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Acts 10:1-23
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Hearing God's Word in Prayer

Last week I shared the story about when God called to me into ministry. This morning I want to share yet another time when God spoke very clearly about something that would take place in the near future.

I was living in this intentional community sponsored by University Presbyterian Church in Seattle. It was a group of young adults, three men and three women living in Christian community and learning to be good neighbors in a very impoverished neighborhood.

We were required to commit a year at a time to living at this house. And it was time for us to share whether or not we would be recommitting for the following year. I couldn't explain exactly why, but for some reason as I prayed about it, I had this nagging sense that I wouldn't be living there because I would be living with a high school student. Sort of an odd thing for a young twenty six year old to say. God did not say anything specifically to me. I just knew.

A couple months later, my then girlfriend, Karen, received a frantic phone call from her brother, Drew, who was a high school student, living in Arkansas. He had gone to a party to pick up a friend when a shooting occurred. He picked up his friend and as they drove away, the gunman jumped into the back of Drew's truck and so ironically, Drew, became the alleged "get-away" car. He asked if he could come live with Karen.

I can still remember that morning sitting in the Denny's as Karen shared all this with me. "Chris, I don't know what to do. I'm not equipped to have a high school boy live with me. What should I do?"

And not having told her this vision I had received from God said plainly, "Well, he should come live with me."

Long story short, after charges were cleared, we received permission to move Drew to Seattle where Drew and I lived together through the remainder of his junior and senior years of high school. You see God had been preparing me for this moment.

Drew eventually graduated with Bachelors degree in outdoor youth ministry and a Masters of Divinity, both from George Fox University. He is now the executive director for the Cameron Boys Camp which is a ministry of the Southern Baptist Church that gives troubled youth one last shot to rehabilitate before being sent to juvenile correction facilities.

My friends it's amazing how God speaks to us when we open our imaginations to things we never thought were possible. Both Drews, Karen's and my lives were changed through this interaction with the Lord.

Like in scripture story today. Both Peter and Cornelius, God fearing people, had visions from God that changed their lives. Visions that not only changed the course of their lives, but the course of all Christians for the rest of time. Please join me as we read from Acts 10:1-23 and hear God speak for ourselves.

10 At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. **2** He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. **3** One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, “Cornelius!”

4 Cornelius stared at him in fear. “What is it, Lord?” he asked.

The angel answered, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. **5** Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. **6** He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.”

7 When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. **8** He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

9 About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. **10** He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. **11** He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. **12** It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. **13** Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

14 “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

15 The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

16 This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

17 While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon’s house was and stopped at the gate. **18** They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

19 While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. **20** So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.”

21 Peter went down and said to the men, “I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?”

22 The men replied, “We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy

angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.” **23** Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

The Bible is clear that ever since Genesis with the creation of humankind, God has desired communication with us. Notice how even among God’s self there is prayerful conversation. “Let us make humans in our image.”¹

And then God said what they could and could not eat, the consequences of what would happen if they broke those rules, and that it was not good for them to live in isolation.

And then once woman was created, man responded in praise to God for the gift of his wife.

“This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman’ for she was taken out to man.”

The very first prayer or conversation between God and humankind.

It should be no surprise then that the context of our scripture story today takes place while people were praying. Cornelius, we are told was a God-fearing Gentile, an army officer who was member of the Italian Regiment. And Peter who was a follower of Jesus.

In biblical times, rabbis encouraged Jews to pray three times a day... during the third hour, the sixth hour, and the ninth hour which translates to 9:00am, noon, and 3:00pm. This is how we know that Cornelius was praying because 3:00pm in the afternoon would have been his customary time of prayer. Peter, we are told was specifically praying at noon.

And during these times of prayer, God spoke to each of them in order to prepare them for what would happen next. Cornelius had a visit from an angel. Peter had a vision from God. Both would be told that they needed to find one another so that Peter could tell Cornelius and his family the Good News about Jesus Christ.

Cornelius sent two of his servants and a devout soldier to find Peter and bring him to his house. But there was a significant cultural barrier that stood in the way between them. “It was against Jewish custom for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit them.”² Hence the significance of Peter’s vision that he received while he was praying to God.

Scripture tells us that while Peter was praying that he fell into a trance. The Greek word for trance is extasis. It’s where we get the word “ecstasy.” It means a sense of bewilderment, astonishment, or amazement. And then he saw heaven

¹ Genesis 1:26

² Acts 10:28

opened up and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth, and birds of the air. In other words, everything that the Levitical Law and kosher law deemed unclean to eat.³

And God told him, “Get up, Peter. You can now eat everything that I just showed you.”

WOW. Does this strike anyone as odd? As I meditated upon this story, this was THE line that stood out to me. Why? Because this is a unique moment where God specifically told Peter to do something that contradicted his Word in Leviticus 11 or where Jews were commanded what they could or could not eat.

Jewish dietary laws separated Jews from those who were non-Jews or Gentile. Jews who kept Kosher were considered clean. But non-Jews or Gentiles were considered “unclean.”

Kosher Jews held that what a person put into their mouths, that was Kosher foods, was what kept them clean. But Jesus corrected this by saying, “Listen and understand., What goes into a person’s mouth does not make them ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of their mouth, that is what makes them ‘unclean.’”⁴ “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.”⁵

Notice how self-righteous Peter’s response was to this invitation to eat unkosher food.

“Surely not, Lord.” [I know my Torah and I am a faithful Kosher Jew.] “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

I love how God quickly shut him up. “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

Notice also that Peter, also didn’t get it the first time. So God repeats it three times. In the same way that Peter denied Jesus three times and then Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him.

