

“Making All Things New”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
May 15, 2022

Acts 11:1-18
Revelation 21:1-6

Last week in church, we heard about the resurrection of a woman named Tabitha, who was also named Dorcas— some called her by her Aramaic name, and some called her by her Greek name. What a fitting lead-in to this Sunday’s lectionary: a woman who is bi-cultural, who has navigated in both Greek and Jewish communities. Perhaps for Peter, seeing that this woman had been called to life began the preparation in his heart for the next strange and amazing event in pursuit of Jesus’ wildly inclusive love.

Peter had been approaching Caesaria— a city where he, as a Jew and a follower of Jesus, would have been very much an outsider. Instead of a temple worshipping Yahweh, or a church worshipping Jesus, Caesaria had a temple dedicated to the Roman emperor himself. On his way to that city, Peter had a vision. Scripture says he was hungry; maybe that’s why he fell into a trance; the Greek word used here is *ekstasis*— that’s where we get the word *ecstasy*— but a literal definition would be more like “put out of place.”

Already, Peter was out of place. He was out of his element, out of Jerusalem, away from the buffer of all he knew from Judaism and the close community of people who followed Jesus in those earlier days. Perhaps there is something about being *out of place* that makes you more able to be in tune to God’s messages. The message God sent him was this: on a rooftop, a sheet floated down, filled with a fresh buffet of animals which the Torah would have considered unclean: not kosher. Then a voice told the hungry Peter, kill and eat! Peter asked: How could I possibly eat these things? Nothing unclean has ever touched my mouth! The response was basically this: How *dare* you call that which God has named clean, unclean?

The question really wasn’t about food at all. It was about people. And it was to show Peter and the church he and the other disciples were trying to build that in Jesus’ church, there would be no false line between who is clean, and who is unclean; who is worthy, and who is not. Who is in, and who is out.

Peter’s vision may seem peculiar and abrupt. But the truth is, God would not have granted him this vision if there was not already the tugging on the sheet of his understanding of who should be in, and who should be left out, of the church of Jesus Christ.

I remember once I had an amazing dream. I was in college, and I remember seeing a baby by a lake. A huge bird of prey— it was something even larger than an eagle— swooped down, and it grabbed the baby in its talons, and soared into the air again with this tiny child. Then, the bird

swooped down again, this time straight to the lake, and it dunked the baby in the lake, and then came back to the shore, where it laid the baby down.

I was really disturbed by this dream. But I had a religion professor, Dr. Hobbie, who claimed to have the gift of dream interpretation. He was the least “woo-woo” kind of guy— dressed in a tweed jacket with elbow patches, he looked kind of like he could have fit into any college professor cliché of the past 100 years. But he had a strong belief in the power of dreams as a way that God communicates with us, and drew upon how important that communication was for the people of the bible as they tried to follow (or run from) God.

Sitting in Dr. Hobbie’s office was like seeing a psychic, but a Christian one. I guess we call those prophets. What he did not know was that in college, I had started to realize that I am gay. But I had barely told anyone— my first college was in a small, conservative, southern town, and it only had one openly gay person— who wasn’t me. So, the thought of coming out terrified me, for that reason as well as several others. Dr. Hobbie didn’t know that. But he told me this: the dream showed that I was on the verge of huge changes. Although the bird looked large and threatening, he said it was probably a sign of the Holy Spirit. The baby, he said, represented a new birth—and the dunking into the lake was like a baptism, sealing God’s blessing on the new life that was about to start in me.

Looking back, I know that I had been tugging at the edges of the possibility of a life that could be a truer, more honest life; a life more filled with love; a life living in who God was calling me to be. But I think it was that dream that helped me to see that stepping into that life was okay, and not only that— stepping into that life was deeply entwined with my spirituality and faith in Jesus Christ, who calls us to new life.

Peter had already been tugging at what new directions following Jesus would lead him and the faith community that had become Christ’s church. Already Peter had encountered Tabitha, a.k.a. Dorcas, a woman of two names and two cultures, and restored her to life. In her worship blog, Maren Tirabassi writes, “It was as simple as her two names, Tabitha for Jewish friends and Dorcas for her Greek ones, In a time when Jew stayed with Jew, Greek with Greek, Christian with Christian, and deep between lay fear or prejudice, envy, condescension, hate. This one woman welcomed them all, (wearing herself out doing it), and it reminded Peter of someone he once knew.”¹

This vision led Peter and others who were spreading the good news of Jesus Christ to build a church that was a truer, more honest reflection of God’s inclusion. It would be a church filled with love. It would be a church taking the messages Jesus taught, and living them out in faithful calling.

What could this new life through the church tell us about the world we live in today? There are people who are so driven by the fear that they will be put out of place that they do all they can to hold on to vestiges of the past, even to the point of resorting to violence. I really hate it when I

¹ Maren Tirabassi, “From Tabitha to Tablecloth” in *Gifts in Open Hands* blog. May 11, 2022

am writing a sermon and I get news that a mass shooting has happened. This has happened multiple times on a Saturday, as I prepare for Sunday. But so much deeper than any inconvenience I feel as a last minute preacher is the anguish I feel for each Black person who has been made to feel unsafe because of white supremacy, each person who has lost a loved one or has been traumatized in some way by gun violence. I suspect we won't be able to find healing unless we are also able to, as Peter was in his trance, be *put out of place*. That may mean examining your privileges you may have because of your race, or income, or education, language, gender expression or ability, and figure out how to share power. That may mean being put out of place by entering into dialogue or risky relationship with someone who thinks differently than you do.

If we are to take on the kind of empathy toward which Jesus points us, we have to be able to step out of place from time to time. And the more we do that, the more we can fit at the table where Jesus meets us.

Peter had a vision, perhaps, because he was hungry. He thought he was hungry for food. But that day, the Spirit showed him that he was also hungry for a welcome that extended far beyond any table he had known. This is the welcome of Jesus Christ.