

Easter 6B. Acts 10:44-48. May 6, 2018

It is a preacher's nightmare. Peter is preaching one of the most difficult sermons of his life, one of the really big ones. I guarantee that he was up very late Saturday night refining and starting over and adding/subtracting/modifying his illustrations. It's one of those make or break sermons and if he gets it wrong, chances are he'll be updating his resume and looking for part-time associate rector positions. You see, at this time every Christian was a strange kind of Jew. Earliest Christianity, in the first weeks of the church, was a controversial teaching within Judaism. There was no such thing as a non-Jewish Christian.

But God convinced Peter, somewhat painfully, that it's time for this to change. God is at work among all people, not just Jewish folks, and the gospel is breaking out of its ethnic borders to liberate and enliven the nations, without the requirement that they become Jewish first. Peter is at the home of a Gentile named Cornelius, who wants to learn about Jesus. And Peter faces the impossible homiletical task of simultaneously preaching the gospel to these folks who don't have the usual religious preparation and convincing the nearby Jewish believers that they can put their scissors away because circumcision will no longer be a requirement for joining the church.

Peter's about halfway through this impossible sermon of his life when the Holy Spirit just interrupts him and demonstrably falls on the believing Gentiles—rendering the great insight Peter had planned for the last paragraph irrelevant. His carefully crafted sermon is completely superfluous; it is a preacher's nightmare. I'm kind of joking about Peter's excellent sermon being interrupted, and the jokes you're imagining about the Holy Spirit cutting off long-winded sermons are all hilarious. But what I really want to point to here is the pattern of the Holy Spirit interrupting good, commendable, virtuous work. This is immediately the case here with Peter's sermon, but it is also more broadly the case with the whole focused evangelism strategy of the early church.

God is always out of ahead of us, doing things more strange and wonderful than we would dare to imagine, and beckoning us forward—sometimes with slow steps and sometimes with great giant leaps that we wouldn't be prepared to make on our own. And the infuriating thing about serving a living God is that doing good stuff is no guarantee that God won't interrupt us to do something else. Peter was being honest and faithful and brave in preaching this sermon that his usual constituents wouldn't much like—and God still interrupted him.

And the earliest church was doing good, difficult work in spreading the gospel throughout Jerusalem. Focusing on the chosen people wasn't wrong—it was obvious. Of course those are the folks Jesus' followers are preaching to. *But*—but their good work is interrupted spectacularly by the action of the Holy Spirit. And they are called into a

whole new world, where what couldn't have been imagined is suddenly item one on the to-do list.

We won't get to the fallout from this story—the direction of our readings on Sundays shifts before we get to Peter's return to the faithful in Jerusalem. But it turns out that back home there are quite a few folks who *would* have withheld the water for baptizing these outsiders. Even the spectacular work of the Holy Spirit, that shifts the direction of the church in a moment, doesn't make that direction easy. The folks who aren't too sure about severing the bonds between Christianity and the law have “what the faith has always meant” on their side and they aren't just going to throw away the way we've always done things lightly—and nor should they. God's interruptions inevitably cause disagreements, which require deep dives into discernment. The early church does it right, consensus is reached with no one being silenced and without compromising the work of the gospel. And we've done it sometimes pretty well and sometimes really horribly throughout the rest of Christian history because God hasn't stopped moving and living and interrupting, and sometimes we notice.

Now, that's the thing, and brings us to what this story has to do with us today. The Holy Spirit is still at work and I don't think has gotten any more bashful about interrupting even the good work that we are doing. Things are perhaps often a bit less spectacular now, which makes our job harder. Because for the most part we're good Americans with our heads down, noses to the grindstone getting done the good work that we have to do. And our absorption in this hard good work makes it even harder to notice the ways that the Holy Spirit may be gently prompting us to upend our work and worlds together.

God does not always call us to do again the thing we are doing, though unfettered chaos isn't some magic sign of God's will, either. Our task I think is to continue with the best information we have, while praying with hearts that are open to being interrupted. This is true in our personal lives, where we're right to go to work and give our talent, time, and money to the causes we give them to. *And* whatever practice opens us up to discerning God's potentially radical will for our lives must become a discipline.

And it is true, too, in our corporate life here as a small stucco outpost of the one holy catholic apostolic church. This isn't intended as some ominous warning of impending revolution. It's an encouragement for us all to be aware that institutions are naturally conservative in temperament and the biblical witness gives us little reason to think that the God we serve is tepid. God is always already out ahead of us, doing things more strange and wonderful than we would dare to imagine, and beckoning us forward—sometimes with small slow steps and sometimes with great giant leaps into the unknown. Amen.