

THE STORY'S NOT OVER YET

SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION
OF THE CHURCH.



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Acts 9:32–10:23
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Acts 9:32–10:23

I went out to dinner with my father not long after my forty-first birthday. I was single, with no prospects on the horizon.

My father said to me, “One of my regrets is knowing what a good husband and what a good father you would have been.” I’m not sure where my answer came from, but immediately, almost instinctively, I said, “The story’s not over yet.” Interesting choice of words. I felt as if I didn’t even choose them, though—as if they were given to me.

Did you know your life is a story? As with any good story, there are chapters that feature disorientation, confusion, and tension, even crisis. Your story features strange happenings that cause you to question what’s going on. At such times, it helps to know that you’re not writing the story. There’s a divine Author, and he’s crafting a masterpiece.

Peter has a disorienting experience that challenges a core belief. The narrative unit stretches from Acts 9:32 to Acts 11:18. It’s a long story with enormous implications both for our church and our world, especially post-election, most of which we will take up next week in Part Two. For now, Part One.

Peter heals two people

Acts 9:32-43:

Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. 33 There he found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed. 34 And Peter said to him, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed.” And immediately he rose. 35 And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.

36 Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. 37 In those days she became ill and died, and

when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. 38 Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, “Please come to us without delay.” 39 So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them. 40 But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. 41 And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. 42 And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. 43 And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner.

Peter continues to heal people in the power of Jesus (Acts 3:10, 4:30). The healings echo the healings of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke and demonstrate, as in Acts 3:10, that Jesus is alive from the dead. First, Peter heals a paralyzed man. Second, he heals a woman whose predicament is even more dire. In fact, it’s beyond dire: the woman has died. Nevertheless, Peter proceeds to raise her from the dead.

Note the parallels between the two accounts:

- In each account, the person is introduced similarly: “There he found *a man named Aeneas . . .*” and “Now there was in Joppa *a disciple named Tabitha . . .*”
- In each account, the verb “rise” is the key word.
- After each healing, people responded in faith: they “turned to the Lord” and “believed in the Lord.”

Both the parallels between the two accounts and the intensification between the first account and the second account (being dead is worse than being paralyzed) set the stage in the narrative for Peter’s interaction with Cornelius.

The divine Author is preparing you for the next chapter

Luke, the author of Acts, is telling a story. Peter, an apostle of Jesus, is living a story. Peter's story is part of a much larger story: the biblical story of redemption. Peter therefore is caught up in the largest story imaginable. In fact, he is about to be caught up in the final turning point in that story. The rest of the New Testament is largely concerned with the implications of that turning point.

You are living a story. How do you know? Frederick Buechner asks a different question.

*"How do I happen to believe in God? I will give one more answer which can be stated briefly. Writing novels, I got into the habit of looking for plots. After awhile, I began to suspect that my own life had a plot. And after awhile more, I began to suspect that life itself has a plot."*¹

How do you know you're living a story? Because the same kinds of things keep happening. Maybe you keep crossing paths with the same person. Maybe you meet a person who reminds you of someone from an earlier chapter. Maybe you arrive at some chapter in your life that reminds you of an earlier chapter. Nothing is ever exactly the same, because the plot is developing. Don't you suspect that your life has a plot? Back to back, Peter healed people (note the pattern), but they were different kinds of people, with different kinds of afflictions (note the plot development).

Truly, something of great importance is happening in your life right now. Just as surely, what's happening right now is preparing you for the next chapter, which is beyond your knowing because it is yet future. You therefore do not know how the divine Author is preparing you for the next chapter, or how your story fits into the larger story of redemption that he is writing. By the way, one of the great things about believing in Jesus is that you know that no matter how bleak things get, there's always another chapter. We have eternal life don't we?

Luke's story abruptly shifts from Peter's story to the story of a man whom Peter has never met. Why does Luke place these stories next to each other?



