

Acts 10:34-38
First Sunday after Epiphany
January 8, 2023

Do you remember experiencing a struggle to master a new skill or to solve a problem and then suddenly everything clicked and you got it? You could see the point; you could do the task or figure out the problem. Cartoonists represent the discovery with a light bulb going on above the person. It is exhilarating to experience or to observe as a teacher (which includes parents, our first teachers).

The situation also happens on a spiritual level when someone comes to understand the meaning of grace; when they see that salvation is God's gift to them rather than their assignment to carry out as our natural mindset thinks is the way. Today's text brought such an experience to its participants. As we learn with them, instead of the light bulb we will say

HAVE AN EYE-OPENING DAY

Eye-opening moments brought Cornelius and Peter together. Cornelius was a centurion, leading a regiment of Roman soldiers in Palestine. He was stationed in Caesarea, a city on the Mediterranean Coast. Cornelius had left the worship of the Roman array of gods and goddesses and instead honored the true God worshiped by the Jews who surrounded him. His was an open faith, put into practice in his daily life. He had a reputation for generosity toward the needy and for an active prayer life.

Living and working in that region, he likely was aware of events that had happened in the ministry of Jesus. Peter noted, "You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all." The baptism of Jesus that we witnessed in today's Gospel reading brought his anointing by the Spirit, as he was sent forth to his ministry. The Savior had performed many miracles and spent hours in teaching the Word of God. In summing up his work Peter mentioned demon expulsions. That was a vivid demonstration of his superior power, but the description can take in more than those miracles. He called to faith those who were influenced by Satan, and that's everyone as we come into this world. He came to rescue us from the devil's power.

Cornelius also probably knew that Jesus had been crucified. He may have been wondering about what came next. There were many reports circulating, including those spread by the guards of the tomb who had been bribed to say that his followers came and stole the body while they slept. When he went to worship at the synagogue he would not hear that Jesus had risen from the grave and ascended to heaven in triumph. Maybe he had caught wind of some reports of what the disciples were teaching and wondered what was true. Even as a proselyte or convert to the Jewish faith he knew the separation that existed between Jews and Gentiles and wouldn't have initiated contact with someone like Peter.

God knew what he needed was the full and true message so he sent an angel in a vision who instructed him, "Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."

Peter would have been no more likely to agree to come than Cornelius was to ask. He grew up avoiding Gentiles. He knew that God had picked Israel to be his chosen people. In the Old Testament messengers like Isaiah had referred to reaching people from other nations, but they had to come on Jewish terms and submit to their customs. As their teachers interpreted matters Jewish people were to avoid contact with Gentiles. Granted, you might not be able to keep from bumping into one in the marketplace, but you should not deliberately enter the home of a Gentile.

The Lord prepared Peter for the emissaries from Cornelius by sending him a vision. He was praying around noon. A sheet came down from heaven loaded with critters that the law in Leviticus declared unclean, but the command was given to kill and eat them. Peter objected. He would never consider such an act. When the vision happened three times it got his attention just as the messengers from Cornelius knocked at the door. The Holy Spirit gave Peter specific instructions to go with them. Then he figured out that things had changed since Christ came. He fulfilled the law for us. In the New Testament we are no longer bound by its demands. His eyes were opened. So Peter went and shared the message of Jesus with Cornelius and the others who had gathered in his home.

II.

There were eye-opening truths shared in the gospel that Peter proclaimed. He told of God's Anointed One. We saw that anointing happen at the baptism of Jesus in today's Gospel. Anointing occurred a number of times in the Old Testament. A special oil was placed on the head to designate men to serve as prophets, priests and kings in Israel. The act gave assurance that God would equip the individual for service. Jesus was fully equipped as true God and had the mission of all three offices.

He carried them out in his public ministry that began after his baptism. He preached the gospel as prophet. He helped and healed many people. Demon possession demonstrated his divine power in a visible way. He did more than exorcisms. He rescued all who were under the influence of Satan, which is every sinner. He won the victory over the devil, an act as king. It culminated on the cross where as our high priest he offered himself as the sacrifice for the sins of the world.

