

“All” Really Means All
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We are somewhere around 60 – 90 CE. We’re in Caesarea, the Roman capital of the province of Judea, a garrison town.

Think of soldiers, chariots, symbols of Roman power and dominance. Cornelius, a prayerful Gentile and believer in Jesus, a centurion - most likely a retired - is led by a vision to seek out Peter, who is in the area, staying with Simon a tanner.

Cornelius immediately acts on his vision and sends his men to Joppa, about 30 miles south of Caesarea – down the coastline of the Mediterranean to seek Peter and invite him to Caesarea as the vision commanded.

In the meantime, in Joppa, Peter is on the rooftop of Simon’s home, finishing prayer and meditation. He is about to get something to eat when he falls into the trance, during which a sheet is dropped with “all manner of four-footed beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air.”

He is told to eat, and Peter refuses, saying he will not eat the unclean food.

Not once, but three times.

One wonders if Peter thought that maybe God was testing him.

And he continued to doubt the message, and at that moment of doubt and questioning – the men sent by Cornelius arrive at the door, breaking the trance, and connecting the two visions in a way that even Peter could not deny.

It is not lost on me that it is someone outside of Peter’s parochial community that calls him to what will soon become a broader, more expansive view of God’s mission.

In line with the hospitality customs of the day, Peter invited the men to stay overnight and in the morning they travel to Caesarea, on to visit with Cornelius and what some believe to be the first preaching by the Jewish followers of Jesus to a Gentile.

The world was about to change, again.

It is morning, some twenty centuries later. This morning. We are in a small town in Southwest Kansas. There are no visions that we know of, other than of what was once home to 1600 people, now all but devastated, as two days of deadly tornadoes laid waste to what was once and has been changed forever.

We are in the aftermath: dusty roads, unfamiliar what was a short time ago well-known, adults and children scraping about the rubble for what might be found, hoping to stuff the empty plastic bags they carry as if in search of something that will make sense to what has happened, something they might possess to hold onto. They wander toward help, outstretched hands – moving toward them, yet unseen. The growing light reveals a nightmare.

The difference between how their and our morning started is hard to fathom.

If you feel a bit helpless, we share that, as well. None of us can turn back the clock; we have learned that too many times.

There will be help, though. Already according to reports, mistakes made in recent disaster responses will make this outreach quicker, better, more effective.

Praying? That began the moment the skies began to darken and like a growing calm, continues to expand.

But human help is on its way, and it is unlikely that outstretched hands will doubt the help, question it – as did Peter the bountiful vision of God's gift. There will be no questions, either about the motivation of the emergency workers, neighbors, friends, and strangers who reach out to help.

No questions of separation of acceptable help based on how the hands are aged, colored, or who it is them embrace in love and affection. IQ, economic status, or political affiliations have no meaning when empathy and compassion rise to their greatest merits.

Call it a phenomenon or one of the best characteristics of the human/spiritual race: the very worst of conditions brings out the very best in people. We've been through this before, disasters that is – from human-engineered destruction to nature's own way of being nature, with no regard for our presence. Boundaries, differences, ideologies blur and we reach out.

We pray. We pray across denominations and belief systems as disparate as those we pray for. One might even think we all pray to the same God, well beyond our understandings of God.

We don't know what else to do, so we do what is most natural at our very basic of natures – we elevate and expand the spirit in our lives. Our helplessness reminds us of the gossamer fabric that holds us in its grace, even more so than any gravity hold this or other universes together. It may be that we come closer

to eternity at these times of greatest trial. That deserves a moment or two of thought.

It seems this is something like the same lesson that Peter learned in this morning's first reading, that we all serve God – not just one group or another – but all of us. And when we are called to minister from the visions of the heart – the compassion, longing, sorrow, and determination to help in prayer and other ways – we do become on church and a new church, again.

There can be no mistake that such events and disasters stir the sense of the apocalyptic and eschatological. When a tornado comes roaring down in full fury and force, “the end” has a very real meaning and presence to it. In our own ways and times we have all heard the rumbling of such advancing cataclysms.

And it is such events and foreboding that have generated much of the eschatological writings, including major portions of Revelations. It is a book compiled during a time of crisis and persecution for the Jews who followed Jesus, more and more being referred to as Christians. The temple was destroyed, persecutions continued, and this book written intently with the purpose of giving courage and strength to those oppressed, affirmed the temporality of Caesar and of mammon. Simply, one can lose their life to Caesar, but never their soul if they trust in the God that is always present – even when it seems otherwise.

The New Jerusalem probably will look nothing like Caesarea, Joppa, Patmos – the island of exile for John, Greenburg, KS or Palisades, NY – for these one day will all be “The old things that pass away.”

I believe that the new heaven and the new earth is with us today, we carry within us - always emerging, responding, and growing in ways that most unrepentantly show us its power, the Power of God. It is God's-Spirit nurtured in our response to one another our relation to the world – begun in the smallest, most intimate, and most personal of ways.

All things are being made new, not because of any disaster or apocalypse, but because we are ever drawing more closely to a God, and that means we change with each advancing breath and heartbeat. The closer we get, the greater the welcoming and healing Spirit becomes – boundaries and differences fade away. We come from and to the God-Spirit.

If anything the events of Greenburg, Katrina, 9/11, and others have made those boundaries meaningless and the ones remaining – more important to dismantle, somehow, someway.

They have pointed to the truth that the new thing God is doing has nothing to do with our design.

Perhaps the day will come when our language for God will be seen as one language in all its differences and our hesitancy for understanding and acceptance will have changed to a firm and unconditional love, maybe all of these things that happen will eventually make it so clear about who we really are deeply in our souls – so clear that we will all partake of the waters of eternal life, given to all.

That's our mission and our blessing. To walk in the midst of all of the turmoil and know we are not lost. Even more so, we know what it is we have to do: we take care of one another and our neighbors in prayer and with whatever other resources are available to us. We enter into that space, welcome the spirit, listen for instructions, talk with each other, and then take the actions. It's not about answers, but how the spirit moves among us, and it begins, as we have in worship and prayer.

So, today and all the days forward, let us remember those who today will be grateful for the hand of the stranger – our hands - and who, in taking our hand may very well find the God they thought has left them behind.

There can be no better place to begin this new day of God.

Amen.