

Sermon Series: People in Motion

October 27, 2013

Title: A New World in 3-D

Text: Acts 10:1-23

Summary: God gave us 2 eyes so that we could see in 3 dimensions. Luke tells us about God giving 2 visions to 2 very different people so that together they could bridge the ancient divide between Gentiles and Jews and help usher in God's New and Good Creation. In the same way, He calls us to be the pioneers who build that new world.

A New Creation

Seeing in 3-D:

Did you ever wonder why God gave you 2 eyes? It wasn't just so that you'd have a spare in case something happened to one of your eyes. It was to enable you to see in 3 dimensions.

How? It is because each eye sees the world from a slightly different angle. Our eyes are spaced far enough apart so that they enable us to "see around" things. Our brain puts the two images together and we enjoy the ability to perceive the world with depth perception.

2 eyes = 3 dimensions.

Did you know that God often does the same thing when He wants to show us things about Himself and His wonderful plan for us? When it came time to fully unveil His plan for welcoming the entire human race into His family, no one human perspective would be enough. God's New Creation could only be grasped in 3-D.

Cornelius:

The first view of this new reality comes to a seemingly unlikely person, a Roman soldier named Cornelius. Luke introduces us to him:

Acts 10:1-2 NIV

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.

What do we learn about this soldier?

- Well, first of all, his rank: he was a centurion, holding a rank roughly the equivalent of a captain.

- We learn that he lived in the very cosmopolitan and pagan city of Caesarea, the center of Roman rule at the time.
- Third, we learn that he and his family were "God-fearers," Gentiles who had attached themselves to Judaism in certain ways, although they had not fully converted. His devotion to prayer and helping the poor were two of the three most basic obligations of Jewish people.

It is to this Gentile soldier that God sent an angel in a vision that would reveal His New Creation:

Acts 10:3-6 NIV

One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."

In this vision the angel is commanding Cornelius to dare to reach out to a Jewish man -- a man who is forbidden to so much as come into his house! Cornelius has prayed fervently for God to reveal Himself to him; now the revelation comes in a seemingly impossible assignment!

New Creation:

The very first story that Luke tells us in the opening chapter of his Gospel is about a man who had a similar experience. His name is Zechariah, and in almost every way he was the polar opposite of Cornelius.

- Zechariah was a Jewish man with a long-standing and impeccable ancestry.
- He was a priest who is actually *inside* the great Temple, offering up incense to God.
- He was performing this service at 3:00 p.m., the time of evening prayers.
- The angel told him that God had heard his prayers.
- Then the angel gave him a seemingly impossible assignment: to father a child in his old age with his infertile and aged wife.

Cornelius was a Gentile who could never get close to the Temple, much less set foot in it. But notice how his story compares with that of Zechariah:

- Cornelius is also described as devout and a man of prayer.

- He encountered an angel at precisely the same time of day: 3:00 in the afternoon.
- The angel told him that God had heard his prayers and seen his acts of mercy.
- Then the angel gave him a seemingly impossible assignment -- to reach out to a Jewish man and invite him to his home.

So why would Luke compare these two very different men in such a way? The clue is found in something very special that the angel says to Cornelius:

"Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God."

This is the language of Jewish sacrifice -- precisely the kind of thing that Cornelius *could not participate in because he was not Jewish*. But God is now saying to Cornelius that his prayers are an offering identical to those of ethnic and observant Jews!

The ancient barrier between Jews and the rest of humanity has been replaced by the reality of God's New Creation. Now, a Roman soldier in a pagan city is granted the same entrance into God's Presence as those praying -- at that very moment -- in the Temple in Jerusalem.

A Good Creation

Peter:

The second view of this new reality comes to someone we have come to know quite well: Peter, the apostle and leader of the followers of Jesus.

Acts 10:9-16 NIV

About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. 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. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds.

Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

It would be almost impossible for those of us who are Gentiles to understand just how disturbing -- revolting, even -- this vision must have been for Peter. Here was a dream in which he was being instructed to go against the dietary laws that Jews had observed for centuries -- all the way back to the Exodus! To obey the "Voice" would mean to break with not only his past, but his entire culture, his family, his friends. It was unthinkable.

Except for one thing: he sensed that the "Voice" was that of his Lord!

Good Creation!

So just what was God saying, and showing, to Peter?

The clue to the meaning of this dream-vision is in these words spoken by the Lord to Peter:

“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

When God had called out the Israelites to be His chosen people, He had made a distinction between them and the rest of humanity. Likewise, He had made a distinction between foods that were "clean" and foods that were "unclean." These distinctions were reminders that the Creation itself was polluted and broken. For a time, God would develop His plan to rescue and restore His Creation through a subset of humanity -- people who agreed to be set apart and made "clean" by Him.

But *now* God was showing Peter a brand new thing: the time for such distinctions and separation were gone. When Jesus rose from the dead He became the first of a renewed human race. The old problem of pollution and brokenness had been resolved by His death for all of our sins. Now God's Creation could be what it was always meant to be: *good*.

Peter was about to discover just what that would mean in real life.

Visitors:

Luke tells us that when the vision ended, the Holy Spirit gave Peter specific instructions:

Acts 10:19-20 NIV

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.”

Who were these visitors? Emissaries from Cornelius, of course. Gentiles with an invitation. They introduces themselves and explained their mission:

Acts 10:21-23 NIV

Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

The men replied, "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."

Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along.

Peter found himself walking wide-eyed into God's great rescue mission -- an adventure in God's Good Creation.

A New World in 3-D

The Creator's work:

Two visions to two very different people. What did they have in common? They were both from God. God sent the angel and the dream. God put everything in motion. Neither man would have ever dared to even imagine the things that God told him to do. This was entirely God's doing.

And isn't that the point? God was doing what God did at the very beginning: creating. He was beginning what He will finish when Jesus returns as King:

Revelation 21:5 NIV

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

The New Creation exploded into this tired, prejudiced, suspicious old world. The ancient barrier between races was wiped away in an instant. As Paul would later write:

Galatians 3:26-29 NIV

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

A New World in 3-D:

But it took two visions, two points of view, for this radical new reality to take hold. It took a Gentile and a Jew. It took both of them comprehending the incomprehensible -- daring to step out in faith and departing from the ruling social norms. It took pioneers who were willing to colonize a brand new world.

This is our world. We live in God's good Creation, even while we are surrounded by the old polluted and corrupted creation. He calls you and me to be pioneers like Peter and Cornelius, people who come to see that God is doing something brand new. He is rescuing and restoring people, regardless of their background and failures. He calls us to be the priests who stand in His Presence and offer up prayers on behalf of ourselves and our world.

We'll never comprehend the reality of God's New Creation all by ourselves. We just can't see in spiritual 3-D! But together God can reveal the bits and pieces of what it is that He is doing. And as He does, we can not only see His New World, but become the people whom He uses to make it happen.