Cornelius' vision

Acts 10:1-8:

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, 2 a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. 3 About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, "Cornelius." 4 And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. 5 And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. 6 He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea." 7 When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, 8 and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

We are introduced to Cornelius in the same way that we were introduced to both Aeneas and Tabitha: "At Caesarea there was a *man named Cornelius* . . ." However, there are significant differences between the first two individuals and Cornelius.

First, Cornelius is not a Jew; he's a Gentile—and not just any Gentile. He's a Roman, and the Romans, who occupied Palestine, were particularly despised by Jewish patriots. To make matters worse, he's a leader of the occupying force: a centurion, who commanded one hundred soldiers. However, he's a different kind of Roman soldier. He's what's known as a God-fearer: he and his family believe in the God of Israel. Like Tabitha, he's full of good works and charity. Moreover, he prays continually to the God of Israel.

Second, Cornelius is neither sick nor dead. By all appearances, he doesn't need to be healed. Or does he? In introducing us first to a paralyzed person and to a dead person, then introducing us to another person in the series, might we expect the next person to be in even worse shape? If so, what's worse than dead? But Cornelius isn't dead; he isn't even sick. Or is he?

After we were introduced to Aeneas, we were told that Peter came to him. After we were introduced to Tabitha, we were told that Peter came to her. Now we're introduced to Cornelius. Does Peter come to him, as we might expect? No. An angel comes to him. So far in Luke and Acts, angels have only appeared to Jews. In Acts, angels have appeared to the apostles and to Philip (Acts 5:19, 8:26). Now an angel appears to a Gentile—and to a Roman commander, of all people.

The sight of the angel makes even a Roman soldier such as Cornelius go weak-kneed. The angel, however, comes not to threaten Cornelius but to affirm that the God of Israel has taken notice of his prayers. In fact, the angel has instructions for him: send for Peter.

Just as some disciples sent two men to urge Peter to come to Joppa when Tabitha died, Cornelius sends two of his servants, along with a devout soldier, to urge Peter to come to Caesarea.

The divine Author is preparing you for people

By healing two people, Peter was being prepared to meet Cornelius, the third in the series, but he was completely unaware of the goings-on with Cornelius.

You not only don't know how the divine Author is preparing you for the next chapter, you also don't know who you'll encounter in the next chapter. Moreover, you don't know how you're being prepared to meet a particular person or how that person is being prepared to meet you. You have no idea what's happening to that person right now. You don't even know what's happening to the person right next to you.

A New York City cabdriver picked up a woman who gave him a destination; then the two of them got into a heated dispute concerning the best way to get there (before the days of smart phones). They argued for quite some time, the cabbie and the passenger, before they became stuck in traffic that had come to a complete stop. The cabdriver tells the story:

"I reached for my clipboard and began to write a letter to a lifelong friend, a girl who not long ago meant the world to me. As I continued to write, my emotions overwhelmed me. I began to weep." Upon hearing him sob, the passenger spoke up. "Oh, for God's sake," she said. "If it means that much to you, take Fifth Avenue!" Needless to say, the passenger was unaware of what was happening to the person in the driver's seat!

Much is happening that we are unaware of. Much is happening that we cannot be aware of, no matter how often we check Facebook. If "knowledge is power," as Francis Bacon said, our power is limited by our ignorance. Better to cast ourselves upon the one who is all-knowing and all-powerful, and to believe that he is preparing us to cross paths with certain people and that he is preparing them to cross paths with us.

Moreover, the divine Author may be preparing us to meet someone we never could have imagined meeting. How could a law-keeping Jew such as Peter have imagined that he was being prepared to meet a Roman soldier such as Cornelius? Even if he could have imagined such a meeting, he never could have imagined how it would play out.

Luke, having interrupted the story of Peter to tell the story of Cornelius, returns to the story of Peter.

Peter's vision

Acts 10:9-16:

The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. 10 And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance 11 and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. 12 In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. 13 And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." 14 But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." 15 And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." 16 This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

Whereas Cornelius responded to his vision with a question (“What is it, Lord?”), Peter responds to his vision with an objection (“By no means, Lord”). Peter’s objection is understandable, however, because the voice commands him to violate the law handed down by Moses.

