

**Sermon, 2017-07-02, “Liberation”**  
**Pastor Bob Harrison**  
**West Valley Presbyterian Church**

Have you ever had a significant dream which helped you deal with a problem you were facing? Well Peter had a vision experience-- translations call it a trance or even some a dream. You see, he had a problem and was not aware of it, but God was aware and had a solution for the problem. It had to do with Gentiles--people who weren't Jews. Peter would never associate with them because the law told him not to and would never eat anything that was not kosher. Gentiles just weren't in his circle of friends. So God gave him a vision. But let me back up just before Peter's vision in Acts, chapter 10. Now listen to this. At the beginning of Act 10 the Bible says Cornelius, a Greek gentile and a God-fearing man who prayed to God regularly, had vision from God. In this vision, an angel directed Cornelius to send men to Joppa to summon Simon who was given the name of Peter. Now Cornelius didn't know what the vision meant, but Peter would be the one to help him find the answer. The messengers of Cornelius would find Peter outside of the city of Joppa itself. (God is in the background preparing the way.) And now we come back to Peter. <sup>9</sup>“About noon. . . Peter went up on the roof to pray. <sup>10</sup>He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. <sup>12</sup>It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. <sup>13</sup>Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” <sup>14</sup>“Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. ‘I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.’ (God was showing him things that were not on his Jewish kosher diet) <sup>15</sup>The voice spoke to him a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ <sup>16</sup>This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.” While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the

vision, he didn't know that a solution to a problem was already in progress.

Have you ever had that happen to you? You had a problem and didn't realize a solution was on the way. Maybe you didn't even know you had a problem.

Well Cornelius sent three men to find Peter and said, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." Peter went with them and met Cornelius. While talking with him he went inside and found a large gathering of people. Peter said to them, "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean." Then he wanted to know why they asked him to come. Cornelius explains his vision to Peter. Peter replied to Cornelius and all who were with him in the house, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right." And then he tells the story of Jesus—how he was crucified, raised from the dead on the third day—how he appeared and how his disciples ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead—that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. "And then the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message." This must have been a dramatic outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished because they heard the gentiles speaking in other languages/tongues and praising God. So Peter orders these new believers be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Well word got out rather quickly about what had happened. This didn't sit well with the apostles in Jerusalem. So, Peter went to Jerusalem to have a chat and tell them what had happened. The first thing out of

their mouths was, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men (those vile despicable gentiles) and ate with them!” What do you think you were doing? They are not one of us. They were really ticked off. The Message paraphrase says, “What do you think you’re doing rubbing shoulders with that crowd, eating what is prohibited and ruining our good name?” Have you ever felt that way? (Ruin my family’s name. Ruin WVPC’s Name.) Peter spoke over their excitement and got their attention. He told them of his vision and how he went to Cornelius’ house. “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning (the day of Pentecost). Then I remembered what they had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’ way?” When the apostles heard this they calmed down. And then it sank in. The Message says, “. . .they started praising God. ‘It’s really happened! God has broken through to the other nations, opened them up to Life’.”

The apostles in Jerusalem had been running in circles. One big loop. The Good News was only for those who were circumcised and ate kosher food—people like us. If you didn’t do that then you really didn’t have the Gospel—Good News. But God’s plan was much bigger. Have you ever been caught in a loop? It’s like ground hog day every day—you raise your head, it looks the same you do to bed. I know I have. A couple of week ago, I was coming home from a Session Meeting. We had been discussing partnering with Onnuri Church. I was listening to a station call SPA. They play SPA music. SPA music is very repetitive. It repeats, repeats, repeats. It goes in loop. It is mindless music and therefore fits my personality at times. But I became tired of it and as I pulled into the garage I switch stations. And guess what. Roger Williams, one of the great pop pianists of all time was playing, “To dream the impossible dream.” It gave me goose bumps. I went from mindless music, caught in loop kind of music to something that had a

vision, “To Dream the Impossible Dream.” This is my quest to follow that Star—to Follow Christ. The apostles in Jerusalem could now dream big.

This encounter with Peter and the apostles was the pivotal turning point of the early church. The Gospel is now open to everyone by faith. This was always true, but the apostles just hadn’t recognized it. The loop was forever broken. The Good News of Christ was for all.

