

“DOUBLE VISION.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Acts 10:1-33

This is the very word of God, only truth for faith and life.

Expect God to speak as we read His Word.

Prayer: Holy Father, your Word is our only firm foundation in this otherwise shifting, changing, unstable, uncertain world. Speak to us by your Spirit, equip and train us in righteousness for your glory and the sake of your Son. Amen.

Introduction.

How many of you like/liked history in school? How many of you like to read history?

There are a number of contrasting ideas about how we should view history. Many Eastern religions view history as circular or cyclical, a series of reincarnations. Marxists and communists understand history in terms of class struggle.

In our secular West, many people assume history is aimless. In the words of Shakespeare's Macbeth:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

All of these views are a contrast to the Christian Biblical view of history as His Story.

I wonder if more of us would have liked history if we could more clearly see the hand of God in all of history, that all of history is spiritual, it's all religious. There really is no such thing as secular history, history that is apart from God.

Think about it. When did history begin? It began when God decided to begin it. In the beginning God. And when will history end? When God decides it is time to end, when He sends His Son Jesus Christ to bring about the great end of history. History is completely spiritual, God begins it and God ends it. History has an aim, a purpose, a goal.

So, what about everything that happens in between? That is all spiritual as well. God leads and guides and sustains all of human history and every human's history, each one of us.

Acts 17:24-28 God ... made the world and everything in it, ... he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ... 'In him we live and move and have our being.'

Romans 11:36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.

God has always been intimately present and active in all of history. And sometimes the curtain is pulled back and we see His very hand at work making and causing things to move in a particular direction.

Our text this morning is one of those moments, a ground-breaking event that forever changed the course of spiritual history and touches our lives directly. If this hadn't happened none of us would be here.

Remember the table of contents back in Acts 1 when Jesus says:

Acts 1:8 You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

Peter preached on Pentecost when the Spirit came upon the Jews in Jerusalem.

Peter came to lay hands on the Samaritans in Samaria and Judea.

Now Peter is being called to take the Gospel to the Gentiles, to the ends of the earth.

Something big is about to happen, God starts by moving in the minds and hearts of men to change history

The story of the conversion of Cornelius is the longest single narrative in Acts (66 verses). This tells us something about the great importance of this story to Luke. The centurion's vision is actually repeated four times in Acts 10 and 11 (10:3-6, 22, 30-32, 11:13-14). Luke narrates the story in his words in Acts 10 and then in Peter's words in Acts 11.

Cornelius.

Cornelius is a military man on foreign assignment in Israel. He is stationed on the coast in Caesarea, the Roman administrative capital of the province of Judea.

The Italian Cohort refers to a 600-man battalion divided into 6 companies of 100, each with a centurion over them (like an NCO, sergeant-major).

This Cornelius stands out as a most uncommon and remarkable man. Roman military leaders were hated in Israel, they were an occupying army. They could be corrupt and cruel, abusing their privileges and the foreigners where they served.

Cornelius is devout, he gives regularly and generously to the need of others. He is a man of prayer, he and his family and servants, a God-fearing Gentile. Cornelius had shunned the Roman gods and superstitions and immorality. He knew God existed and he feared Him.

All of us know non-Christians like Cornelius, good decent, nice people, who are kind, helpful, would give you the shirt off their back, who make wonderful neighbors and co-workers. They might even be religious.

But. But what? But what is he not? He is not born again, he is outside of the covenant of God. You can be like him, have what he has and do what he does and not have eternal life. Something is missing. He doesn't have the Holy Spirit, he hasn't surrendered to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Cornelius is a great answer to a question more non-Christians ask than any other. What about the person who has never heard of Jesus, who lives a good life, is a good person, but has never heard of Jesus, what happens to him?

Here is your answer. When such a person lives according to what he knows and seeks more, God will meet him, he will send someone, or lead him someplace. Remember the Ethiopian Eunuch to whom God sent Philip.

Morality and generosity and going to church and doing devotions don't save us. Honest, honorable, sincere, people need Jesus too. Don't throw away the importance of Jesus and the cross by trying to make a side door into heaven for people who are nice, decent, sincere who don't confess and believe in Jesus.

At the Jewish ninth hour of prayer at 3 pm, Cornelius is praying when he receives a vision of an angel of the Lord giving him specific instructions of what to do and he obeys exactly.

Notice one thing the angel did not do. The angel didn't preach the Gospel to Cornelius. Angels are not commissioned by God to preach the Gospel. God reserves preaching the Gospel for those who need the Gospel, so it is preached by those saved by the Gospel, preached by those who love the Gospel, preached by those who know and have experienced the truth about Jesus in ways angels can never know and only marvel at.

Peter.

But now comes the tougher nut to crack. Peter and all his Jewish prejudices.

Do you know you can be morally right and good and an all-around great person and not be a Christian? Do you also know you can be a Spirit-filled Christian and still be holding onto sins and pride and prejudice? You can have besetting sins that God wants to root out and kill in us.

Do any of you think you are your parent's favorite child? The goal of parents is to raise their children to think each of them is the favorite. The Jews absolutely believed they were God's favorite child, and they couldn't imagine anyone else also having that status. They ignored all the warnings of the prophets that their status was very much in jeopardy.