Certain animals, such as those lowered down by a sheet when Peter fell into a trance, were forbidden to eat, not because they were bad but because abstaining helped the Israelites understand that they were set apart for the Lord. The food laws enabled Israel to bear witness to the world that the God they believed in was different from the pagan gods. The hope was that if the Israelites abstain from Gentile foods, they would abstain from Gentile gods. The food laws, in addition to circumcision and Sabbath-keeping, marked the Jews out as God’s people.

The voice, though, says the times have changed: “What God has made clean, do not call common.” The voice echoes Jesus’ teaching about what defiles a person. What goes into your stomach doesn’t defile you, Jesus said; what comes out of your heart defiles you. Jesus’ teaching, according to Mark, amounted to a declaration that all foods are clean (Mark 7:14-23). The story of redemption, the larger story that Peter is caught up in, has entered a new chapter, but he is slow on the uptake. In fact, the voice has to tell Peter three times: “What God has made clean, do not call common.”

Still, Peter doesn’t understand the meaning of the vision. Presumably, he now understands that previously forbidden foods are now permissible for him to eat. Presumably, he believes there’s more to the vision than that, but what is it?

Men at the gate

Acts 10:17-23:

Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon’s house, stood at the gate 18 and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. 19 And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are looking for you. 20 Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them.” 21 And Peter went down to the men and said, “I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?” 22 And they said, “Cornelius, a centurion, an upright

and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.” 23 So he invited them in to be his guests.

The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him.

Just as Peter is trying to figure things out, the men from Cornelius arrive at the gate of the house where he is staying. Just as the men arrive at the gate, the Spirit instructs Peter to go with them immediately. Likewise, after Tabitha had died, the men from Lydda urged Peter to come with them immediately. Back then, Peter departed immediately—but that was with Jews and for a Jew. This would be with Romans and for a Roman centurion, who, being neither sick nor dead, seemingly had no need for Peter. What will Peter do?

When the men from Cornelius explain the reason for their request, Peter invites them in. Wow! Jews mostly didn’t go into Gentile homes, and they mostly didn’t invite Gentiles into their homes. They feared getting too close and being contaminated. Peter breaks a taboo. Then he departs with the men for Joppa.

What does Cornelius need? He needs to hear what Peter has to say. He needs to be healed after all—even raised from the dead. Although he is inclined toward the God of Israel, he is, as the apostle Paul puts it, “dead” in his “trespasses and sins,” “alienated from the life of God” (Ephesians 2:1, 3:18).

And what of Peter? By the power of Jesus, he healed a sick person and raised a dead person, commanding each to rise. When Peter heard about Tabitha, though, he “rose” and went with the men. When he saw the sheet full of animals descending from heaven, the voice told him, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” When the men from Cornelius were looking for Peter, the Spirit told him, “Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation.” Finally, Peter “rose” and went with Cornelius’ men. The key word, “rise,” is used more in connection with Peter than anyone else.

Peter too needs to be healed—healed of his ethnocentricity. The Spirit has given Israel new life so that it can fulfill its ancient vocation to bless “all the families of the earth” and to be a “light for the nations” (Genesis 12:1-3; Isaiah 42:6, 49:6; Acts 1:6-8, 2:1-13).

What you need to know, when you need to know it

The Lord gave Peter a disorienting vision but didn't explain the meaning of it. Peter was perplexed, and he pondered the meaning of it. As he was pondering the meaning of it, however, the Spirit instructed him. At some point, but not immediately, he pieced things together so that when he meets Cornelius, he knows what to do.

Has something disorienting ever happened to you? It is worth pondering the meaning of it, even if the meaning isn't readily apparent—even if the meaning never becomes apparent. Even if you never understand the meaning of it, what you will get, over time, is perspective—including the perspective that it's not necessary to understand the meaning of every disorienting experience. Maybe, though, the strange happening is part of something the Author is doing, something he is preparing you for.