But you say, God’s not given me a dream or vision. I want to tell you a story about girl named Anelys and her family. She lived in Cuba 15 years ago. She was 9 years old and her sister, Arlenys, was 5. Her dad was a mechanic and her mother a medical doctor. Their family was caught in a loop by the regime in Cuba. They were controlled by the government and had no hope of finding freedom. Her father and mother dreamed an impossible dream and decided that they should go to the United States and break this loop and live in a land of freedom. Her mother, a medical doctor, found out from the government that if she want to go to the United States, she would have to move away from her family and live in Russia for 5 years and would only be able to see her family 2 week a year. After that she would move back to Cuba for 5 years and only be able to see her family two weeks a year. You do the math: she would only be able to see her family 20 weeks over a 10 year period of time. Anelys’ parents decided they should escape from Cuba. One evening their family boarded a crowded boat to take them to the US. All they had was the clothes on their backs. About half way to the US the boat experienced problems and stalled in the middle of the ocean. They were scared. But there was hope. The boat captain had a relative in the US who knew they were coming. Fortunately, the captain had a cell phone. Unfortunately, it had only one bar. We all know what happens when we have just one bar on our cell phones—there is a good chance we won’t be able to connect the call with the person with whom we want to speak. The captain dialed the number and barely had said a word when the phone went blank. They were dead in the

water so to speak. A couple of hours went by and they were losing hope. If it became daylight, they would likely be found by the Cuban Navy and taken back. The adults would be put into prison, and the children put in an orphanage. They were giving up, when out of nowhere a boat came along side of them. It was the captain's relative. He had gotten their nautical coordinates from a very brief connection of the phone. They boarded his boat (although Anelys and sister fell into the water and had to be rescued) and were taken to the Florida where they put their feet on the sand and asked for political asylum. They were free. They dared, they risked, they believed there was a better life for them in America.

I think this was how it was with the apostles in Jerusalem. They were going nowhere until Peter arrived and told them of the vision he was given. The boat arrived in the form of the Holy Spirit and were taken from a loop of shortsightedness to a land of liberation-freedom that could see far away, even to the ends of the earth. God knew their coordinates. At the right time He always comes through.

And now the story focuses on the Church at Antioch in Acts 11. Many Jews had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed (stoned to death). They traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus, a Mediterranean island, and Cyrene, northern Africa, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks (Gentiles) also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. They were bold. They had names like Simeon, called Niger—probably a black African proselyte (some think this was Simon of Cyrene); Lucius of Cyrene—probably a Greco-Roman leader and Manaen, who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch—a Hellenist aristocrat.

Antioch was a melting pot of different nationalities. The men from Cyprus and Cyrene didn't care what the nationality was. They just

wanted to proclaim the good news to whomever would listen. It didn't matter if you were a Jew sharing the Good News with a Gentile or a Gentile sharing the Good News with a Jew. The important thing was that the Good News of Jesus was being shared with people of all nationalities and they were being saved.

When the leaders of the church at Jerusalem heard about this--Antioch, they wanted to check and verify. So, they sent a gracious man named Barnabas, a wealthy Cyprus-born Jewish Levite, off to Antioch. When he arrived, he witnessed the grace of God. He encouraged the new believers to remain true to the Lord. The Bible says, "The Lord's hand was with them and **considerable numbers** were brought to the Lord." Barnabas surveyed what was happening. The church in Antioch had become a multi-ethnic church—Jews and Gentiles being saved. The doors of liberation had been thrown open. When something like this happens, you cannot put it back into a box again. He knew exactly what he needed to do. He needed someone with vast multi-ethnic experience to help lead the church at Antioch. He didn't go back to Jerusalem, he went up to Tarsus to look for Saul, whom would later become known Paul. Paul had also had a vision that turned his life around. Barnabas brought him back to Antioch. Paul was a Roman citizen (he understood gentiles) and a Jew who had been a Pharisee and had held the cloaks of men putting Christ followers to death. He understood multi-cultures and multi-ethnicities. He was perfect for the job. They met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. They were liberated. The Gospel was about ready to spread like wildfire. For if you were a Jew or a Gentile and you were saved, you were simply call a Christian. And anybody could be saved.