The Jews twisted God's doctrine to the point that God's electing love was turned into favoritism and national and racial pride and prejudice. The Gentiles were despised as dogs. No orthodox Jew would enter a Gentile home or ever eat with them or even associate with them. This was a deep racial divide filled with hatred and animosity.

How in the world could such deep seated, centuries old racial prejudices be broken?

But God is about to move to forever change the character of the church and He has chosen Peter to be the instrument of the change, the one to whom Jesus gave the keys of the church. Little did Peter know then that those keys would unlock the door to the Gentiles, to all the nations.

The next day during the sixth hour of prayer while Peter is praying God gives him a very strange vision. Three times God lets down a huge sheet with all kinds of four-footed animals, reptiles and birds, things that walk, crawl and fly. It was a mixture of what the Jews called clean and unclean creatures. A very non-kosher buffet.

Then comes the shocking order to kill and eat. This is right up there with God telling Jonah to go preach the Gospel to the wicked Ninevites or Hosea being told to marry a prostitute. This goes against every Jewish conviction and sensitivity.

Acts 10:14 But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean."

This sounds like a little of Peter's old nature coming through, remember when he declared Jesus would never be killed, or "Lord, you will never wash my feet," or "though everyone else fall away, I will never betray you."

God rebukes Peter. Don't call unclean and impure what God has created and made clean. I wonder if that made Peter remember Jesus' words.

Mark 7:18-19 Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, 19 since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus, he declared all foods clean.)

God shows him this vision three times. Why? Perhaps because there are three Gentiles knocking at the door who are no longer unclean? And then verse 23 happens.

Acts 10:23 So he invited them in to be his guests.

Amazing, unprecedented in Jewish history, in the history of the early church to this point. He does what no Jew would ever do. What a drastic change, those who were judged to be enemies are now welcomed as friends, and soon as brothers in Christ.

Notice how perfectly the pieces of the puzzle are coming together under God's sovereign hand. Two men praying, three men arriving just as the second man is getting a vision of what to do.

God is changing the rules. What was true and necessary in the OT to show the Jews how to be holy and separate from wicked nations around them, now was no longer necessary. God's plan is shifting from one nation to all people groups.

Implications and application.

First, it is because of this act of God that you and I have any hope of eternal life. It's because God is the Lord of history and He is working out His plan and right now counts forever.

Everything that happens has spiritual significance and purpose. Every news story, every tragedy, every event in our life, it is all pointing somewhere and leading somewhere. Any commentary or news analysis that leaves God out of the picture is incomplete. Learn in the midst of trials and difficulties that we are under the sovereign care and purpose of the supreme God.

Your education is superficial at best if God is left out of the story, out of science or history or social studies or literature. God is the main actor in our world and God is the greatest reality.

Parents pray for your kids and grandkids that they will learn to see everything in our world and in their lives in relation to God. That they will learn to see every subject they take in school in relation to God and His glory.

Second, we all have racial prejudices, thoughts, attitudes, stereotypes, labels, preconceived ideas and opinions about people of other races. We think our race is better than others or more pure and other races are not as moral or good.

We divide up and play favorites in politics, business, denominations. We make judgments about handicaps, disabilities, levels of education, economic status, schools you attend or root for. Who have we written off? Who do you dislike, can't bring yourself to love? Someone you deem beneath you? Someone who has hurt you? Who do we throw in the sheet?

No human being is unclean, common, to be shunned or rejected in any way.

One of C.S. Lewis most famous quotes is from his book *The Weight of Glory*: “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. ... it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.”.

Our family, friends, enemies, classmates, colleagues at work, the residents in our retirement and care homes, the people next to us in line or on the road, not one of them is common, a mere mortal. This should give us all pause as we deal with one another, how we speak, act, think.

This is why racism and bigotry and hate are sin, they are an affront to the image of God in humans. White supremacy groups are an abomination to God, they are spreading a lie contrary to Scripture. Let us erase from our minds and mouths every racial or ethnic slur or put down or derogatory term or jest or joke.

Christ died for all, from every tribe, tongue, language, people, race.

This is why it is always helpful to know people and make friends with people different from us, to breakdown many of our false ideas and assumptions.

Every human being you see, wherever you seen them is made in the image of God, for His glory, and is destined for an eternal future in salvation or judgment. There are no ordinary or common people in God’s eyes, nor should there be in our eyes.

What we do, say, think about the least of these, we do, say and think about Jesus. Let us affirm everyone’s dignity and defend everyone’s human rights.

Keep your eyes and ears open for a Cornelius around you, one who is seeking, asking questions, hungry for truth and hope and life.

Prayer: Holy Father, open our blind eyes and open our prejudiced hearts, break down the walls that divide us from others. May your love and grace conquer our selfishness, unforgiveness and hard-heartedness. Don’t let us continue in sinful rebellion, resisting and refusing to obey your clear commands. May we live and act and speak in a way that honors and exalts Jesus. Help us by your Holy Spirit. Amen.