

## Sermon

May 22, 2022

*Pick One to Remember*

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This morning I want to do something different. Instead of preaching one sermon on a single topic, I would like to preach four sermons ... on four different topics.

Now don't leave (or stop reading)!

It would be as challenging for me to preach four sermons consecutively as it would be for anyone to sit still and listen to all of them! No preacher, however good, could hold a congregation's attention for **that long** without boring them to tears.

When I say that I would like to preach four sermons, therefore, I mean four *mini-sermons or sermonettes*, each of which would last three to four minutes and be based on our first reading for today.

Here's the exciting part: as listeners, you can play along by choosing one of the four mini-sermons to remember and ponder over the coming week.

How does that sound? Shall we try it? Do we have a deal?

If so, let's begin!

### **Resurrection: Real or Imaginary? (Sermonette 1)**

We see it in Acts 11:1-18, our first reading from last Sunday. Peter has a vision. God shows him a variety of animals that Jewish law declares unclean, only to lift the restriction for the sake of spreading the gospel.

The removal of this prohibition **tears down the wall** separating the Jews from the Gentiles, enabling the Jews following Jesus (like Peter) to fulfill their calling to be a **light unto the nations** (see Isaiah 42:6). God's covenant can now be shared with *all people* through the preaching of the gospel.

The story seems unremarkable, at least with respect to how Peter encounters what he perceives. Here's why: people throughout the Bible have visions. Isaiah "sees" the God of Israel "sitting on a throne, high and lofty" (6:1). In the New Testament, John of Patmos witnesses the end of the world as we know it while "in the spirit" (Revelation 1:10). Like Isaiah, he had a vision.

Today, however, many of us have a different attitude concerning visions. We regard them as purely subjective. Nothing "out there" in the world corresponds to the experience of the observer. If someone came up to me and said they had a vision, I'd say it was **all in their head** – wouldn't you?

The understanding of visions as purely subjective phenomena with no basis in reality led one of the participants in the forum series I'm currently leading on the

resurrection to object to my use of the word “vision” to describe Paul’s experience of the risen Christ. That makes it sound like Paul was hallucinating, he said.

I see that now.

So, when Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 that the risen Christ “appeared” or “became manifest” first to the disciples, then to 500 believers, and then to him, what does he mean? Did he have a vision, or was it something else?

Peter’s experience sheds light on the subject. Peter “saw a vision” according to last week’s reading (Acts 11). The word here for “vision” is *horama* which differs from the word Paul uses when he says Christ “appeared” or “became manifest” to the disciples, to 500 at once, and then to him. That word is *ophthe*.

So, what did Paul and the other early followers of Jesus encounter when he “appeared” to them? Clearly it was something more than a vision: not only does Paul use a different word to describe the experience. He also identifies multiple witnesses who saw the same thing. This suggests whatever they saw occurred “out there,” **independent of the mind**.

What’s more, we have no indication that any of these witnesses were in altered states of consciousness. Peter’s vision, on the other hand, occurred while he was in a trance (see Acts 11:5).

What a puzzle! How did Jesus’ followers experience the resurrection according to the earliest accounts we have in Scripture? Perhaps, as our brief exploration implies, the resurrection lies somewhere between two extremes: in becoming “manifest” to Paul along with the other people of the Way, the risen Christ was neither merely a vision nor merely a dead man walking! His presence was *objectively real but irreducible to physical form – a mystery in the midst of history*.

How do you “see” the risen Christ?

Does his presence become manifest in our lives even today? If so, where...and how?

## **The Legacy of Lydia (Sermonette 2)**

On Mother’s Day, we heard about Tabitha, Priscilla, and Phoebe. These women were among the first leaders of the church: they taught others The Way, they oversaw house churches, and they provided an example of what it meant to live for others instead of only for themselves.

Today we meet Lydia, another woman in Acts who possesses the honor of being Paul’s **first convert in Europe**.

Acts identifies Lydia as a “worshipper of God,” which may imply that she was a Gentile attracted to the Jewish faith. It also says she dealt in purple cloth.

Purple cloth was a luxury in the ancient world. It was expensive to make, which explains why it became the color of royalty. Anyone trading or selling purple cloth

would have obviously required money to purchase it, which suggests, therefore, that Lydia was a **woman with some wealth**.

Another detail in the text likewise suggests that Lydia had some extra change in the bank. According to Acts 16:15, she “prevailed” upon Paul and his companions to stay with her after they baptized her household. The invitation implies she owned what Allan McNicol of the *Institute for Christian Studies* calls “a large domicile befitting a wealthy person” (*HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, p. 577).

In other words, **Lydia had a big house** – and big houses cost money!

Lydia offers an important example of someone who used her status as a homeowner and businessperson to welcome outsiders as well as provide for the spiritual needs for those with lesser status as evident in the baptism of her whole household.

