

## The Changing Tide

### Acts 10:1-35

You might not be familiar with Cornelius but you should be. We often think of Abraham or Moses as the patriarchs, the fathers of our faith. And of course, they are. But they are, in part, because of Cornelius. Because up until Chapter 10 in the book of Acts, all stories of people in the early church who have come to a new faith in Christ have been Jewish, either by heritage or by choice, meaning that their ethnicity was Jewish or it was not but they chose to follow Jewish faith. Even on the day of Pentecost, where we hear the account of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon people from many different places and backgrounds, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappodocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and Lybia, Cyrene, Rome, Crete, and Arabs, a multicultural gathering if ever there was one. But did you ever notice that they were all Jewish? That's how the story begins. "Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem." The crowd that day was all Jewish. The congregation for Peter's spirit filled sermon on that day, all Jewish, some by birth and others by choice. The early chapters in the book of Acts record the rapid growth of the early church through preaching to the Jewish people. And then in Chapter 10 we read the story of Cornelius, a devout man who feared God, not an Israelite, not part of the chosen people, not a proselyte who had converted from another faith to Judaism. Just a good man who respected God. In fact, he taught his whole household, his family and his servants, to respect God. He gave generously to those in need and he even prayed to God. He prayed constantly to God. The story doesn't tell us anything about how Cornelius came to hear about God. Just that in the most basic of ways, he believed in God. And then God sends an angel to tell Cornelius that He, God, has seen his acts of kindness and heard his prayers. God sees and hears him. And the angel tells him to send some of his men, some of the company under his command to Joppa, to bring back a man once named Simon but now known as Peter. Peter was staying at the home of a man named Simon who lived beside the sea. Of course, Cornelius didn't know who Peter was. He didn't know that it was Jesus who gave Simon Peter his new name had once said, "You are Peter, Petros, and on this rock I will build my church." Cornelius didn't know that Jesus once said to Peter, "Feed my sheep." Cornelius didn't know that Peter was a fisherman, the captain of his own boat. Cornelius didn't know that Jesus once said to Peter, "Come, come, follow me, and I will make you a fisher of men." Cornelius didn't yet know Peter. Or Jesus.

Peter was with Jesus right from the very beginning of his ministry. And during those years, he saw it all. The teaching, the healing, the criticism, the lives transformed. Peter was the first to acknowledge who Jesus was; "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the son of the living God." He was present on the mountain to witness the transfiguration, to see Jesus in His glory. He was in the garden as Jesus prayed, he was a witness to the betrayal

of Judas, he himself denied even knowing Jesus, not once but three times. He was present at the suffering of Jesus, present at the crucifixion, and he saw the empty tomb for himself. And Peter encountered the risen Lord on the shores of the Sea of Galilee where he had returned to his old fishing grounds. There, Jesus said again to Peter, the same thing he said, the first day he called him, “Follow me.” Since that day, Peter had become the captain of the disciples. And he was a fiery and charismatic preacher, filled with the Holy Spirit and used by God to bring many into a God restored relationship with Jesus Christ and to live as transformed people, as God’s own people. But up until today, all those people were Jewish, the people of God, though living in broken relationship, broken covenant, with Him.

While Cornelius was hearing about Peter for the first time, Peter, staying in the seaside home of his friend Simon, was sitting down to pray. And in this story we have in scripture we catch a glimpse of not only Peter but also of our true of selves. Peter has gone up on the roof to pray – think of the roof as a patio or balcony. What could be a lovelier, more peaceful and reflective place to pray than outside, overlooking the sea? And then the truth – the common human experience. He is praying and his stomach starts to growl. He gets distracted by his hunger. I love that picture because it just seems to real life to me. And it is. There is no air brushing going on here to spiritualize the story. God answers Peter’s hunger with a vision, a vision of food. When that happens to me when I’m praying I always think of it more as a temptation than a message from God. But all kidding aside, God used this moment to transform Peter’s heart and to transform the church. In the vision, Peter sees foods which have previously been considered unclean, not kosher for the Jewish people. This label had been placed on foods which during the years of wilderness wanderings might have made the Israelites more susceptible to illness or disease. But now God was inviting Peter to “go and eat,” in essence to see these foods differently. He chides Peter, not to consider anything unclean which God himself has declared clean. And it wasn’t just food God was talking about. While Peter is still confused about what he has experienced in the vision, there’s a knock at the door. The men Cornelius has sent have arrived to invite Peter to go with them to see Cornelius, this Gentile, in other words, this non Jewish but otherwise God fearing man. And so he goes and enters the house of Cornelius. It might not sound alarming or radical to you but in fact it was unlawful, not according to the Roman Empire but according to Jewish law, for Peter to even be there. That day God used Peter, to introduce Cornelius to the God he respected but did not know, Jesus. And God used Cornelius that day, to change the face of the church forever. No longer would the church be for Jewish converts only. All would be welcomed. And the church, the church continued to grow exponentially. The disciples lived into their calling to be fishers of men, of people, across borders, across nations and languages and races and cultures. And the church grew. And as the church grew, the number of fishermen grew, and they went out into the world and told two friends, and they told two friends and so on. It was more than just a clever marketing campaign for Faberge Organic Shampoo. It was how disciples made disciples.

