



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Journey to God

SCRIPTURE:
Acts 10:1-33

October 2, 2022 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr. and Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Tom: This is an important moment in the book of Acts. It describes the greatest reformation in the history of faith. The largest social issue the early church had to address was race. How can Gentiles be included in the grace of the Messiah? The Messiah was the promised one of Judaism. But to everyone's surprise, except God it seems, Gentiles were flocking to worship and confessing their trust in Jesus. No one expected that. The church has to explain this. That reformation, the inclusion of Gentiles, starts with Cornelius.

And it happens this way: Peter was a first-string disciple. Peter has a vision. It's a vision about kosher laws. What you can eat and what you can't eat. Keeping kosher was, and is, a practice that made Jews Jewish. But Peter's vision challenges this age-old kosher practice. It says, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." What seems to be a new way to think about food is actually a new way to think about God. It was quite a vision.

I have never had a vision. Maybe you have, but I haven't. Visions are a pretty elite kind of spiritual experience.

At the same time Peter is gifted with this vision, a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian cohort (read GENTILE—ALL CAPS), receives a visit from an angel. Now *that* I have experienced. The Greek word for 'angel' literally means 'messenger.' A holy messenger. I've never been visited by a dude with wings and halo, but I have had people speak grace in my life. They are angels. And as spiritual experiences go, again, pretty lofty.

So, it's surprising after such powerful encounters with God, that neither Peter nor Cornelius catch on to what God is doing. They don't get what God is up to until they talk with one another. For that to

happen, Peter has to take a journey to Cornelius's house. It's a geographical journey, but even more so, a spiritual one. Peter begins by saying, "You know, I'm not supposed to talk with you. I'm not supposed to be here." And Cornelius says, "I'm not sure why you are here, but God wants me to hear what you have to say." And it is in their conversation that they discover the revolutionary thing that God is doing in their lives and in the church.

Peter travels but the *conversation* makes it a pilgrimage not simply a trip.

Rodger: It's about 35 miles between Joppa and Caesarea. One could walk it in a day, but it would be a long day. A good 11-12 hours of walking. Peter is walking with the men that Cornelius sent, likely soldiers, and other believers from Joppa. It must have been an odd entourage. People must have stared as they encountered them. I wonder what Peter was thinking during that long journey. Tom just talked about the journey as being both a spiritual one and a geographical one.

There is something powerful about embarking on a journey, on a pilgrimage. What is unique about the Christian journey, the pilgrimage, is that it sometimes seems less about the destination and more about the journey itself.

Growing up in Seattle, our family had the incredible blessing of three national parks all within a day's drive: Mt. Rainier, Olympic National Park and the magnificent North Cascades National Park. We would go camping every summer and during the day we would hike together. We were four boys, our Dad and Mom and sometimes our beagle. Perhaps it's a boy thing, but our goal was just to get to the end of the hike, so we would race each other trying to be the first one to get to the top of the mountain. When we

got there, Dad would quickly catch up to us and then we would have to wait and wait and wait because the rule was that we could not eat our snacks until we were all together. We were waiting for Mom. Eventually, after what seemed like hours, Mom would appear and we would finally be able to eat whatever snacks she had prepared for us.

While we were eating, inevitably, Mom would talk about all that she had seen during the hike. She would say, “Wasn’t that fun watching the family of marmots playing on the rocks on the left of the trail?” We would respond with, “There were marmots? Where? We didn’t see any marmots.” Then Mom would say, “Well, did you like seeing the beavers working on their house?” And we would say, “We didn’t see any beavers. Where were the beavers?” And she would say, “Well, they were building their house in the middle of that beautiful lake.” “There was a lake?” we would ask. “You boys missed the lake?” Mom would ask incredulously. To be on a pilgrimage means you need to pay attention; otherwise, you may miss the holy moments.

Tom: Peter paid attention on his pilgrimage. That’s how his understanding of God grows. This is important. When we encounter a neighbor’s experience of God, particularly when that neighbor’s life experience is different from our own, often they can become our teachers and provide new insight into what God is doing in us and the world. And it should be—because God is always ahead of us. God is always broader and bigger than we imagine.

