

New Purpose

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Date: 06 December 2009

Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0 : 00] Let us pray as we stand. Father in heaven, thank you for your Holy Spirit and ask that he will speak to us through your word today.

Father, we pray that our hearts and our minds will be open to you, that you will transform us as we hear your word, that we might take your vision for the world upon ourselves.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Please be seated. Amen. We're continuing on with our series on the book of Acts.

And Julie read just the middle section of what is a very long reading. So we had a little mercy on you by keeping that done. I'm going to refer to the whole thing.

But it starts in chapter 9, verse 32 on 121 and goes all the way to 1118. It's a very big passage because Luke is spending a lot of time on a most important thing that happens to the church, that God does for his church.

[1 : 06] And that is that he is opening the world to the church. So it's a critically important and wonderful passage for us. As I was coming into Vancouver from Richmond this morning, there was a beautiful scene as I was driving along by the airport.

You could see all of the mountains from the Sunshine Coast all the way to Mount Baker. And of course there's snow up there now. It was a glorious scene with the sun shining on it.

Very different from the month of November when I drove into church, in which I didn't know there were mountains in Vancouver. All you could see was a big cloud bank. And I think that this is a picture of what this passage does for the church and for us today as well.

It opens the eyes of the church to the big vision that God has. It expands their love for the world and allows them to see who it is that God is sending them to with the gospel.

Luke spends that time because God is taking all the limits off where and to whom he is sending his church. It's God's will to bring the whole world into the church.

[2 : 22] And Jesus promised this would happen. So the church was forewarned. If you remember, he told the apostles, you're going to receive the Holy Spirit and power when he comes to you and you will be my witnesses.

Where? In Jerusalem, in Samaria, Judea, to the ends of the earth. And that's been happening in Acts. They started in Jerusalem. Persecution forced them out to Samaria and Judea where they shared the gospel, the church did.

Then Philip shares the gospel with a powerful leader from Africa, from the empire that's at the end of the earth. And this man goes rejoicing back to that empire where he works, bringing the gospel with him.

And then in last week's sermon, Jim talked about how Paul was converted on the road to Damascus. Now the thing that I hope you remember about Paul is that God said something about him, critically important.

He said this as a prophecy. He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

[3 : 28] And we are going to see Paul do that in much of Acts. Paul is going to come back into the scene in a couple of chapters. And through him, the gospel is going to go forth very powerfully.

It will actually explode into the church. But there are some things that need to happen in the next few chapters in order for that mission to take place.

And that is that God will need to transform the heart, the attitudes of his church. And this is something that God is always about, renewing the mind and heart of the church as a whole.

The problem with bringing the gospel to the world is not so much for the people who will hear it. In church history, it has often been the problem that lies in the church itself.

Obstacles in the church that arise, that keep the church from seeing this big vision that God has for the world. And so God is going to help us with that as a church as we read this passage today. [4 : 36] Now the big obstacle for the church in Acts was the assumption that the gospel was for Israel alone. The way that God removes that obstacle, that thinking, is through the conversion of two people in this passage, Cornelius and Peter.

And it's clear that Peter's conversion is actually more wrenching and more difficult than Cornelius'. And that's what we're going to focus on. That's what Luke actually focuses on in this passage. And I hope that you know that in the Christian life, there are two types of conversions that happen. There's the conversion of going from darkness to light, from not knowing God to seeing His great and wonderful spiritual blessings in Jesus Christ.

And that conversion happens in many different ways for Christians. Sometimes it's a Damascus road experience. Sometimes it is a long process. Sometimes it's being brought up in a Christian family, which is a great gift for children, because from the moment that they are aware of the world, they are aware that Jesus Christ died for them and rose again in power.

And they grow up with the understanding of that gospel. That is the first conversion that Christians have. A second type of conversion involves taking to heart the implications, the practical implications, that Jesus Christ lives as your risen Lord in your life.

[6 : 13] And there are many implications to this that we are converted to throughout our life. God is continually renewing us and drawing us into the image that Jesus has for us.

And those conversions may include a new caring in your heart for the suffering and the poor in the name of Christ. It is a conversion that may involve a new practice of reading the Bible regularly and praying regularly, having times intentionally of hearing, listening to God.

And I should just draw your attention to your bulletins because there is a purple leaflet that has a list of Bible readings that help you, a daily list. And you should look at that.

