

A Spirit That Interrupts – Niquita Hohm

Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

Peter's vision takes place before our portion of the Acts story this morning, but it is important for context: *Peter went up to the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.*

Because this vision is described as happening on *something like a large sheet*, I've always pictured it in my mind as a very low budget production. Actually let's make that a no budget production, because I envision the kind of theater my cousins and I would put on for our parents. I see a literal sheet with four little kids holding each of the corners and shaking some stuffed animals around. I'm sure the vision was a much more impressive sight than that; I doubt it would have been as compelling as it was to Peter if that's how he saw it.

I can also understand Peter's initial hesitation. I don't like to break a perfect record either. Whether it's attendance, or grades, or work performance reviews, we like glowing, unblemished records of our achievements.

But as much as we like for things to go perfectly and smoothly, our story this morning is about interruptions. I'm really hoping the fact that I had a professional interrupter move into my house three and a half months ago will be good practice for attending to the interruptions of the Holy Spirit, but I know it takes serious intentionality to consistently respond well to interruptions.

Peter had been praying, and then while he was waiting for something to eat, God interrupted him with a life-changing vision. The barrier-breaking wind of the Holy Spirit doesn't move according to our timeline. ***While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.*** Just another reminder that ours is not the first nor the last word. Thanks be to God that we are created with God's divine speech, then we inhale the very breath of life for our own speech, and then God graciously responds to our incomplete words with the Word of Life.

Interruptions are powerful, in both good and bad ways. When the physical barrier went up between the states and Mexico, families suddenly had to reach between cold metal bars to touch one another. On the other hand, interruptions of business as usual by protesters can bring about powerful and lasting change.

So where do these interruptions lead us? First, to worship. The Spirit's movement among us leads us to roar with the sea, clap with the floods, and sing with the hills, as in our psalm this morning. The Spirit's interrupting presence breaks us away from the monotony of linear living to anticipate with joy the coming of the Lord who judges with justice and equity. This Spirit brings to all people a glimpse of the steadfast love and faithfulness of God. The worship happens in the

gathering together, in hearing new melodies, new words, new praises. *O sing to the Lord a new song.*

This new song can lead us to new people, new connections. We shouldn't underestimate the wonder of building bridges across difference. The Spirit being able to draw us out of the insularity of ourselves and back to one another is often miraculous. *The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were **astounded** that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out, even on the Gentiles.* It shows just how deep seated our divisions can be when these people, who had not too long ago seen a dead man brought back to life, are astounded at new people being included in their group. On the other hand, when we open ourselves up to seeing new visions and dreaming new dreams, we embrace easily and whole-heartedly these unlikely friendships.

The Spirit also leads us to hospitality. When Cornelius' people make their way to visit Peter, he invites them in and gives them lodging. Then Peter comes to them, to share his vision from the Lord and to be transformed by their worship, and they invite him to stay for several days. This hospitality continues to tear down the social barriers. But when you open yourself up to giving and receiving this kind of hospitality that demolishes barriers, be prepared for the backlash. For Peter it led to an investigation and criticism. *Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?* Peter, however, wasn't fazed and went on to bear witness to the Spirit's unmistakable movement. Fortunately, in the confrontation the Spirit worked in those confronting him to change their minds as well.

The Spirit leads us to deep, formative friendship. The journey—the walk—from Joppa to Caesarea would have taken over 12 hours. I think all those who have been on the university's Walkabout trip would tell us that journeying with baggage for that many miles will forge a particular and close bond with your companions. Cornelius' messengers on the way there, and then Peter with them, would have surely had the opportunity to sow the seeds of a friendship on their long journey up the coast.

You graduates have spent the last four years, at least, watering those seeds of friendships planted now years ago. Those friendships bear fruit as they abide in the steadfast love of God. You'll take those friendships with you even as you are appointed to go. To go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. As you go forward and ride the wind of the Holy Spirit as it crashes through barriers, you'll be strengthened by your network of friends. Goodbyes are hard. That is why Jesus spends so long saying goodbye to his friends. He knows it is painful, so he acknowledges that, and reassures them of his abiding presence with them even though physically distant. And he spurs them on to many new friendships at the prompting of the Spirit.

Jesus chose us as friends and that is the friendship to which we should aspire. The abiding love to which Jesus calls us picks us all up and weaves us into a sacred entanglement. We are friends of Jesus who are all called to the table, and then sent out from it to try to catch up with the Spirit's movement through the world. And then when we do manage to catch up, to know the right responses: *Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit, just as we have? ... Who was I that I could hinder God?*

So ultimately, the worship, the journeying, the hospitality, the friendship, it all leads to belonging, as Pastor Ben pointed us toward last week. The baptismal waters and the baptism of the Holy Spirit bring us to where we belong: together, together in the kingdom of God. And isn't belonging one of our deepest desires? Haven't we all done and said some pretty silly or stupid things to get in with the people we want to belong to? But the belonging is there for us without our needing to try to impress people. *You did not choose me but I chose you.* Jesus chose us. We were created to abide in God's love, and to belong there to one another, together.

The more I imagine Peter's vision, it becomes so much more than a sheet of stuffed animals hanging down from the sky. Peter just saw the beginning of it in the animals spilling over, but perhaps if he had continued to look he would have seen wave after wave of creation redeemed, and if he had listened closely he may have heard the sea roaring and the floods clapping and the hills singing for joy at the presence of the Lord.

May we sing together a new song, of worship, friendship, belonging and joy at the continually surprising presence of the Lord.