

## **Acts 10:44-48**

10:44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.

10:45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles,

10:46 for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said,

10:47 "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

10:48 So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days. We didn't read last week's lection from Acts, but it's impossible to talk about this week's lection without mentioning it.

### **Sermon:**

Last week, an important emissary for an African queen finds himself seeking good news in a faraway land. He is accomplished in every way, but his accomplishments are invisible in this strange place. His tongue, and his wardrobe, and his darker complexion betray him as an outsider to important Romans; his status as a eunuch compromises his oneness with traditional Jewish folks. The text doesn't even offer us his name.

And yet on a wilderness road, you might be so bold as to call it a desert highway, he meets an apostle, who heard it from a friend, who heard it from a friend, who heard it from another, that there is good news to be

had and found in the story of Jesus. And lest we forget, tales of a Holy Spirit that provokes new apostles into remote places; serendipitous water, enough for a baptismal fount, that appears in a desolate land; and that same Holy Spirit, snatching up apostles to send them to the next village, and leaving their recent converts rejoicing, toe-tapping, even, in recognition of new life, and new possibilities.

Yes indeed, friends, the glory of the Lord is revealed. I wanna live in a world that duly and rightly recognizes the power of strong Black women, too, a power that has been evident through the ages. I want to live in a world where it's not an anomaly to see them wield treasures of influence, too. I want to live in a world where strangers get to ride in fancy coaches, too, and where they have the access and resources to express their powerful intellect, too. And I want to live in a world that isn't SO Jerusalem-centric – a world where its apostles can realize and acknowledge the incredible spiritual gifts of the Gentile world, and not only recognize those neighbors, but pursue them, love them, collaborate with them, celebrate their value and dignity as children of God, welcome them as whole members of their community. I wanna see the glory of the Lord revealed in global neighbors.

Good news!!! The book of Acts tells us this is possible. The book of Acts reveals the undeniable power and movement of the Holy Spirit. And the book of Acts keeps reminding us that the Spirit will not be tempered, dampened, nor delayed by our lack of creativity and imagination.

Last week, the ultimate outsider, so emboldened by the Holy Spirit, proclaimed, "There! There is water! And what is to prevent me from being baptized?!?" And Philip was smart enough to let the Holy Spirit get about the business of spiriting.

Fast forward two chapters. This time, we meet another outsider, but's he's the opposite of last week's outsider. He's not invisible nor unrecognizable nor unnamed. His name is Cornelius. He's a centurion from Caesarea. He's got a household. He does not represent the power of a faraway queen, but rather an up-close emperor. His masculinity has not been stolen from him, but rather it is on full display in his armor. But his status as a Roman citizen has not emptied him of his humanity.

Cornelius is devout. He is generous. He is keen to experience the goodness of God. And eventually Cornelius is the recipient of a vision beckoning him to find Peter.

Simultaneously, Peter is the recipient of his own vision – a strange one. Four-footed creatures, birds, reptiles, not profane, but clean. Peter doesn't make sense of it at first, but eventually, he'll see this vision as God's way of calling for inclusion.

Soon enough, Peter and Cornelius meet face to face. Cornelius and his household eagerly await Peter's words. Just as Phillip summarized the scriptures and the story of Jesus for a stranger filled with divine curiosity, so too, Peter shares his heart with an equally divine and curious audience. Peter tells an Easter story.

And as Peter tells the story, the Holy Spirit falls fresh upon all the people, himself included. And guess who else?!?! The Jerusalem contingent – the devout, circumcised, life-long Jewish believers among them. "The Spirit is moving in them, just like it has moved in us!" they say.

And this time, the apostle of the Lord doesn't need to be reminded by the neophyte that there's plenty of water. In an instant, Peter realizes that those caught up in the wave of the Holy Spirit – which can be anybody, from anywhere, at anytime – should be offered baptism, and bestowed with all the rights and privileges of the fellowship.

Did you catch that? Baptism, the invitation into new life, life undergirded in the abundance of God, is contingent on one thing. Not who your mama is. Not a ritual of physical distinction. Not having been the first and exclusive witness of the Jesus movement. Not any of those demographics that the census insists matter. Not any of those details that Good King Joe enacted to prime the Temple economy. But what fills you...the Holy Spirit. And that Spirit is accessible to anyone who is a child of God. And everybody, E-V-E-R-Y-B-O-D-Y is a child of God.