It might be part of a conversion for you. The conversion might be a real desire to serve Christ in some way in ministry that you haven't before. Or the conversion might be talking about Christ with people that you hadn't thought of talking to about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I had a great conversation after the 9 o'clock service about somebody who was talking to a Muslim and an atheist in his office. First time he's ever tried doing that.

[7 : 30] He said, I feel like I'm up to my neck in this. And I said, that's a very good place to be. It means you need to depend upon God in that. And it's a joyful thing. It might be a conversion to make decisions at your place of work that reflect the fact that Jesus judges our decisions.

There's many types of conversion. And we're going to see that every conversion, they can be very difficult, but they result in joy in your life.

A renewed understanding of the living Christ in your life. And so this second type of conversion is really all about living out the implications of Jesus.

All of those conversions center on him. And that's Peter's. Now, the great thing about the way that God converts us in that second type, and the first type of conversion as well, is that God is very aware of your weaknesses and my weakness.

He is very, very patient with us. And we see this in Peter and in the life of the church. I don't think it's an accident that if you look back at Acts 9.31, that because of Paul's conversion, the church experiences a time of peace.

[8 : 47] It's a time of great encouragement, a time where they see God building up the church, it says, the church is multiplied and they are comforted by the Holy Spirit, it says there.

Now, I think that can tell us something very important, that God does not just grow his church through persecution. He grows it in times of peace and in times of encouragement.

So it's okay to pray for those times for our church as well. And I think we should. And, you know, two of those things that are very encouraging for the church were happening in Peter's ministry. And Luke briefly mentions them in 9.32-43. He first talks about how Jesus heals Aeneas, who was paralyzed, through Peter's ministry.

Very similar to Jesus raising paralyzed men as well. And then Jesus raises Tabitha from the dead, an extraordinary miracle.

[9 : 46] Again, doing it through Peter, who in some ways reenacts how Jesus raised people from the dead, and especially a little girl as well.

This is part of Peter's traveling ministry as he's going along the Mediterranean coast of Israel. And the church would have known that Jesus is doing powerful things through Peter, who is the leader of the church.

Now, it's in that context of great encouragement and affirmation of Peter's authority that God brings Cornelius into Peter's life.

And everything changes for Peter because of him. I just want to say a word about Cornelius. Look at chapter 10, verses 1 and 2. Cornelius was the perfect person to be a bridge into the Gentile world and the Jewish world.

He was somebody who was a Roman officer. He was Italian. He was from the pagan world there. And he represented Gentile oppression. He is a leader in the Roman army.

[10:51] But he is also somebody who is a believer in the God of Israel. He worships him, prays to him, lives a wonderful life, a devout Jewish life, even though he is not Jewish himself.

He is not fully converted to the Jewish faith. And he and all his family were greatly respected by the Jewish community. He gave alms to those who were very poor in the Jewish community.

And so he was highly thought of by them. And while Cornelius is praying, God speaks to him through an angel and tells him to send for Peter.

And the reason he does it, we find this out later in Acts 11, is that God wants to save his family. As good as Cornelius is, as highly thought of as he is, Cornelius needs to be saved.

God speaks to him directly and he says, I want you to go to a man named Peter. And he even gives him an address in verse 6. He says he's at the Tanner's house by the sea. Unmistakable.

[11:58] Clear direction by the Holy Spirit. So as this is happening, there's lots of movement in this account. Cornelius is sending, sends his three trusted people.

Peter, as they're walking towards Peter, has a vision. And again, it's during a time of prayer. It's in verses 9 through 16. Now I want you to notice that Luke is really clear that God is directing these two people through their times of prayer.

It's as they pray that these visions happen. And that's because prayer, in their prayers, they would have been praising God, giving glory to him. Their minds would have been turned to who God is for the world.

And they would have thanked God for this. They were deliberately attentive to God and well prepared to hear from him. And that's why for us, this is a word, because prayer and Bible reading are meant to go together.

For us at St. John's, we are asking God to guide us, particularly during this time, as we deal with difficult legal questions. And as we praise and thank God together, and also in our own personal times, as we lay our needs before him, God will prepare us to hear him.

[13:14] He will lead us through our times of prayer. And it's critical that we bring ourselves into that place of depending upon him and listening to him in prayer.