The Spirit will show you what you need to know, when you need to know it. That's how a story works, doesn't it? You find out what you need to know, when you need to know it so that you're curious about what's in the next chapter. The Spirit shows you what you need to know, when you need to know it so that by the time you meet someone who's prepared to hear what you have to say, you'll be prepared to say it.

Know this: no one else can say it. No one else can do what you can do. No one else has lived the chapters that you have. All those disorienting chapters are essential parts of the story that the divine Author is writing to make you the woman or man you are today, ready to serve his precise purposes for you. The divine Author is writing a unique story with your life, unlike any other.

In some way, in part because of some of the disorienting chapters in my life, I've been prepared to write what I'm writing today. Maybe what you're reading right now means nothing to you. But maybe, just maybe (I hope, I pray) you may be thinking something like, "This is exactly what I needed to hear today." You may feel, somehow, as if you've been prepared in some way to read it.

Instead of dreading the present chapter and fearing the next chapter, if the Author is all-good and all-powerful, shouldn't we be on the edge of our seats to see what's on the next page?

A question and an answer

Long about my late thirties, I began praying earnestly for a wife. If I had thought going up on a roof at the sixth hour would have helped, I would have done so. Up until that time, despite my best efforts, I had been unable to find a wife, which resulted in no small amount of consternation on my part, especially in the wake of relationships that fizzled and hoped-for relationships that never developed. I traveled to different parts of the world to teach the Scriptures, and people in those places couldn't believe that I was in my thirties and unmarried. They took it upon themselves to pray for me. Literally, I had people around the world praying for me.

Was God preparing me to meet a woman, like he was preparing Peter to meet Cornelius? I had no idea.

I also had no idea what was happening in the life of a certain woman who was living in Hermosa Beach, in Southern California. In fact, I had no idea she even existed. She began a focused spiritual search. She checked out books on world religions from the library and concluded that Christianity made the most sense. While working for an entertainment company, she researched the meaning of Christmas for a software product that she was producing. She started visiting churches, but none of them was what she was looking for, even if she didn't know quite what she was looking for.

She thumbed through the Yellow Pages and saw an advertisement for a church that was, in fact, right across the street from her apartment. She hadn't known it was a church because the worshipers met in a converted bowling alley. She walked through the doors one Sunday, the pastor preached the Gospel, and she felt the Holy Spirit. She gave her life to Christ.

She immersed herself in the Scriptures. She participated in her church in stretching ways. A year after giving her life to Christ, she felt called to return to school and was accepted as a Ph.D. candidate at Stanford. She moved north and, based on the recommendation of some friends, started attending this church. I met her after one of the worship services, and we talked for a bit.

I didn't know that she had something of a no-dating policy, a carry-over from her church in Southern California, which encouraged "courting," which was considered more formal and more serious than "dating." If a man asked her out, she politely declined. The next time I met her, after a worship service, I asked her to lunch. She politely declined, right?

Unbeknownst to me, in the week prior to my invitation, two women each approached her, independently of each other, to tell her, in so many words, “You have to give guys a chance.” She spent most of Saturday in prayer before finally feeling released to potentially say yes to a man who asked her out. It just so happened that the next day, I asked her out. She said yes. Five months later, I asked her to marry me. She said yes. Three years later, we had our first daughter. Three years after that, we had our second daughter.

The divine Author was preparing me to meet Karen, and he was preparing her to meet me. He was preparing me to speak, to ask her a question: “Will you marry me?” He was also preparing her to speak, to answer the question: “Yes.” For the last sixteen years, the Lord has sent us together so that we might together live the mission of the church.

I dropped in on my father, who still lives in Mountain View, in the house in which I grew up. He just had to say, yet again, that he was so pleased to see me as a happy husband and father.

Do you find yourself in the middle of a disorienting chapter? Are you struggling to figure out what’s going on? The story’s not over yet.

Endnotes

¹ Buechner, Frederick. *Listening to Your Life*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 93-94.