Isn’t it great that God provides real people in the Bible to whom we can relate? How many times does it take for God to really get our attentions on any particular issue? I bet it is more than once!

God telling Peter to kill and eat all sorts of unkosher foods was extremely radical. And yet this was only the precursor for the truly radical thing that would happen next...Peter personally interacting with non-Kosher Gentiles so that he could share the Good News of Jesus with them.

The story continues, “While Peter was still wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon’s house was and

³ Leviticus 11:4-8, 13-20; 2

⁴ Matthew 15:10-11

⁵ Matthew 12:34

stopped at the gate.” The Greek word for wonder is *diaporei*. It means to be thoroughly nonplussed, be in doubt, or perplexed.

Perhaps Peter was praying about what this meant or was still trying to make sense of such a radical departure for him. When one has lived their whole life believing and practicing a particular thing, it’s not easy to change direction on a dime. In fact, we can only do something like that with the help of the Holy Spirit. And we see how before Peter was able to put all the pieces together that the Holy Spirit moved him in that new direction.

The other line in the story that really struck me was the last one. “Then Peter invited the men in the house to be his guests!” He put aside his prejudices, his preconceived notions, his religious ideas of who and what were considered clean and unclean, and invited these men into his home, risking everyone’s defilement.

And all of this happened because two faithful men of God were open to hearing God speak to them in prayer.

Well, we might say to ourselves. “That is all good and well for people in the Bible. But God doesn’t speak to me like that when I pray.”

What if God would?

Pete Greig in *How to Hear God, A Simple Guide for Normal People* offers two tools that can help cultivate the ability to hear God better through prayer. The first is *lectio divina* which is an ancient form of reading scripture. The second is through his PRAY acronym.

Lectio divina was formally established as a monastic practice in the sixth century by Benedict of Nursia. Greig says, “I continue to believe in the life-changing power of reading the Bible slowly, attentively, and imaginatively, whether alone or with others, seeking conversation with God (rather than information about God) from the text, approach the Scriptures not just as a picture to be studied but as a wide-open window to the world.”⁶

Lectio divina involves four specific steps which according to Greig are more like four steps of a dance and less like rungs on a ladder. The first step is *lectio* where we read the text. The second is *meditatio* where we meditate on the text and focus a particular word or phrase the jumps out at us. The third step is *oratio* where we craft a prayer around that word or phrase. And finally, *contemplatio* is where we contemplate the text or sit as we listen for God to speak in response to our prayer.

“Benedict [of Nursia] knew that if society were to be rebuilt, Christian communities would have to become centers of intellectual and spiritual formation and that *lectio divina* was essential to both.” My friends, I believe the same is true today. If we want to see American society rebuilt, then our churches need to

⁶ Pete Greig, *How to Hear God, A Simple Guide for Normal People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), 72.

become centers of intellectual and spiritual formation and that lectio divina will be important skills for us to cultivate.

If lectio divina is too hard to remember, Pete Greig in his book, *How to Pray*, suggests using the acronym PRAY.⁷

P - As we enter prayer now, we pause to be still; breathe slowly; recenter our scattered senses upon the presence of God.

R - Read and reflect. This where lectio and meditatio come into play. Slowly read, rejoice, reflect, and repeat.

A - Ask or oratio. Here we turn our reflection into prayer.

And finally Y - Yield to God or contemplatio, simply basking in the presence of God.

St. John of the Cross said, “Seek in reading and you will find in meditation; knock in prayer and it will be opened to you in contemplation.”⁸

Greig describes contemplation in this way, “It is, if you like, the intimacy of the elderly couple sitting together in contented silence or of a mother gazing down at her sleeping baby. It’s that timeless moment at the end of an exceptional cinematic experience, when no one moves, no one speaks. It’s the heart of the couple on the Emmaus road ‘burning within’ as they silently listen to Jesus.”⁹

In closing there is one more tool that I’d like to share that might spark our imaginative prayer with God. Pastor Jim Harrison on his website “Faithward” describes what he calls “Listening prayer.”¹⁰ Listening prayer helps us hear God more clearly. Like lectio divina, listening prayer invokes our imagination so we can know specially what God is saying to us.

Join me as I lead us through this exercise of listening prayer. Begin with thinking of an area where we need God’s wisdom or direction.

First we come to God with our requests for guidance. Let us pray...

“Father, we come to you in the name of Jesus Christ, your son and we are seeking your wisdom for what is on our hearts.” In the name of Jesus, we take authority over Satan and his fallen angels and command that they be rendered deaf, mute, and blind to our prayers, and removed from our presence.¹¹ We submit our

⁷ Greig, *How to Hear God*, 74.

⁸ Greig, *How to Hear God*, 94.

⁹ Greig, *How to Hear God*, 95.

¹⁰ <https://www.faithward.org/listening-prayer-hear-god/#:~:text=Listening%20prayer%20centers%20around%20a,opportunity%20to%20speak%20to%20us>.

¹¹ James 1:5; Matthew 28:18; Luke 10:19-20

own voices to the shed blood of Jesus and command that our thoughts be taken captive to the obedience of Christ.¹²

We ask Father, that only your Holy Spirit will speak to us now as we wait on you for wisdom, insight, and direction. And whatever you show us or direct us to do, we pray that we will quickly obey.”

We wait in silence for You to speak in these next moments. We jot down any Scripture, songs, impressions, or pictures that come to mind, even if we don’t understand what they might mean.

And finally, God, we promise share how You have spoken to us with trusted people who will help us to discern and follow Your will in our lives.

Amen.

¹² 2 Corinthians 10:5