And this is something he's calling our church to do now. Now, guidance was even more important than for us at that time for the church. And that's why I think Peter's gift from God is this very vivid, vivid vision.

It was critical that Peter got the message. So in verse 11, this extraordinary scene, heaven's open in his vision, and down comes this massive, it looked like a sheet, you know, or a massive tablecloth let down by four corners and on it are every kind of animal you can imagine.

And so, unclean and clean animals, according to the rituals of the Jewish law, were there. And God speaks to Peter directly and he says, kill and eat them.

Well, Peter is clearly shot. He doesn't just say, no, he says, absolutely not, Lord. And it's because he wants to be faithful to what he has been brought up to in his faith.

[14:28] But each time God says to him, each three times God says, verse 15, what God has made clean do not call common.

And God had to hammer that home for Peter. Peter is again denying three times it looks like. And yet God three times is reminding him of this incredibly key verse that what God makes clean do not call common or ritually unclean.

And this verse is going to apply right to the Gentiles because immediately afterwards in verse 19, Peter is pondering the vision and the Spirit says to him, behold, there are three people outside your door.

They are Gentiles. And the Spirit tells Peter to accompany them immediately because God has sent them. And the Holy Spirit again is saying these are the ones I'm going to make clean.

So those unmistakable words are a call to conversion for Peter. And I don't think we can underestimate how profound that change is that God is calling Peter to.

[15 : 41] That's why he was troubled by it. Look at verse 17. Dr. Luke makes a diagnosis and he says Peter was inwardly perplexed. He doubted in his heart.

He was in a turmoil about what God was saying so clearly those three times. And the reason for it is that he was brought up, he was formed by this guiding principle that the Jewish people were God's chosen people.

And it had been turned over the years into a doctrine of favoritism. And there was a sense of racial pride at their status as God's people. So that rather than seeking to bless the whole world as Abraham was given the covenant, they built a massive sociological wall that permanently separated themselves from the Gentile, making it a massive obstacle to following through with the covenant to Abraham.

But through Peter, and this is the wonderful thing about this passage, God tears down that wall.

Now I don't know how many of you are aware that about a month ago there were 20th century, 20th anniversary celebrations in Germany.

And the 20th anniversary was of the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. Now as part of those festivities, there were a thousand dominoes, eight feet tall, with graffiti that symbolized the separation of that wall.

[17 : 16] And as part of the kind of ceremony, they set these up along the root of the wall, and they toppled the first one of the dominoes, and all of them tumbled down to symbolize the collapse of that wall of separation.

Now in Peter's conversion, we are seeing sort of the first domino of the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile go down. And in the rest of Acts, we actually see this huge, wonderful domino effect of the whole thing collapsing so that there's a new people made up of Jew and Gentile who are united very powerfully through the gospel, united to Christ together.

And that's what's so significant about this passage. That's what's so significant about Peter's conversion. And I think his conversion is very instructive for us because it really begins with humility.

Peter humbly obeys God's word. Look at verse 23. He welcomed these Gentiles into his house, and then he obeys God by bringing six other Jewish believers with him, and they walk the 30 miles together up to Caesarea from Joppa.

And during that walk, God continues to work in his heart. We don't know what Peter was thinking.

There were lots of thoughts as he walked and talked with these Gentiles. But I think what must have happened is that during that walk, he realized the implications that Jesus Christ was the risen Lord in his life.

[18 : 52] And that that implication had to do with all of these things that he was brought up with. And he realized in that walk that the clean and the unclean provisions of the law were temporary.

They were not meant to last. They were actually pointing to Jesus Christ. They were designed to keep Israel a holy and distinct people only into the time that God gave Jesus to the Gentiles and the Jews.

And what Jesus gave to both of these races was inward cleansing. Cleansing that comes from the forgiveness from the forgiveness of sins that Jesus gave through his death on the cross.

It is a cleansing by his blood. And that powerful fact of the gospel is what changes the status of all people who trust in him. And so the first thing that Peter does when he reaches Cornelius' home is to tell this large group that Cornelius gathered at his house of his own conversion.

Here's what he says in verse 28. This is what has happened in his mind. You yourselves know he says to them how unlawful it is for Jews to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation.

[20 : 03] But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. God has shown me this and he's saying I believe it. I am acting on it by coming to you now.

