

Sermon Series: People in Motion

November 3, 2013

Title: Out of the Box

Text: Acts 10:9-33

Summary: God grants two visions to two very different people in order to usher in the full reality of His rescue of the whole human race. In both cases, people have to be willing to get "out of the box"!

Seeing in 3-D

2 eyes means 3-D:

2 eyes = 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.

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 can only be grasped in 3-D.

Cornelius:

We saw last week that God granted a vision of a whole new world to a very unlikely person. He wasn't a Jewish prophet or teacher. He wasn't a follower of Jesus (yet). In fact, he wasn't even Jewish. Instead, he was an officer in the army that occupied the very land that God had long ago promised to His chosen people, Israel.

In this vision an angel informed Cornelius, the Roman centurion, that God had heard his prayers and had accepted them as an offering -- just like He accepted the prayers of the Jews which were offered in the great Temple every day.

Then the angel instructed Cornelius to send messengers to invite a Jewish man named Simon Peter to be his house guest. Finally, Cornelius' longing to truly know God would be fulfilled.

Seeing God's New Creation in 3-D:

Jesus had commanded His followers to become witnesses to His Kingship. They were to carry this Good News not just to their countrymen, but out to the whole world:

Acts 1:8 NIV

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

So just what would that mean? Did it mean that they would go out into the rest of the Roman Empire to find fellow Jews and persuade them to become followers of Jesus? Or could it mean something as yet unthinkable: namely that God would somehow bring the rest of the human race into His family to become His chosen people?

To learn the answer to this question it would be necessary for God to grant a second vision, one that would enable both Jew and Gentile to see His New Creation in 3-D.

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.

Out of the Box

Walking on the water?

I wonder what was going through Peter's mind as he walked along the shore of the Mediterranean with the emissaries from Cornelius? Every step took him and his Jewish colleagues further from the safe and familiar world they knew and into strange and dangerous new territory.

Perhaps Peter remembered a night some years earlier when Jesus had hurried him and the other disciples into their boat and had ordered them to push off for the far shore of the Lake of Galilee. They had rowed for hours against a rising wind.

For us to understand what it would have felt like to be out on a wild lake, rowing against 4 foot waves in an overcrowded boat, we need to know that to the people of that time large bodies of water were considered a chaotic, uncontrollable place that defied everything good in God's creation. When a storm kicked up, the disciples would have immediately been thinking in terms of a demonic presence raging against them.

Think for a moment about how Jesus had spoken to a storm when on this same lake with His disciples:

Mark 4:39 NIV

He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

Jesus used the same command that He spoke to an unclean spirit in a synagogue. His command was the voice of the world's Creator and King silencing the demonic raging of the storm. And just hours later He dispatched the legion of demons that had possessed a poor, crazed man into a herd of pigs -- pigs that then rushed headlong over a cliff guess where? Into the lake.

So here were Peter and the other 11 disciples, rowing against the raging wind, when all of a sudden they realized that *they were not alone!*

Matthew 14:25-26 NIV

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

Looking over the stern of the boat as it pitched up and down in the waves, all they could think was that this hellish realm had spewed out a vengeful ghost, come to carry them off to a dark watery death!

All except Peter, that is. Matthew tells us that Peter dared to think "outside the box."

Matthew 14:27-31 NIV

But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

"Come," he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

For a few brief instants Peter did something that Peter alone could never do: He walked on water. For a few brief faith-filled instants, and as long as he kept his focus on Jesus instead of the shrieking wind, he joined Jesus as Jesus ruled over His creation. For a few brief instants, Peter experienced God's wonderful New Creation -- previewed in victory over the forces of darkness and destruction.

Out of the Box!

Now Peter faced the same choice: would he look at Jesus or listen to the winds of doubt and tradition -- old voices now that called him back into the brokenness of a world divided between Jew and Gentile? Certainly, everyone he knew was "still in the boat" of that old way of thinking. But he had a Voice -- the Voice he had heard calling him to step out of the boat and onto the water on that dark, stormy night in Galilee. That same Voice was now calling him to get out of the boat and walk into a brand new world.

A day or so later he found himself walking into the house of the centurion, Cornelius:

Acts 10:27-29 NIV

While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He 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. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"

Peter was out of the box.

Seeing in 3-D:

Peter was able to at last begin to grasp that in God's New Creation the ancient barriers between peoples -- Jew and Gentile -- had been abolished.

But it was Cornelius who made the most profound observation as the two men greeted each other:

Acts 10:30-33 NIV

Cornelius answered: "Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.'

"So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

Cornelius understood that not just Peter was present in his home that day. He could say *to Peter*, "Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us." God was **in the house!**

2 eyes = 3-D.

Peter, seeing through Jewish eyes, could finally see that God was welcoming the whole wide world into His Presence.

Cornelius, seeing through Gentile eyes, could finally see that God was *present* -- present to his prayers and present in his home.

What did the two men have in common? Faith. Faith to see and trust what God was showing them. You might put it this way:

2 eyes + faith = God's New Creation in 3-D.

I wonder what God wants to show you?