It also creates a dilemma. According to Margaret Aymer in the *Women’s Bible Commentary*, the Book of Acts inadvertently treats Paul not as a messenger proclaiming the emergence of God’s upside down kingdom, but as a colonizer who brings about the “in-breaking [of] empire” (p. 543).

I’ve never thought of Paul’s missionary work like this before. Lydia, Aymer continues, “enters into the traditional relationship of a female character to an imperial envoy” – one that reflects “the colonizer’s desire to enter and domesticate the land” (*ibid.*).

She exercises dominion over the subjects of her household, moreover, by presumably **forcing** them to be baptized.

How, then, do you view Lydia?

Is she (according to the view I favor) another example of the Christ-like leadership we see in Tabitha, Phoebe, and Priscilla, a woman who provided hospitality to strangers and cared for the spiritual needs of her household? Or is she complicit in Paul’s supposed efforts to colonize Gentile cities for the sake of establishing a new, theocratic empire?

What is the legacy of Lydia? Who do you say she is?

### **The Baptism of Children (Sermonette 3)**

The argument that Lydia “forced” her household to be baptized raises a serious question for those of us who believe in infant baptism. Critics of infant baptism make it clear: people should have a choice concerning whether they wish to be baptized.

From the Lutheran perspective, on the other hand, the choice belongs to God. Baptism signifies that God initiates the relationship. Like a parent, God loves us as God’s children before we can ever respond. Talk about amazing grace! Obviously, we can turn away from God and reject God’s baptismal promises, yet even when we

do baptism suggests that God holds on, that God persistently makes the choice to keep loving us.

In short, infant baptism confirms our belief in salvation purely by grace; that said, the Bible presents us with a problem here. Jesus baptizes adults. The reason concerning why the Gospels never talk about baptizing infants, however, is one that defenders of “believer’s” or adult baptism always miss – it was the beginning of his ministry!

Obviously, Jesus had to convert adults first, men and women who could follow the Way and who would then baptize others, including whole households. While the Bible never makes explicit reference to the baptism of children, moreover, it stands to reason that they belonged to households like Lydia’s Acts 16:15. The household, after all, was an *intergenerational family unit*, one that also included servants along with (presumably) their families.

When we read, therefore, what Paul says about the faith of his disciple Timothy, how the faith “lived first” in his grandmother Lois, then in his mother Eunice, and finally in Timothy himself, we see the backdrop of a house church, one where the entire household was probably baptized, and one where Timothy, then, grew in his faith (see 2 Tim. 1:3-7).

Was Timothy, then, forced to believe? By no means! In the waters of baptism, **he was freed to believe**, freed from the grip of sin and death to say “yes” to God and neighbor.

What’s your view of infant baptism? Is it a place of grace, one that centers on God’s choice, or should salvation be in our hands and the choice be ours?

### **Grace Beyond Baptism (Sermonette 4)**

Luke, who also wrote Acts, presents a view of grace that extends beyond baptism. Take a look again at the first reading. It says that “[t]he Lord opened [Lydia’s] heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul” (16:14). God, in other words, gave her the gift of faith. God opened her heart.

The teaching that God is the author of our faith finds its clearest expression first in the Letters of Paul. “No one can say Jesus is Lord,” he writes in 1 Corinthians 12:3, “except by the Holy Spirit.” Luke follows Paul, both of whom would eventually influence Martin Luther.

I will never forget reading Luther on the subject of faith as a gift from God as a seminary student. I always assumed faith was simply another requirement I had to fulfill for God to accept me. Imagine my surprise, therefore, when Luther says, “I cannot, nor should I, force anyone to have faith. That is God’s work alone, who causes faith to live in the heart” (Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., p. 420).

Instead of berating myself for not having enough faith, or pressuring others with the message that their faith must be strong, I realized I could confess my sometimes-weak faith, that I could trust in God who justifies me by grace, not by how strong my faith is. And when it comes to faith, whatever faith I have comes from God!

Suddenly, I remembered the words of Scripture: “Lord, I believe; help me in my unbelief” (Mark 9:23).

How about you? Is it comforting to assume even your faith comes from God, or do you feel that undermines what we need to do to make God love us?

### **Choose One**

You have now heard four sermonettes: one on the resurrection; another on the legacy of Lydia; one on the baptism of infants; and another on faith as a gift.

Now I invite you to choose one to ponder over the coming week.

You can ponder the mystery of the resurrection. In what way do you “see” the risen Christ? Does his presence become “manifest” to us even today, and if so where and how? You can reflect on the life and legacy of Lydia. Was she an example of Christian leadership in her care and hospitality toward others, or did she force her household to be baptized?

Who do you say she is?

You can meditate on the meaning of baptism. Is it a place of grace, one where we see God accepting even helpless infants? Or should the choice to dedicate ourselves to God be ours? You can ponder your faith. Is it comforting to assume it’s a gift that comes from God, or do you feel our response is what saves us?

Whatever option you choose, may God’s Word accompany you throughout the week ahead.

I’ll expect a full report from you next week.

Amen