He says that Jesus has cleansed all people from unrighteousness who trust in him. And so his physical act of going through with his conversion is that he accepts Cornelius' hospitality and he comes into this Gentile's home living out this conversion in his life.

And now the way is clear for the gospel. And it's a wonderful scene that we see in verse 33 and following of the powerful transforming work of that gospel.

Cornelius has this attitude in verse 33 we're all here in the presence of God and we want to hear all you have been commanded by the Lord. And I don't know if you see this but it's a wonderful scene because here is a group wanting to hear and obey God's word through Peter and Peter might not have realized it but when he opened his mouth in verse 34 this was the start of the first Gentile service ever in the history of the world.

The first Gentile church was beginning at that point. And what we see is a sermon by Peter that is centered totally on Jesus Christ.

[21 : 23] He starts by saying the gospel's for everyone. In every nation God shows no favoritism. And he goes on in 36 through 43 to remind them of Jesus' ministry, of Jesus' rescue, of Jesus dying for us on a cross for the forgiveness of sins, of Jesus rising again in power which they all saw he said, Peter said.

And then Peter went on in verse 43 to say everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. This is the application part of the sermon.

I just want to jump back to verse 42 because Peter has just said this is the one, Jesus, who is ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead. And here's what you need to do.

Believe in him for the forgiveness of sins. And you know at that moment there was immediate response. It doesn't often happen for a preacher in a sermon but there's this immediate response to the sermon.

Belief in everyone's heart because Peter's sermon is cut short right in the middle. In fact, he was just going to talk about the Holy Spirit and all of a sudden the Holy Spirit fell on everyone who heard the word of God that day.

[22 : 43] Holy Spirit through God's word. And like that first Pentecost for the apostles, these Gentiles spoke in other tongues, they praised God and there was this clear working, supernatural working of God in their lives.

Peter was amazed by this and he said later in chapter 11 or 15 that God made no distinction between us and them having cleansed their hearts by faith.

and Peter said they've got to be baptized. We have to baptize them. We have to, in other words, bring them into the life of the church as brothers and sisters in Christ.

And I want to say that what you see here now is Peter's type 2 conversion now complete. He realized the implications fully of Jesus being the risen Lord.

it meant that Jesus' blood cleanses all people who trust in him. And it means absolutely no one is beyond the power of God to do that. God to save them from the power of sin.

[23 : 50] And so God will bring people from every nation into the family of God. His vision becomes what God's vision has been all along. And that's why Paul's going to say in Ephesians for Jesus himself is our peace who made us Jews and Gentiles both won and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.

Now, I just want to talk about two practical implications as I close this sermon that come to us. And there's lots of implications but I'm just going to focus on two of them. And you might not be able to live out the application at this moment to cut the sermon short but here's what they are.

First of all, because we know Jesus God is calling us to open up our relationships with the world around us. We live in a secular city Vancouver area and we need to know that God is working in the city in a bigger way than we think.

And we have a responsibility to use resources and especially the gospel that we have for his agenda and to allow God to broaden the horizons of our ministry.

and that's why we need to ask ourselves is there conversion that has to take place? Are there attitudes or thoughts that might limit our mission to the world?

[25 : 14] Our church body and each of us personally can actually build up walls very easily that protect us instead of welcoming those who are outside the church into our lives.

And hospitality is this theme that we see in Acts. But God does not want us to be all about minimizing risk. He wants us to take opportunities to bless the world to practice a hospitality that means welcoming people that God has already welcomed through Christ.

He wants us to constantly broaden our vision and to make bold decisions to bless the lower mainland because Jesus is with us. And the second practical implication is this.

It's related to that. God clearly is gathering people spiritually. In this city he is constantly gathering people to Jesus Christ into union with him by Jesus' forgiveness.

Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to all who believe and he unites people not only to Jesus but to other Christians. And our job is to physically be part of that gathering.

[26 : 24] To physically gather as well. And that happens through hospitality. The spiritual unity that Jesus brings means that people of very different backgrounds from every race and status and nations are being gathered.

And for us we are called to practice kindness love and acceptance of one another because we submit to Jesus as Lord. And that kindness and patience and acceptance is not just to be practiced towards one another.

And that will be very important for us as we go along because that's what we invite people into. But that physical gathering needs to happen to the city around us. And especially to people that we might think are very unlikely.

We are called out to live out the gathering that Jesus is doing spiritually in this world. And God will be patient with us. He will give us grace in order to do that.

