this bridge is intact on the other end."

And that is when we fully understood what was really happening on that bridge. For on that bridge and in more ways than one we wanted nothing more than to see the bounty below that we knew was out there. We wanted nothing more than to identify clearly the path on which we were traveling so that we could see perfectly the future before us, the condition of the road ahead, to set our sights on the security waiting for us on the other side, and to control the speed with which we got there. But instead, were relegated to hope. Resigned to the fact that God alone was the guardian of the way before us and that by his grace alone, rather than anything we could do for ourselves, that bridge would be intact on the other side. We were forced to cast off all that we thought we knew about what we thought we needed, about how this thing called life was going to play itself out, and surrender to the trust that God would provide for us in ways beyond that which we could have ever even imagined for ourselves.

For Peter and the early Jewish believers who were charged with building up a young new religion that was somehow supposed to save the world, it came as quite a shock that their success

had nothing to do with their ability to see clearly the path that lay before them, but everything to do with their openness to the new direction God was leading them. Their ministry was not defined by their ability to call the shots or direct their steps, but by their willingness to loosen their grasp on the truth, release their certainty about the way God was going to work, and see how the radical, powerful, and infinitely more perceptive Holy Spirit was going to lead them to an even greater purpose than they could have ever asked or imagined. Out of passion for their tradition and love for the faith, Peter and the believers at Jerusalem would never have seen fit for the unholy Gentiles to receive their Holy Spirit, for such sinners to join their ranks of the faith. But by their wisdom they surrendered to the fact that the agenda of God was not in their hands, and by this act of surrender brought the gospel to the likes of you and I.

For all of our strategic planning and meticulous preparations in the Christian life, for all our concern over the numbers of souls saved or dollars earned in the building campaign, for all the ways we attempt to program success in our communities, our church, our lives, none compare to the power of surrender. None compare to the power of just showing up with arms outstretched and eyes wide open, ready and willing to receive the Word carried on the winds of the Spirit, to catch the vision of the new thing that God is doing for the world and for you and I in Jesus Christ.

Oh, it turns out that the bridge that had laid itself out in such short segments before us really was intact on the other side. It finally gave way to the land but not before the fog lifted for one brief moment and we glimpsed a scenic waterway spread out before us in all its coastal glory. My husband and I decided then to let go of our confidence in the vision we had so carefully constructed for ourselves and sat quietly to instead discern the Lord's. And wouldn't you know God had a different vision altogether? One we would never in a million years have defined for ourselves and yet would transform our work and our relationships and our lives forever - one that would land us right here in Charlotte, North Carolina, of all places.

By the gospel of our Lord we know that when we respond in faith to what seems like the absurd, when we surrender our way to the one who can lead us to the grave and beyond, we can do so in true confidence despite all we are asked to surrender and fear for all that lay ahead. For in all things the Lord is your keeper, he will keep your soul. The Lord will guard your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever. Let us pray.

Mighty and merciful God, we thank you that in your wisdom you direct our steps, and so we pray that you would also conform us to your will. Help us to live a life of surrender to the ways you are ever empowering us to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to a world hungry for some good news. Help us live in anticipation of the ways we will forever be surprised by the depth and breadth of your grace. Help us to recall that there are many paths through this world but only one true way, and that you are truly the guardian, keeper, and Lord over all. We thank you for your steadfast faithfulness and love as shown to us by your Son, our Lord and our Savior Jesus Christ, in whom we believe and by whose name we pray. Amen.