Lord of the Nations

First Sunday after Epiphany 2020

Matthew 3:13-17 Acts 10:34-43

*Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*

Acts 10:34-35

*16And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”*

Matthew 3:16-17

Aha moments. We all have had them; at least I hope so. They often come to us unexpectedly and in different ways. I like to believe that God is the author of all these Aha moments. Sometimes God uses people as instruments for these moments: friends, relatives, book club members, and yes, sometimes, even the pastor can convey the revelation.

We read about one of these aha moments in today’s lectionary reading from Acts. The Book of Acts, as some of you know, is the history of the Christian church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, that had its beginnings in the experience we call Pentecost. The rest of the book contains Luke’s version of how the church took shape, evolved, and came to be. From groups of believers who tried to figure out what happened to them at Pentecost, meeting in homes, to a more structured institution with bishops and elders, the church came to be. Through petty arguments – shouldn’t women cover their heads in worship – to grand controversies – how do we make for a more just and equitable caring for the needs of members of the community of faith – the church evolved, sometimes painfully.

But the biggest and, in my humble opinion, most important evolution was in terms of how the church understood who they were. From its very inception, from the first moment when the Holy Spirit fell on that crowd at Pentecost and people came to faith in Jesus, it was a very exclusive group. They were all Jews. Every single one of them. It was assumed that it was a “Jews only” community. Jesus was the promised messiah for the Jews, the promised one who would come to save the Jewish nation. If you, a Jew, believed that, then you were a Christian, although they weren’t called Christians back then. If you were not a Jew, then you had to become a Jew first to be eligible to become a Christian. It was like you had to become a US citizen before you were eligible to vote.

Everything we read in the first ten chapters of the Book of Acts culminated in the passage we read this morning. It was the church’s aha moment.

Let’s look at what led to this moment. Peter, who was the acknowledged leader of the fledgling followers of Jesus, held strongly the belief that Jews only were eligible to become Christian. But God had other plans. So, this is what God did. God first gave two visions to two different persons. The first was to a high-ranking Roman army officer named Cornelius, saying you can expect a visit from a man named Peter who will help you understand God. At the same time, God gave a vision to Peter through a very weird dream – that’s a story for another time – telling Peter that God had a task for him to do. As he was trying to figure out what this was all about, Cornelius’ underlings showed up to escort him to see Cornelius. Obediently, Peter follows God’s command and accompanies the soldiers to Cornelius. When he gets there, Peter asks Cornelius, according to Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase, “I think I’m the man you’re looking for. What’s up?” At first, Cornelius thinks he is in the presence of God and falls before Peter in worship. Peter explains he is just a man and they begin a conversation. Cornelius recalls his vision and Peter tells him his. Everything falls into place: God is behind the meeting. The aha moment has broken through Peter’s past prejudices and Peter announces, again, according to Peterson’s paraphrase: “It’s God’s own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites. It makes no difference who you are or where you come from – if you want God and are ready to do as [God] says, the door is open. The Message [God] sent to the children of Israel – that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again – well, God’s doing everywhere, among everyone.” That moment changed everything in the course of human history. From that moment on, faith in Christ became a worldwide religion, not a small sect of the tiny religion of Judaism. The rest of the Book of Acts recounts how, from that moment on, how the faith was shared with all the world.

In 2020, we will celebrate how the consequence of that moment reached the shores of the beautiful islands some 200 years ago. All because Peter had an aha moment in that house in the backwater town of Caesarea.

There had been before many aha moments and many more since, great and small. Those moments are not because we have the smarts to figure things out. They are truly revelations from God. Perhaps you have had those aha moments in your own personal life, where God has broken through the veneer of your consciousness. Perhaps it came in a quiet but sure revelation of a truth that has changed your life. Maybe it was God hitting you over the head with a spiritual two-by-four. Whatever it is, it is to your benefit to pay attention and allow it to change your life. It will make all the difference. It may not change the course of human history, but it may change your life in ways you could not begin to imagine. That in itself may be an aha moment: that God care so much for you as an individual that the Lord of the universe would reveal the wonders of his grace and leading.