Our job is to have the vision that he has for the world and to really live each day out this incredible thing that he is Lord of our life and he has sent us out into the world as witnesses.

[27 : 37] Amen. Amen. Let's kneel to pray.

Father God we come before you this morning and we thank you that you have called us from darkness to light. Lord we thank you that you are our risen Lord and live in our lives.

We pray Lord that you would convert and transform our lives corporately and individually in the ways that would bring glory to you.

Lord in your mercy in your scriptures Lord you tell us not to be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving to let our requests be made known to you.

Father God some of us feel anxious or uncertain about the future of our church or of our lives. This morning we want to thank you for your gift of Jesus Christ.

[29 : 02] We thank you that he is Emmanuel God with us. We thank you that we do not stand alone but that you are with us.

This morning we especially want to pray and commit before you our church St. John's as well as St. Matthew's St. Matthias and St. Luke's and the Church of the Good Shepherd.

Father in this junction we are at in our corporate life we ask for your discernment. We want to know your will in how to respond to the recent court ruling.

Lord we do not want to be bound by our buildings and our resources. Give us the grace to give them up if that is your will. But neither do we want to be poor stewards of the resources and facilities you've blessed us with if your will is that we persevere in attempting to keep our buildings.

Lord we are your people and these buildings are yours. We ask that your will and desire would be done. We ask that you would guide us in our life as a church that the name of Jesus would be proclaimed and that the gospel would go forth in spirit and in truth.

[30 : 20] we pray for Bishop Ingham and for the executive of the Diocese of New Westminster. Lord we pray that you would be at work with your will in their lives.

We pray for your blessing on them for your gospel grace. We pray that this Christmas they would know you as Emmanuel God with them.

Lord in your mercy. Lord we pray for unity at this time of decision making. Let us not get carried away by our varied opinions and emotions but give us your unity in the decisions we must make.

We pray that we would know and be obedient to your will and Lord we pray that you would help us to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Lord in your mercy. Through this time Lord we pray that your Holy Spirit would be at work in our lives.

[31 : 39] We reflect on Dorcas who was full of good works and acts of charity and on the early church who chose seven to look after the needy. And Lord we pray that you would enable us to love and care for each other and for our communities.

Lord in your mercy. This morning Lord we want to especially pray for those in need in our congregation.

We lift before you Harold Yvette Margaret Margaret Rosemary Gordon Bronwyn and especially Lord David that you would be at work in their lives.

Working your healing your transformation and your will in their lives. and now in the quietness of our own hearts we lift before you those known to ourselves who are in need of your mercy today. Lord in your mercy Father God in this Christmas season we pray that your gospel would go forth in a special way.

[33 : 17] We pray that you would help us to share your love with this city. Lord we confess that sometimes we are like Peter before his vision.

We would prefer to withdraw into our comfortable communities. But Lord we pray that you would convert and transform our lives.

We pray that your gospel would go forth through our hospitality our words our actions and through the special ministries and services of the church this month that your kingdom would be proclaimed in this city.

And Lord we especially pray for the Sunday school ministries and the youth ministries. Uphold their leaders especially we pray for Ben and Chloe as they give leadership to the youth.

Lord we pray that the hearts of the children of this church would be turned to you that they would love you fully. Lord in your mercy and Father God this morning we also want to lift before you people who dedicate their lives to proclaiming your gospel in various ways.

[34 : 43] We pray for Paul Ratsoy of the Lighthouse Harbor Ministry. We think of some of the sailors that he and the people who work with him have had an opportunity to give track to or to share your gospel to.

People who live in countries where the gospel is unknown. Lord we pray that you would warm their hearts and that these sailors would know your truth.

We pray for Dan and Fran Gau of the Seeds of Hope. We pray that you would be at work in their lives and their ministry this season. And Father God we want to lift before you Mary and Maxwell and Genesis House.

We thank you for the work that they do to help needy women of this community of this city. We give you thanksgiving for their new staff for Gail and Carmen and we ask for your grace as they seek to minister to the woman in Genesis House.

And Lord we pray for the program participants we ask that they would see God's abundant and unending love and that they would be moved to ask for and accept your grace and begin a lifelong relationship with you.

[36 : 03] Lord in your mercy. And now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy to the only God and Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord be glory majesty dominion and authority before all time and now and forever.

Amen.