Our Muslim friends make pilgrimage to Mecca. Our Jewish friends will pilgrimage to Jerusalem. But our pilgrimage is less to a place and more to people who live a different life from our own. Oh, there can be places that speak to the soul, no doubt. But pilgrimage for us is more an encounter with others, particularly encounters with those whose life experiences are different from our own.

Rodger: Tom and I both had a good friend who has now joined the saints in heaven. Rev. KC Ptomey served as the senior pastor of the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Nashville for many years and then joined the faculty as a professor at Austin Sem-

inary. KC told the story of one pilgrimage. He and his wife and two children were driving to Montreat, North Carolina for vacation. On Interstate 40, they had a tire blowout, which was complicated by the fact that they were towing a trailer. Thankfully, he was able to pull the car and trailer over safely. This was before cell phones were common, so he got his wife and two kids out of the car and then proceeded to unhitch the trailer and unpack the trunk so he could get to the spare. He said cars and semis were flying by him at 70 miles per hour.

Then as he was pulling out the spare, he heard a loud engine and looked up to see a man on a Harley-Davidson, who had just pulled up behind them, get off his motorcycle. KC said the man was huge, dressed all in black leather, with a bandana on his head, dark sunglasses and tattoos up and down his arms. KC said to be honest, he was more afraid of the man than he was the traffic. He thought to himself, “Oh, great. I have a flat tire and now I am going to be robbed.” So, he was surprised when the man came up to him, smiled, greeted him and asked if he could help. KC was shocked. At first, he wanted to refuse the man’s offer, but then he remembered he had not changed a tire in years so he said, “Actually, I probably could use your help.” So, KC and this man put the spare on and then repacked the trunk and re-hitched the trailer. KC tried to offer him some money, but the man refused. Said he was just glad he could help.

KC told me that if you had asked him to describe the kind of person whom he thought would be the *least* likely to stop and help a stranger, it would have been this man. His kindness changed Rev. Ptomey. He told me as he was driving his family down the interstate, he was embarrassed. And he prayed for this man and gave thanks for him.

Tom: As you know, in recent years, I have done a lot of thinking about joy. It has been a growing edge in my own faith. Let me tell you a portion of how that got started. Several years ago, a group of us went to Thwake, Kenya. It was a pilgrimage for me. We interacted with the people of the village. We visited schools where three or four children shared a single desk made up of two-by-fours with a chalkboard at the front of the room. Very few books.

I watched Jerry Woolsey test his dentistry skills all day long, staring into mouths devoid of regular dental care—the only light, a lamp strapped to his head. He passed dental pliers and syringes through the window to Lucy Tidwell and Melanie Mann, who sterilized them using a pressure cooker. Kathleen Stanley handed out eyeglasses and watched amazing smiles spread across faces who saw blurry things come into focus. These people have little good, little hope. Apart from us, the world doesn't really know they are there.

But then we went to church. And they danced. They danced in joy. They danced in faithful defiance of life's circumstances. And I got a glimpse of people who trust Jesus with their lives because they know how fragile life can be. It was holy. Since then, I have spent much of my time trying to learn more about joy because I could see a holy and courageous joy in them. They became my teachers in this aspect of faith. They were angels for me.

In Jack Kerouac's novel, "On the Road," Sal Paradise's life falls apart. He decides to take a road trip. He and some buddies hit the road, hitchhiking to nowhere in particular. In Nebraska, a farmer asks the most important question: "You boys going to get somewhere or are you just going?"¹ When the road is the point, it's just a trip. But when pilgrimage is the point, it is a journey to discover the ways of God among us. St. Augustine used to say, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." Pilgrimage is the spiritual practice to address that restlessness, a way to discover the bigness of God.

Rodger: Peter thought he had God all figured out. Then he went on a journey and he was changed. Sometimes we need to ask for directions. Reading and studying the Bible. Seeking and speaking truth. Praying. And going on a pilgrimage—a journey of faith. On the journey we encounter others and in those encounters, we come to know God truly.

1 I am grateful for this reminder in James K. A. Smith's "On the Road with St. Augustine" (2019) p. 6.