

Peter's Shocking Vision  
Acts 11:1-14  
Preached on May 6, 2007 by Eric Lindblade

Visions. Many wondrous, troubling, and exhilarating visions are found in the Bible. Ezekiel: a vision of dry bones that will live again. In the New Testament, Zechariah has a vision in the Temple in which he realizes he will become a father in old age, the father of the one whom we know as John the Baptist. In Acts, a man named Ananias receives a vision in which he is told that the one come to persecute Christians has in fact been persecute, the one we now know as St. Paul. In 2 Corinthians, St. Paul himself records a vision of heaven, heaven he describes as being, well, indescribable.

And the Book of Revelation is filled with wondrous and even frightening visions. Of red horses and white horses, and black and pale. Of mountains and islands fleeing away. Of smoke rising up from a city and a new city descending from the heavens.

All these visions seek to use imagery and poetry and symbolism to convey something of God's truth. And so it is with our Scripture Lesson this morning, this vision given to Peter. And its vision was shocking in Peter's day and it challenges us to this very day.

Because Peter's vision leads to this truth: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality..." and concluding, "Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Everyone. We say, well, of course. But back in the earliest days of the church, "everyone" was NOT the self-evident answer to the question, "Who is included in Christ's kingdom?"

And even today the church has a tendency to build walls, spiritual walls, that keep others out. We don't mean to, we don't even realize we are doing it, but then suddenly we look around and realize there are whole groups of people who somehow don't think that church is for the likes of them.

Well, back to the vision.

Peter was a disciple. We often think that the disciples, being disciples, had all the answers. They did not. They, too struggled and stumbled and faced temptation and sometimes flunked. And, through the power of Jesus Christ, they grew. Became new people. Better people. Cast aside their ways to follow

Christ's ways. And so it is that Peter grows into a new understanding of God and Christ through what was to him a shocking vision.

Here is the background of the sermon Peter preaches today. Peter was born and raised a Jew. He believed that God's love was for the Chosen People. And so, after his life with Jesus, after walking with him through Galilee and to Jerusalem, and abandoning His Lord there, after being restored himself by Jesus' merciful love, Peter shared his faith in Jesus with his own people. But one night, Peter has a strange vision; Peter who always kept Kosher, always ate only food declared clean according to Jewish law, Peter had a vision: not probably the most pleasant vision anyone has ever had, if the truth be told. It was a vision of reptiles and birds and four-footed creatures. And a voice said, and I paraphrase, "If you are hungry, go ahead and eat." Peter replied, "By no means, Lord, I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." To which the voice replied, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Peter, not being always the quickest learner, had this vision repeated three times. And while he puzzled over it, some men sent by a Roman centurion named Cornelius appeared: Cornelius, not only a non-Jew but a member of the Roman Occupying Force in Palestine, an enemy if ever there was one, wanted to become a follower of Christ.

Peter finally catches on: His vision was not really about bacon and ham and barbecue; it was about Christ and Christ's love. Christ shows no partiality. All are welcome in his Kingdom. Christ loves Peter, even Peter. But Christ loves Cornelius, even Cornelius. Everyone who believes in Christ receives forgiveness in his name.

Cornelius must have wondered if he really had a place among the people of God. Must have wondered if he really had a place within the Kingdom of God. For Cornelius had two strikes against him. First, he was a Gentile. Second strike: he was a military man, whose business was war and fighting. Could God really welcome one such as he? Through the ministry of Peter, made known in that shocking vision, Cornelius found out the answer is yes.

Everyone. That's the key word. And that's one of our greatest challenges, as the people of Christ, to be warm and embracing and welcoming. Christ is not just for people like us. His love is for everyone.

But it's a challenge. Here's an example from late 2005: It seems a certain drifter named Bowens came to the church for help one day, and hid there overnight. He was a street person and a general pest. In the morning, it was discovered he had gone into the food pantry the church had to help the needy and helped himself to some tuna fish and other items. The church chose to prosecute him for this nefarious crime. When asked why, the pastor, said, "This is

an upscale neighborhood and people don't want these people to walk around."

If you head to New Bern, you see a billboard advertising a church. It shows a very handsome young man and a very attractive young lady, her arms sort of around his shoulders, with the phrase "Not your average church." It's a disappointing billboard with a disappointing message. Never mind the subliminal implication of church as successful dating service, but the message says, "Not average, but if you're young and white and handsome and pretty, you will find welcome here."

A better photo would be this: a young white man pushing an elderly black woman in a wheelchair to church. Or a single mom being warmly welcomed in a Sunday School Class. Or a prisoner being visited by a Circle. Or a long-time member willingly giving up a seat to a first-time visitor.

Peter's shocking vision was that God has more room than we could ever imagine in His kingdom.

Now go back with me to last week. When I did not preach. When Anne did not preach. Instead, we were invaded by a horde of orange-shirt clad youth, for youth Sunday. What a great day that was. And what a great, shocking message. That this church embraces youth, has room for youth. Believes that the youth have something to offer to us.

There are plenty of churches where a Youth Sunday simply is not done. Deviates too much from standard practice. But Ann Street said to the youth: you are welcome to participate.

And last Monday we had a crowd of well over 100 simply to see a Children's Play. Not because it promised to be the best theater south of Broadway, but because you wanted the kids to know they were important, they have a place in the church, and if they want to share something of Christ through a play, you want to be there to see and to listen.

Dare we be a church that opens its arms as wide as Jesus Christ opened his?

When Peter told Cornelius that he was acceptable in God's sight Peter was doing something very important: he was offering Cornelius a place not just in heaven, but in the fellowship of believers. And here is where a church indeed becomes something other than your average church, when we live together

not just as neighbors, but as people who share a special and sacred bond: we are people for whom Christ died; we are people forgiven by his love.

And, Jesus still believes in us. He loves even you and even me. He forgives even you and even me. We are not perfect, but we are the best Jesus has to work with, if his ways, his thoughts, his way of living is ever to triumph in our community, in our world.

And may we be people who, by the way we are, the way we react to one another, the way we reach out to newcomers, be people who offer to others what Peter offered to Cornelius: a place, not just on a pew, but in our very hearts.

It is sometimes a cold world out there. Whether people have been a part of this congregation for sixty years or six weeks, we all need Christ's love. We all need to know we are forgiven, accepted. And, we all need from time to time to know that we are important to one another.

In Jesus Christ we are a new fellowship; in Jesus Christ we have been given the power and the promise to live abundantly in the new year which God has given to us. Dare we live with one another primarily as forgiven people whom Christ loves? Dare we place the cross at the center of all our relationships? Dare we reach out in Christ's love and grow as individuals, as a church? Jesus loves even you and even me. Dare we say that is the most significant ingredient of our lives?

Peter's shocking vision was this: that the grace of God was available for all, not just the chosen few. It's that same vision that shocks us today, but also lets us know that we are welcome, and also gives us our vision of who we are as the Body of Christ. Amen.