

I

“Someday, son, all that you survey will be yours.”

So says King Mufasa to his son Simba in the movie, *The Lion King*.

“Everything?” says Simba incredulously.

“Everything the light touches,” says Mufasa.

Then Simba spots something on the far horizon.

“What about that shadowy place over there?” he asks.

“You must never go there,” says Mufasa sternly. “That’s beyond our borders.”

II

As we grow up and come of age, all of us come to learn that there are “shadowy places” in our worlds. We come to learn about the places in our world that are “ours”, and there are “shadowy places beyond our borders.” We come to learn from a very early age that there are places that “our people” just don’t go. For some, the “place beyond our borders” may be a section of the school cafeteria. Maybe for others it’s a certain neighborhood. Maybe it’s some other social boundary line. But all of us learn from a very early age that there are certain places that are off-limits to people like us.

But in our story for today, the Holy Spirit is going to lead Peter directly into just such a place, directly into the

home of someone he’s not supposed to associate with under any circumstances, and nothing will be the same.

III

This spring and summer, we’ve been reading and preaching our way through the Book of Acts. At the very beginning of the Book of Acts, as the resurrected Jesus is ascending into heaven, he makes his disciples a promise. He says, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

And in recent weeks, we’ve been watching that promise come to fruition. The Holy Spirit is on the move, and the good news about Jesus is indeed beginning to spread beyond Jerusalem.

But when we come to our story for today, the Holy Spirit is blowing the gospel to a place far beyond the borders, a place where faithful first century Jews dared to tread – to a city called Caesarea Maritima.

Caesarea Maritima was not just any other town in the Land of Promise. A few centuries before the birth of Jesus, the Roman Empire came to rule over the entire Mediterranean basin, including all of ancient Israel. The Roman Empire had become so vast that the emperor came to depend on local officials to enforce the law and to keep the taxes revenues rolling in. In the case of ancient Israel, the Roman Empire set up a client king named Herod the Great.

In order to boost his status with the emperor and to enhance trade and commerce, Herod the Great oversaw the construction of a brand new city along an otherwise empty stretch of the Mediterranean coastline. Herod saw to it that the city he built was Roman in every respect, complete with a proper Roman amphitheater, a track for chariot races, temples dedicated to Roman gods, an aqueduct to bring fresh water down from the mountains, and a seaside governor's palace, which, some years later would come to be occupied by a certain Roman governor named Pontius Pilate.

Caesarea Maritima was a little slice of Rome, right there on the coastline of the Land of Promise. It was a symbol of Roman domination and occupation, and consequently, it was thoroughly Gentile, that is, non-Jewish territory.

Now, that distinction might not seem like a big deal to us, but for our ancestors in the faith, it was a huge deal. To be faithful in the first century was more than a matter of intellectual assent to a set of theological ideas. To be faithful was also a matter of daily practice. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God goes to great lengths to outline all the ways in which God wants God's people to live differently than everyone else. God's people are not to have anything to do with other gods. God's people are to pay close attention to boundaries around what is clean and unclean, especially when it comes to what they

eat, and all pork products are off the menu.

For our ancestors in the faith, these boundaries were not just an intellectual exercise. They were boundaries and practices that made them distinct from everyone else. And for our ancestors in the faith, a Roman city full of temples to foreign gods, a city where none of the laws around dietary restrictions or ritual purity were being observed, sin city, if you will, was most decidedly beyond the borders.

Just before we come to today's passage, Peter is praying when he has a strange vision. He sees a sheet being lowered down from heaven, on top of which is a smorgasbord of all kinds food. Some of the food on the sheet is within bounds of Jewish dietary laws, that is "clean," and some is not. In Peter's vision, a voice says, in Ryan's paraphrase, "Get up, Peter, and dig in." But Peter says, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." But the voice says, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and then the sheet was whisked up into heaven.