In his book, *Multiply*, Francis Chan writes “Proclaiming the gospel to a lost world cannot be just another activity to add to the church’s crowded agenda. It must be central to who we are. It forms our identity. Being a

follower of Christ means being a part of this mission. The gospel was never intended to be a private matter."<sup>i</sup> I was struck by the clarity of those words. Proclaiming the gospel must be central to who we are. Central not peripheral. "Proclaiming the gospel to a lost world cannot be just another activity to add to the church's overcrowded agenda." It is the agenda. A few paragraphs later he says it again in a different way. "Missions cannot simply be a department of your church. It should be a vital consideration in everything your church does." Mission, going out into the world and telling others about the good news of Jesus, of living our lives as ways that invite others into the good news of Jesus, should be a vital consideration of everything our church does. And when I say our church, I don't mean KesPres, though that is also true. But I mean, you and I. We are the church. We are the church to the people in our lives, the people God brings into our lives and the people God sends us out to encounter. And I wonder what will be required of us as a church, as KesPres, and as individual fishermen, to enable us to make the shift from being receivers of the Good News of Jesus, from being passive listeners and learners, to being active sharers of what God has done, is doing in our lives?

Most of you won't know this about me, but I grew up in a small community at the gateway to Cape Breton Island, where Cape Breton meets the mainline of the rest of Nova Scotia. Cape Breton and the mainland are separated by a body of water, the Strait of Canso, that begins as the Atlantic Ocean and empties out into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Many of the jobs in our community were dependent on that waterway. The communities that line the Strait were home to a pulp and paper mill, an Gypsum plant, a plant that manufactured heavy water for nuclear reactors, a port for building and maintaining offshore oil rigs, the inshore and offshore fishery and an oil refinery. The Strait of Canso was at that time believed to be the deepest ice free natural channel of its size in the world and its location meant that raw materials from all over the world could be brought in by huge ships and processed there or products could be shipped from there to the rest of the world. Our family life was dependent on the sea as my father worked at the oil refinery, his department responsible for the loading and unloading of supertankers so big the crew rode bicycles on the deck to get from one end to the other. Our home had a beautiful view of the strait, where we watched fishing boats, navy ships and submarines, cargo ships come and go. When you live by the sea, there is one thing you are always aware of: the tide. The tide comes in and the tide goes out everyday. The tide comes in and goes out. In that way, it is like breath. You breathe in, you breathe out. You inhale. You exhale. Breathing is vital activity; so vital that your very life depends on it. You breathe in, get what you need for your own sustenance and then you breathe out. You can't keep holding on to that inhaled breath – at some point you need to breathe it out, even to sustain your own life. Breathing out is vital for our health. And we have become so accustomed to doing it, we don't even think about it anymore. It just comes naturally.

Peter was a fishermen. He understood the tides. The tide comes in and it goes out. It doesn't stay in. There is a rhythm. It comes in and goes out. And that same rhythm is reflected in our lives in Christ. Through Christ, we come into this community called church, in Christ we go out into the world. On Sundays, we come in, to inhale, to fill up again, to gain strength, to learn, to be encouraged, to grow, and in Christ on Sundays we go back out,

not to go home, but to go fishing, to go exhale the good news of Jesus into the world, into our neighborhoods and high schools, and nursing homes and tots time and cancer clinics and prisons and suburbia and office cubicals and on the job site, at the rink and at McDonalds. I love this reminder – someone has said – Jesus may be your personal savior but he is not only *your* personal savior. When you encounter Jesus, His job is done, but yours is just beginning. He is savior to all but how can they know unless you tell them?

---

<sup>i</sup> Francis Chan, *Multiply*, “Good News For All”