Have you ever dared to do something risky and it turned out to be one of the greatest decisions you've ever made. You had initial fear, but it was the right thing to do. Sometimes when we've made that decision it

feels like we're going through a dark tunnel until we finally see the daylight.

Rebecca and I recently went to Glendale, CA, for a wedding reception. My sister's grandson, Ty, had married, of all people, Anelys (the girl from Cuba) last January. They celebrated their California reception in June. They knew how to string out a good thing. We pulled off of Interstate 5 onto East Colorado Blvd on Friday June 16. The area looked a bit seedy. I was concerned that it may not be the best place to stay. I connected with my sister Jan at the hotel. I felt stuck. There didn't appear to be anything to do. The wedding reception was to take place the next evening. I asked, "What's there to do?" Jan told me to go through the long alley across the street and I would find some shopping. It was after dark. Rebecca and I walked down the sterile dark alley and suddenly we could see light in the distance. We turned the corner, and both of us said at the same time, "This looks like Disneyland!" Trees were lit with lights, there were stores to shop in, dancing waters that were lit—even a lighted chandelier hung across the streets. The streets were only for pedestrians. And wouldn't you know it, in the middle of the street there were trolley tracks on which a real trolley would run periodically. In the middle of all of this was a large grassy area with people sitting on blankets and listening to a live band. And there was a great wine bar—I only visited it once. It was a community gathering of all different kinds of people. It was a melting pot of ethnicities all having a good time. We only found it, because we dared to risk going down a dark alley. Later we found the main entrance. It is the Americana Mall in Glendale.

Sometimes I feel like I'm going down dark alleyway and I don't see the light. But at the right time God lights the way at the end of the tunnel. He was working all of the time.

Now this is the great part. At the end of the wedding reception, Ty and Anelys thanked everyone for coming. And then they said the three of us want to thank you. What? The three of us? They said that they just found out that Anelys was expecting a baby. The crowd went wild. What a great announcement with which to end the evening. We all celebrated. Everybody hugged everybody more than once. But my sister shared something with me that framed the story better. When Ty and Anelys first found out she was pregnant, it wasn't a great celebration for them. They had only been married 6 months. They had planned to have children in few years, not 6 months. This gift of a child was an inconvenient gift. You see, Anelys had her Screen Actors Guild card; appeared in some movies and has aspirations to be an actor. Ty was a budding cinematographer. A child was going to be a bit of a burden. It was inconvenient. The good news is that they prayed together earnestly about what God was giving them. They read scripture after scripture. And then clarity came from God. This was not an inconvenient gift, the child was a beautiful gift from God. They saw the light. If the child turns out to be a boy, they will call him Noah. The Hebrew name means "rest" or "comfort."

I began to think about inconvenient gifts. The church in Jerusalem received an inconvenient gift or message from Peter when they were told about Peter eating with gentiles; Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family; Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going; Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac, his one and only son as a sacrifice; Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. And the list goes on and on about inconvenience.

I feel as though our church has been going through an inconvenient long dark alleyway. We've been through a lot in the last 3 or 4 years. For me, it's been difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel. And now we are being offered a gift of partnering with Onnuri Church--a Korean speaking church. To say the least, at times it will appear to be inconvenient. There will be misunderstandings—but we have them already in our church. Culturally, it will be different. But we already have people of different cultures in our church. The campus will be crowded. There will be different ethnicities and cultures, **but we all serve the same God**. Let's embrace this gift and grow together in Christ. Let's be a liberated gracious church. For there is no liberty without grace. The Grace of God gave sinful humankind what appeared to be a most Inconvenient Gift, His Son Jesus. He was born into a world that despised Him and crucified Him. But this Inconvenient Gift, which was contrary to the sinful ways of man, turned out to be the greatest Gift of all time. He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf that all who believe in Him might be saved and have eternal life. Let us break free of the chains which are looped around us and follow the Great Liberator, just like the church at Antioch—a multi-ethnic diverse church on fire for the Lord. God knows our coordinates and will show up on time to lead us from darkness to the light. His grace is truly amazing.