Again, we cannot understate the significance of these events. Peter, the one who denied and abandoned Jesus at the height of the Easter drama, eventually witnesses to several dozen second-and-third-generation believers with such authenticity that they become apostles themselves. Among them is Philip the evangelist, one of seven deacons chosen by the Jerusalem church, who ends up spending time converting friends in Samaria, before eventually befriending the Ethiopian Eunuch in last week's story, and later ministering to the community at Caesarea Maritima, the very location of today's text, where Peter meets Cornelius the Centurion, the first Gentile convert of record. The Ethiopian Church traces its roots to this encounter, and today, has more than 36 million members. The work that Jesus starts in Galilee, fans out from Jerusalem, and across the world. And all people in all times, and in all places, in Samaria, in Ethiopia, in Caesarea, even in Raleigh, NC, see it together.

The Spirit moves. The Spirit seeps. The Spirit gathers. The Spirit doesn't worry about social conventions. The Spirit concerns itself with connecting God's beloved to God and one another.

I am struck by Peter's question: "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

Peter answers in the same way that I believe all Church folk should answer: No. We cannot withhold the water. But Peter does more than answer. Peter acts (the name of the book should have already been a spoiler for us!). Peter offers his new friends the waters of baptism, and then he and the others offer them their hospitality. They stay in Joppa for several days and take note of the abundance they find in God and one another. Theirs is a God to be shared, and theirs are lives to be shared.

I wonder, Millbrook, what things do we withhold that hinder our ability to recognize the movement of the Holy Spirit in our neighbors.

For Peter's Church, a closed baptism was the hindrance. They put the baptism before the horse. But Peter comes to recognize that baptism by water is the acknowledgment of something that has already happened: life filled up, infused, and made whole by the Holy Spirit. It's not something to withhold, but rather, it's something that holds us together.

I believe our congregation must move away from a mentality of *withholding* and toward one of *being held* and *holding onto one another*.

The fount behind us, the scriptures we read, the prayers we lift up, the resources and gifts we share, the constitution and bylaws that formally bind us as community, the covenants we keep, the callings bestowed upon as ministers and laypersons alike...are these objects to be withheld? From anyone?!? Are they to be an impediment to the movement of the Spirit? Are they leverage? Are they to be only as authentic as Caesar and our comfort will allow?

Or...Or is our community one that holds all the things the waters of baptism represent? Do we hold empathy, and love, and hope, and patience, and kindness, and peace, and creativity, and generosity, and hospitality, and imagination, and umph, and faith in, and by, and for one another?

Do we believe that the Holy Spirit flows not just in the North Raleigh suburbanite, but also the Palestinian who feels angry and invisible, the widow mired in grief, the addict plagued by substance use disorder, the expectant mother terrified for both for her own autonomy and the wellbeing of her unborn child, the refugee fleeing violence not of their own making, the soldiers and peacemakers called to unenviable tasks, the politicians on both sides of the aisle navigating the gravity of systemic decay, the persons most diametrically opposed to our own beliefs...? Do we believe the Holy Spirit has capacity to transform God's people, and ultimately, God's world? Do we believe that the Holy Spirit can be cradled, can be nurtured, can be expressed beyond our own Jerusalem?

Let me tell you something, Millbrook. I see a reservoir in this sanctuary. It's full of every good capacity God has given us. And it's every bit as potent and pure and full of transformative potential as the substance that dwelled among the Acts Church so many years ago.

**WithHolding Water**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Sixth Sunday of Easter, 5/5/2024**  
**Acts 10:44-48**



And this morning, we live in a volatile world filled with every imaginable polarity. We have got to, right this very moment, start living as if and believing in the possibility that our collective gifts can infuse some meaningful, impactful goodness into this world. We have got to prioritize our one-ness in the Spirit. We've got to turn the faucet on! Because ours should never be water to be withheld, but rather water that helps us hold one another. Drip. Drip. Splash. Splash. Puddle. Puddle.

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.