

Let's set the scene. The church has just been birthed at Pentecost and thousands of people are being converted and baptized. This is causing unrest in Jerusalem and causing the authorities to arrest disciples like Peter and stone to death others like Stephen.

Even within the church community, there is chaos. The church community shares everything in common, but a married couple withhold some property. The Greek speaking disciples and the Aramaic speaking disciples disagree about the feeding of the widows. Soon, the disciples are scattered due to persecution and danger, particularly at the hands of a man named Saul, who will quickly be converted to a believer and an apostle named Paul.

Because the persecution of the disciples in Jerusalem caused them to scatter to surrounding communities, suddenly more than Jewish people are hearing the gospel and being converted. Philip has preached to the people in Samaria and baptized them. Peter and John go to Samaria and lay hands on the new believers so that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

Peter is performing miracles as he travels, a sign that he carries spiritual authority, which will matter greatly for our story today. He heals a paralytic man in Lydda and all of Lydda and Sharon saw him perform this miracle and believed.

He then travels to Joppa, the very same place where Jonah heard God's call to preach redemption to the sinful Ninavites. Joppa is a seaside town, a port city in what is now modern day Tel-Aviv. So, we find ourselves once again set against the backdrop of a natural beach.

This story, maybe more than any other we have read during this series, is a place of flux and dramatic change. The disciples, this new church movement, are in this liminal, shoreline place in between Jesus' resurrection and the institutional establishment of the church. In between Jews being the ones to hear the gospel and the message spreading to the gentiles. In between Jerusalem and Israel as the centers of God's dwelling place here on earth and the eruption of this movement globally. In between the law and circumcision as a sign of faith and grace and baptism as the markers of inclusion.

We know that these places, while chaotic, are also generative places where sands shift, waves crash, and life is generated. Evolutionary science tells us that shorelines were the places where sea-going creatures became land dwellers, where the colliding of the sea and the sand stirred up something new.

In our story, all of this comes crashing together, just as waves crash against a shoreline, when the dreams of Cornelius and Peter collide and what comes out of that collision is life-giving and world changing.

Peter, the once fisherman now founder of the church, is navigating the swirling waters of life after Jesus when he receives this dream. I can imagine that he is watching what is happening around him and through him with stunned awe at how the Spirit is working. Miracles, conversions, baptisms. At the same time, he is staring down religious leaders who are telling him and the other disciples that they are heretics. Does he lay awake at night wondering, with their voices echoing in his head, causing him to question this explosive birth of the church?

Into this space comes the dream from God, which will continue to up end the norms of the religious landscape in which the church has emerged.

How does Peter know this is real? Without a doubt, he is going to face derision and cries against his faithfulness for breaking the Jewish food laws, eating with gentiles, and welcoming gentiles fully into the life of the church. Is a dream enough for this kind of radical change?

Maybe not. But this is more than a dream. The God who has been calling forth life into the world since the first days of creation, comes to Peter in a manner which will speak directly into Peter's life. First, the dream comes to Peter in Joppa, this seaside town on the shore of the Mediterranean. The very same town where Jonah heard the call to go preach to the Ninevites.

If you remember, Jonah resisted the call because the Ninevites were not worthy in Jonah's eyes, of God's mercy or care. But God was serious about outreach to these people and ended up sending a whale to swallow up Jonah for three days before spitting him back out and sending him once again to the Ninevites.

Peter, versed in the holy stories like all Jewish people, would make this connection. In making this connection, not only would Peter remember the story of Jonah, sent to a people outside of the boundaries of religious society, Peter would know that what God is doing here, through Peter's dream, isn't as radically new as it seems.

This God, who is cracking open the walls that keep people in and out, who is crashing against the seawall that holds back the tide of undesirable and unclean people from streaming in, has always been a God who sees and cares for people beyond the human definitions of "good" or "bad", "clean" or "unclean", "legal" or "illegal".

Notice, also, how many times Peter hears the voice of the Lord telling him to eat what Peter has considered unclean:

"But the voice said to him again, "God has made these things pure. Don't say they are unfit to eat." This happened three times. Then the whole thing was taken back up into heaven. Peter wondered what this vision meant."

Three. Just like the number of times Jesus commanded Peter, in the story we read last week from the gospel of John, to feed his sheep. Perhaps, this vision, is a deepened invitation to understand who the sheep are.

So, three times, the Lord tells Peter to eat what is unclean according to Jewish law. Three times, like the three commandments by Jesus and the three days Jonah was in the belly of the whale.

Still, Peter is unsure and does not know what the vision means until the men, sent by Cornelius, come and summon Peter. The voice of the angel, speaking to Cornelius, and Cornelius's faithfulness in summoning Peter, bring everything together and new life rises up for the people that will now be welcomed fully into the fellowship of the church as Peter is able to proclaim,

Peter began to speak: "I really understand now that God does not consider some people to be better than others. He accepts anyone who worships him and does what is right. It is not important what nation they come from.

This piece, of Cornelius also being a part of the revelation, is essential.

Peter isn't able to interpret the vision until he meets Cornelius. Cornelius

isn't an after thought. He is both a part of the revelation and a mark of what this new movement is going to look like.

Think for a moment of the revelation when Jesus is born. It comes to shepherds in the field, offering confirmation of Jesus' identity and as a sign that Jesus has come not for the rich and powerful but for the lowly in the fields. The revelation also comes to the Wise Ones, again a confirmation and a sign that the messiah has come for more than those who already worship God.

This is at the very core of this story. What seems to be new, what seems revolutionary, what seems radical, is actually just a further revelation of who God is, was, and will always be. Our God is a God who is always drawing the circle wider, expanding the love in the world, always flinging open the gates and wordong the walls that separate us from each other and from God.

This revelation might seem like it is distant from us, a moment in time that matters in that we are all inheritors of this vision since none of us, as far as I know, follow Jewish food laws. But more than that, we are inheritors of

this call. The church is never meant to dwell in stagnant waters. We are always on the shoreline, in the generative space where God keeps expanding our welcome to include those who are on the margins.

This church embraced this shoreline place in becoming a Reconciling church, 19 years ago. This church stepped into the courageous, and sometimes difficult place, of drawing the circle wider at the prompting of the Holy Spirit. It was not easy. Some people voted no. Others left the church. Yet, FUMCO trusted the leading of the Spirit and embraced people from the queer community by becoming a Reconciling Church.

Just as the call on the wider church is to continue stepping into the liminal space and welcoming in people from the margins, so too is FUMCO we are still living in this liminal/shoreline space. We have to keep reaching out, keep

If we keep looking for who the Spirit is leading us to next, we will keep ourselves from becoming stagnant and missing the invitation God is giving us to draw the circle wider. Amen.