Peter, as you might expect, was puzzled about this vision and what it might mean, when suddenly there was a knock on the door. And the Spirit said to Peter, "Get up and go with these men, for I have sent them." So Peter went to the door, and the men at the door said, "Our master, a Roman centurion named Cornelius, was directed by a holy angel

to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.”

In other words, Peter is being invited to cross the boundary into the shadowy place, and not just as an interloper. He’s being invited into the home of a Roman centurion, an officer of the military that is presently occupying Peter’s homeland.

And that brings us to our text for today. So listen now for a Word from God from Acts 10:23-48.

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. On Peter’s arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. But Peter made him get up, saying, “Stand up; I am only a mortal.” And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; and he said to them, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?”

Cornelius replied, “Four days ago at this very hour, at three o’clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. He said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon,

who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.’ Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.”

Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 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, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Up to his point in the story, we've been getting glimpses of the movement of the Spirit into the world, hints that something unimaginably big is happening here. But right here in this moment, right here in Caesarea Maritima, right here in the home of an unclean centurion in the midst of an unclean city, we get to see just how earth changing the gospel is.

Because what has been revealed to Peter is that the gospel, the good news about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, is not just for his kind of people, for those who are considered "clean." What Peter has suddenly discovered in Caesarea Maritima is that the Holy Spirit is moving far beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria. The Holy Spirit is moving far beyond a select few.

And now that he has had this revelation, Peter declares, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone

who fears him and does right is acceptable to him."

IV

You and I live and move and have our being in a world that teaches us from a very early age that there are some with whom we should not associate. We live and move and have our being in a world that that wants to separate us into groups with clearly defined boundaries. We live in a world that tells us that those groups are tied to what we look like, or who our people are, or where we come from, or whether we're an asset or a liability in the grand scheme of things.

But the gospel truth, my friend, is that you are loved and cherished and acceptable to God, not because of anything you've said or done or anything you've not said or not done. You are loved and cherished and acceptable not because of where you come from or because of who your people are.

You are loved and cherished and acceptable to God because of what God has done for you in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. You are loved and cherished and acceptable to God because the Spirit far bigger and wider and deeper than you or I can possibly imagine.

Frederick Buechner tells a story about a boy who grew up in a small town with a single mother and an absent father. They were poor and struggled just to make ends meet, and every day as the boy walked through town, he could sense the sideways looks from the

townspeople and hear their whispers about his absent father.

One day, he happened to be passing a church. It was hot, and the doors were open, and something drew him inside. He slipped into the back pew, hoping no one would notice him. But the preacher spotted him. And just as the service was ending, the preacher said, “Young man, stand up.”

The boy stood on trembling knees, and every eye in the church was fixed on him.

“Whose boy are you?” the preacher demanded.

“I don’t know,” he stammered, looking down at the floor, his face flushed and fighting back tears.

“Young man, look at me,” the preacher demanded. The boy looked at the preacher, and the preacher gazed right into his eyes and said, “I know exactly who you are. You are the child of the Most High God, and you are the spitting image of your Father.”

My friend, I know who you are. I know to whom you belong. You are the child of the Most High God.

V

As we’ve been reading through Acts, we’ve been learning that the Spirit of the Most High God truly does show no partiality, but in every nation seeks out and lifts up those who what is right. As we’ve been reading through Acts, we’ve seen that the Spirit of the Most High God won’t be constrained by

boundaries of geography or politics or race or religion that human beings love to draw around ourselves.

The grace of the Most High God shows no partiality. The good news poured out in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is for the ones who look like us, and the ones who don’t. It’s for the ones who pray like us, and the ones who don’t, and the ones who don’t pray at all. It’s for the ones who voted like we did, and for those who voted differently, and for those who don’t vote at all.

And God has made us, the church, ambassadors of God’s grace. God has called us to cross the borders, to break bread, to extend and receive hospitality, to testify that Christ alone is the one ordained by God to judge the living and the dead. For we know the message God sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – for he is Lord of all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.