

Easter 6, Year B
Acts 10: 44-48
Psalm 98

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California
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A New Song:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Sometimes, you need more than a sliver to understand what's going on. That's the case today. It's hard to follow that story from the Book of Acts unless you have the context. It's hard to understand the puzzlement the disciples had when they saw the Spirit being poured out on Gentiles.

“Even on the Gentiles—can you imagine that—the Holy Spirit poured out even on the Gentiles?” those righteous Jews must have wondered to themselves. “Gentiles—how can that be?” They must have wondered what Peter was even doing there in the home of a Gentile—and a centurion to boot. After all, righteous Jews weren't supposed to associate with Gentiles. Gentiles were unclean. And those early followers of Jesus—followers of the Way they called themselves—were nothing if not righteous Jews.

And yet there they were in the home of Cornelius, a gentile, a centurion, and a man of prayer. They got there in a most amazing way. The day before Peter had been praying on the roof of a house in Joppa—maybe a day's distance from where Cornelius lived. While Peter was praying on that roof—he saw a sheet come down from heaven. It was filled with birds and game—things righteous Jews never touch. And then he heard a voice say, “Kill and eat.” He couldn't do that. Such things were profane. So he protested to the Spirit. Again he heard, “Kill and eat.” He must have protested again, for the Spirit then said, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

While Peter was puzzling over what had happened to him, there was a knock on the door below. Men sent by Cornelius were asking for him. The Spirit said, “Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation.” Off he went—but not without his doubts and internal hesitations. It took more than the words of the Spirit to convince Peter.

It took Cornelius' story to really change Peter's mind. Another story we don't hear today. The story of devout man who, though he fell outside the boundaries of acceptability, nonetheless prayed to God and gave alms to those in need. While Peter was praying in Joppa, Cornelius was praying in Caesarea. The Spirit answered his prayers by commanding him to send for Peter.

When Peter heard Cornelius' story, he launched into a speech. He was singing a new song. His first words were—“I truly understand God shows no partiality....” What do you think those circumcised believers—those righteous Jews that came along with Peter—thought when they heard that? That went against all that they'd been taught. That challenged truths that had carried them through tough times. They didn't know the tune; they didn't know the words. Wasn't Israel the chosen land? Weren't Jews the

chosen people? How could God not show partiality! No wonder they were astounded. No wonder they raised an eyebrow. No wonder they protested.

And who can blame them? Even Jesus found it hard to cross the line from insider to outsider. Remember the Syro-Phoenician woman—the mother who asks Jesus to heal her child. Jesus first says to her, “I was sent to redeem the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she perseveres. She replies to Jesus, “Even the dogs under the table get the scraps.” His response—he changed his tune. He healed her daughter. Jesus singing a new song.

All week long I’ve been focusing on the psalm. That beautiful song of praise sung by all of God’s creation. “Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things.” “Shout with joy to the Lord, all you lands; lift up your voice, rejoice, and sing.” I’ve wondered, “What are the marvelous things?” “What’s our new song?”

Are the marvelous things the wonders of God’s world—a baby cuddling against her mother’s breast, men clad in space suits tinkering with a camera attached to telescope orbiting around the earth, the stunning grandeur of outer space?

Or are those marvelous things the capacity to listen to a cry of pain, the patience to answer a child’s repeated question, “Why?”

Maybe they’re the turning of a heart, the willingness to see things a different way.

Maybe those marvelous things include a human spirit forbearing in the face of loss.

Maybe they’re a people responding to hurt and grief and disappointment not with fear and anger but with hope and love.

Maybe there’s no limit to God’s marvelous things.

And what of our new song? What is the song God’s planting in our hearts? What are the words? What is the tune?

Could it be that our new song is like the one that Peter sang that day in Caesarea? A song that softens hearts. A song that crosses boundaries. A song that welcomes all.

“Sing to the Lord a new song,” the psalmist says.

A song of welcoming—both Jews and Gentiles, both insiders and outsiders. A song that welcomes those who fall on the other side of the lines we so often draw—those with whom we disagree, those we really do not like, and those we do not even see.

“Sing to the Lord a new song”—a song that transforms our hearts as we welcome to our table those that call us into a wider way of love.

“Sing to the Lord a new song.”