



# “Spirit Moving”

a sermon by

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Our text this week comes from Acts 10:34-48. The Holy Spirit has descended upon the disciples and the community gathered and converted thousands to the faith. And now, the disciples turned evangelists are going out throughout the region Judah preaching the faith. Just prior to this text the scripture introduces to Cornelius, an officer in the Roman army and a Gentile living in Caesaria, who had an angel of the Lord appear to him in a vision telling him to send for Peter. Peter, in Joppa, had a vision saying that he would be sent for and was to follow. Despite laws against Jews entering the home of, or eating with, Gentiles, Peter goes to Cornelius' home and meets his family that has gathered there to listen to what the Word of God has to say through Peter.

“Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ- he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 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. 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; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 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. 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. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 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, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.”

I mentioned to you that I just returned from Haiti with our mission team this past weekend. Of all of the incredible experiences that we had, there is one in particular that I will never forget. A few months ago some of you may recall me welcoming the pastor that we work with there, Actionnel, along with his wife and a colleague in ministry of his to Wednesday Worship. They had been in town and stopped in to visit and meet up with a few other folks from different churches to talk about their mission. Well, during that visit I spoke with he and his wife, Yolande, about our upcoming trip to Haiti, finalizing some details that we had been working through. About that time our church was promoting a marriage retreat that we were hosting in the back of our bulletin. Well, Yolande moves over to sit next to me at lunch, points to the announcement in the bulletin, and says quietly, "You do this in Haiti- this would be very good." "What?" I said, "the marriage retreat?" "Yes. You do this for our church." she said. "You want me to do a marriage retreat for the people of your church? In Haiti?" I said, thinking obviously something was being lost in translation here. "Yes." She said. "This trip? Like in a few weeks? For the Haitians? Me?" "Yes. Thank you very much."

Well, needless to say, I was skeptical. But, at least I was in good company as everyone I shared the story with stared at me with a wide eyed expression conveying a mixture of shock that the request had even been made and hilarity over the prospect of me standing in front of an entirely Haitian audience with absolutely no frame of reference for the culture behind their closed doors and even attempting to speak to it. It became a pretty good joke around the office. Leaders that had been in ministry in Haiti for years assured me that it was doomed for failure- the impossibility of the cultural divide too vast. My only expectation for the event itself was complete mortification as I couldn't see how the gap between us could ever be crossed such that anything meaningful would translate.

Well, Sunday afternoon in Haiti, much to my chagrin, finally arrived. Which was, admittedly, better than the alternative. I had moved beyond fear and anxiety to resignation so was at least feeling peaceful about the painful fate that awaited us all much like what I have heard the martyrs experienced. I focused my energy on trying to get our team members not to attend. Even more discouraging was a relatively full house- there must have been 80 people there, which was great by way of turnout. I apologized in advance to Actionnel for any embarrassment he too would suffer.

I won't go into the details of the event that lasted 2 hours. But I will say that it was the most dramatic reversal of my- and everyone's- expectations that I've ever experienced. The Spirit moved, the material was somehow relevant, and the Haitians dug deep, participated to our astonishment, and at the end expressed a genuine enthusiasm for the topic and a desire to learn more. Low and behold, these folks who are literally starving to death in the mountains of Haiti with little to no access to the outside world surrounded by a culture of voodoo wanted a marriage retreat! And not only that, but the challenges and truths that couples experience really are universal. It was very humbling. Not because I'd been a part of it, but because I had been so wrong.

My expectation for what the Holy Spirit could accomplish was proven to be abysmally low. And I'd been so wrapped up in concern over the threat to my ego and the opinion of my friend the pastor in Haiti in his community, and the prospect of the people's disappointment that I'd not stopped to consider that the Holy Spirit just might have a mighty thing in store for us all. It was astounding. And very convicting.