With his work he brought the good news of peace. It is the peace of forgiveness. Sin disrupted the harmony that originally existed between God and man. That's not just a historical reference to acts in the Garden of Eden or the Old Testament. We daily experience it in our life. Rebellion against God and fractured relationships between people in our homes and neighborhoods as well as between countries give evidence of the condition. Sin produces a lack of peace in our personal lives and brings consequences. We labor under the burden. But our guilt has been paid for by Jesus. What do we have to be afraid of?

The message of peace came first through the prophets to Israel and to those among whom Jesus lived and worked. But he is Lord of all. He does not show favoritism, Peter asserted. That is saying he is not like a judge who looks at a person's face and decides his verdict on the basis of whether or not he likes the person. Race, language spoken, job, attractiveness, power and popularity do not matter. Jesus came for all. That truth was significant for Cornelius. God had that intention always, as we heard, but now it was proceeding on fast forward. Christ's followers were to go and seek those of all nations. Peter viewed a vivid demonstration of God's intentions when his address concluded and the Spirit came with outward affirmation. The group repeated

the gift of tongues or speaking in other languages as had happened on Pentecost. It was an eye-opening day for those who experienced it and for those who witnessed it. They were one in the Christian faith.

What good news that is! Did you ever have the experience of being left out? There is that common scene of choosing up sides for a ball game. A few are always left until last, wanted by neither team. What an anxious, lonely moment! But some of you were great athletes and never had that experience. Maybe you felt left out in other ways, sometimes in a crowd—perhaps even in church. There are groups talking here and there, but you feel ignored, standing off on the edge by yourself. And maybe you really needed a friendly greeting or word of encouragement that day. You leave, dejected. It can happen in our human groups despite efforts to be welcoming, but you need never feel that way with the Lord. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, and that's each one of us.

He brings peace to all and that is something to cherish. We face a new year with lots of the future unknown. Details may be uncertain, yes, but not where the path leads. Your Lord wants you to remain in faith. He will strengthen and build your faith. He will take some of us to heaven in the months ahead. He will bring more into his family of believers as we carry his message to the world.

III.

As we observe the baptism of Jesus today, we are reminded of our baptism. The message of God's love, forgiveness and peace was brought to us in that eye-opening and heart-opening encounter with Jesus. You may not remember it if it occurred early in your life. You were brought to the font as a baby. You had been born as a child of the devil, with sin inherited from your parents, and were only too eager to give expression to that sinfulness with your behavior. So you were not lined up for God's favor, but believing parents brought you to be baptized.

The pastor applied water to your head in the name of the Triune God and the Holy Spirit entered your heart. A miracle occurred! You became a child of God, with your record of sins wiped clean, and even your future sins forgiven. You became an heir of heaven. After that your parents followed up with instruction in the home, assisted by a Christian school or Sunday School. You grew in faith and remain a believer today.

Again, we're not just looking back at acts of history. Eye-opening experiences and God's message of peace continue to come in your daily use of baptism. I don't think you're much different than I am. I struggle with sin still. I start the day with good intentions, but how long do they last? Before much time ticks off the clock I'm filled with sinful thoughts and desires. Hastily spoken words and uncaring actions mar my days. When that happens, go back to your baptism. Your eye-opening Savior assures you that you are his forgiven child. What he accomplished on the cross was brought to you in that sacrament. Filled with contrition, or sorrow for sin, we look to him in the faith that he has forgiven us. When doubts interfere, take a look at that cross on your wall, perhaps a memento of your baptism. When you marvel, "How can God do that?" you are realizing what grace means. Rejoice in the peace of his forgiveness. Keep coming to be refreshed. Christ will strengthen you for a new life. You will still fall at times, but you will be ever growing in love for your Savior and in his power to fight sin. As you connect with the Savior in your use of word and sacrament you will have an eye-opening day every day. Your eyes will be open to the grace and love of your Savior and you will receive his peace and power to follow him in faith and service, as you dedicate each day to his glory.