There is no telling what kind of expectation that Peter brought with him to Cornelius' house that day, but I can guarantee that it was not an expectation for conversion. Quite the contrary, he could have expected death- a trap- and probably been more justified in doing so. But the Lord had given him a vision prior to this text- a vision of animals being lowered from the sky on a sheet and offered to Peter with a voice from God saying, in effect, that there was no longer 'clean' or 'unclean', no animal or people was off limits to his exposure as a Jew- God created all things good, clean, and made them available to him now. Which was a great lesson to receive just before receiving the invitation of a Gentile to come to dinner. Good Jewish men spent most of their lives avoiding contact with the Gentiles, but God was clearly calling, Peter had been given a vision that lifted the veil of his perspectives and prejudices just enough that he could at least sit at the

same table as Cornelius and eat with him. And then the Holy Spirit takes hold. Descends upon Cornelius' house in moment of Pentecost. And the text says that "the circumcised believers (the other Jews) who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God."

They were astounded. The Jews were astounded that the Gentiles would receive this gift of God and it took an act of humility for them to acknowledge this gift because to acknowledge the gift meant to acknowledge that this wasn't about them. They had to set aside their ego, their monopoly on being the chosen ones, their certainty about how the story of salvation was going to play itself out, and concede to the undeniable movement of the Holy Spirit in their midst. Suddenly it was clear that God was defying everyone's expectations- and this mission of his was truly to extend beyond the Jews and to the ends of the earth. Before, that statement of Jesus' to 'go and make disciples of all nations' had been more bizarre than anything, but now, seeing the Holy Spirit on the loose and in action, it was a challenge, a call, and not only that, it was simply the inevitable outflow of obedience and discipleship. The disciples just had to show up. God's vision was far bigger than Peter or any of his colleagues ever expected. But the Spirit would not be limited by the limits of their human vision or their lack of imagination. It just needed a collaborator- someone willing to come to the table- and God would take care of the rest.

We can get so caught up in our self-sufficiency and our certainty that I think that it is often the case that we have abysmally low expectations for the Spirit to actually move and act in unexpected ways around us. We size each other up based on a thousand criteria- race, class, socioeconomics, area of residence, previous experience, type of employment, church attendance, ideology, world view, politics- liberal/conservative, republican/democrat- it seems that all of our certainty carries with it preconditioned assumptions about what is actually possible with one another at any given time. We judge what our experience of each other will be like before we even speak together. We gather data based on external factors and move people or situations into the stifling boxes of our own expectations for them to rise or fall to the occasion so that we are rarely surprised, not surprisingly. We try and calculate and manage our relationships with one another and the experiences that we will have until we manage our way right out of readiness to receive a fresh Word from the Lord through them. And in so doing, we confuse our role with God's. We forget that we are not the creator. We are the created, and we are called to be partners in God's activity in fashioning a new creation based on his love, not on our vision. But in order to do that we have to first get on board with God's vision by lifting the veil and taking the risk of drawing near to the unlikely source of blessing in spite of ourselves.

It was a fresh Word that the Lord was offering to Peter. An astounding Word about the way things were going to be. God was going to call and equip people who were not like him. He was going to put his Spirit on those Peter did not agree with. He was going to turn everyone's preconceived notions upside-down and claim the final word about what exactly was possible with the help of the Holy Spirit in the life of his people. And in placing a common Spirit upon them God pried open the grip of Peter's certainty and

lumped all of them- Jews and Gentiles- together into a common call to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. Salvation was now incredibly available to all who would believe. Peter's call was not to categorize and label. His call was simply to risk showing up and let God do the work of surprising them all with what he had in store. And the community and the kingdom would be far better for it, not to mention Peter would walk away renewed and richly blessed.

It is astounding to think that the farthest limits of our imagination cannot begin to encompass the possibilities that abound with our God. In our shortsightedness we forget this. And in so many ways the challenge for us is to get over ourselves long enough to risk showing up in those places where we may not wish to go and stay open to what the Spirit may have in store. Because the Holy Spirit really is moving in and through and beyond all that we could ever see. And I'd hate to think that our pride and calculation could cause us to miss the surprise that is unfolding in the people and places we least expect. Because the blessing that stands at the ready is for us and all the world to receive and more than likely it is one that the community and the kingdom of God desperately needs. Amen.