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Inventing Church: Reality Checks

Isaiah 56:3-8; Acts 9-12

The Hebrew Bible has much in it warning the Israelites to avoid the Gentiles, so as not to be defiled, but the Hebrew Bible has more than one voice. The great Prophet of the Exile, whose words are preserved the latter half of the Book of Isaiah, has this to say. We read Isaiah 56, verses 3-8:

³ *Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,
‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people’;
and do not let the eunuch say,
‘I am just a dry tree.’*

⁴ *For thus says the Lord:
To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,*

⁵ *I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;*

*I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.*

⁶ *And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant—*

⁷ *these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.*

⁸ *Thus says the Lord God,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.*

Last week, in our journey through the Book of Acts, we saw the Jerusalem congregation finally going out to spread the good news beyond Jerusalem. The deacon Philip started a congregation in Samaria, then baptized an Ethiopian, who in turn took the good news to Africa. Other believers traveled as far north as Damascus, in Syria, and began a group there. All that sounds great; it was what Jesus commanded. Unfortunately, the only reason the comfortable Jerusalem-based believers finally branched out was that they were driven out by persecution. First, the crowds stoned Stephen the deacon, which convinced the priestly council that they could use harsh methods to suppress the Jesus followers. A rabbinical student from Tarsus, named Saul,

who had assisted at the stoning of Stephen, began leading gangs of temple guards house to house, dragging any Jesus people he found off to prison.

Then, Saul heard about those believers who had gone to Damascus and decided to follow. He obtained letters from the chief priest, authorizing him to arrest any Jesus followers he found there and started off, accompanied by a team of enforcers. Not far from Damascus, though, a blinding light filled the sky. Saul fell to the ground as a voice said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

“Who . . . who are you, sir?”

“Well, who are you persecuting? It’s Jesus. Look, I’m going to have more to say to you soon, but for now, go on into Damascus, and I’ll send somebody.”

The light disappeared – completely for Saul. He was totally blind. His brute squad, who had seen the light but hadn’t heard the voice, led him by the hand into Damascus, where he fasted for three days, praying and (I would imagine) rethinking his theology in light of an encounter with a man who he knew had been crucified. Meanwhile, a Damascus follower of Jesus named Ananias had a vision of his own, in which Jesus spoke to him. “Ananias, I have a job for you. Go to the street called Straight to a house where a man named Saul of Tarsus is waiting for you.”

“Saul of . . . where?”

“Tarsus.”

“Funny thing about that. There’s somebody with that same name who, we’ve all heard, has come to Damascus to lock us all up.”

“That’s the one. Just go. I have plan for Saul. Yes, he’s caused much suffering for my sake; he will learn what that’s like himself.”

So Ananias went, found the haggard, sightless Saul, told him that Jesus had sent him, then laid his hands on Saul’s head and prayed. Something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see. He said, “Will you baptize me? And then, could I have something to eat?”

There was never anything wishy-washy about Saul. As soon as he’d recovered his strength he went to the Jewish synagogue to argue that Jesus was the Messiah and to bear his own witness to his resurrection from the dead. Saul was a brilliant scholar and theologian, but not necessarily a great people person, with the result that Ananias and the other believers had to lower Saul over the city walls in a basket to keep him from being assassinated by angry Jews. So Saul went back to Jerusalem, to join the believers there.

They were – understandably, I think we can agree – suspicious. The last time the believers had seen Saul was also the last time they had seen some of their friends. But one man gave him a chance. It was that fellow Barnabas – remember, the “son of encouragement”? – who took a chance and sat down with him to hear his story. Then took the further risk of believing it. Then took the yet greater risk of vouching for him before the apostles. Don’t ever think that being an encourager is just giving motivational speeches; true encouragement involves trusting people before they’ve proven themselves worthy of trust, and it’s one of the hardest things we are called to do, and Barnabas is one of the bravest people in Acts. Through his intercession,

Saul was received, upon which he went to the synagogues and started arguing that Jesus was risen and was the true Messiah, just like Stephen had. And he made the Jews just as angry as Stephen had, to the extent that a group started plotting Saul's death. The Jerusalem believers bought Saul a ticket home to Tarsus. So twice in short order Saul had to be bundled out of town for his own safety. That would happen again. A lot.

Now we come to a crucial turning point, not just for the Book of Acts but for the history of religion. Let me start with some background, though. The earliest believers, remember, were all Jews and never imagined being anything else. Their goal was to reform their faith from within, and with that in mind they set themselves to be above reproach as Jews. Yes, the apostles were hated by the priests, but that was because they believed that Jesus – whom the priests had had killed – was the Messiah. And yes, they had opened up their group to include Samaritans, but only reluctantly, once the Holy Spirit had forced their hand by filling the Samaritans as she had filled the apostles. But they were still a branch of Judaism, faithful to the law of Moses in every way.

Well, down the mountain from Jerusalem, on the Mediterranean coast is a port town called Joppa, and for a time Peter left Jerusalem and took up residence there. About sixty miles north of Joppa was the Roman port of Caesarea, where a Roman centurion named Cornelius lived. Cornelius was what was known as a “godfearer” – that is, a Gentile who had been so impressed with the deep faith of the Jews and with the justice and holiness of their God (as opposed to, say, the Roman god Jupiter, who was a serial adulterer), that he began praying to the God of Abraham and helping the poor and supporting the synagogue financially. One day, as this Cornelius was praying, he had a vision of an angel of God. Terrified, Cornelius asked, “What do you want?” In Roman mythology, it was never really a good thing to encounter one of the gods. But the angel said, “God has noticed your gifts and heard your prayers, and he'd like to know you better. Send some people to Joppa, to the house of Simon the Tanner, and ask for the man called Peter to come to you.” The angel left, and Cornelius called for two of his servants.

About noon the next day, down in Joppa, Peter went up on the rooftop to pray. This was normal, by the way. In a time before fans and air-conditioning, the roof was where you went for a breeze, like a front porch here fifty years ago. While Peter was praying, and starting to think about lunch, he had a vision. A large sheet began descending from heaven, and as it neared, Peter could see on it various animals. There was a pig, a rabbit, maybe some shellfish, a reptile or two; a motley selection of wildlife, but they had one thing in common. They were all animals that the Law of Moses forbade the Israelites to eat. A voice from heaven said, “You're hungry, Peter. Here is food. Kill and eat.”

I cannot overstress how important the dietary laws were to the Jews. When Jerusalem had been destroyed 600 years earlier, and the Jews dragged off into captivity in Gentile lands, the laws of kosher food became one way that they maintained their identity as a people and a faith. Kosher was essential to the Jewish identity. The only other laws that were that important were to keep the Sabbath and to have no contact with Gentiles. Assuming this was a test, Peter replied, “Never, Lord! I have never eaten anything unclean or profane and never will!” The voice replied, “If God says something is clean, it is clean. You do not get to call it unclean.” Then the voice spoke again.

“You're hungry, Peter. Here is food. Kill and eat.”

It could still be a test. “Never, Lord! I have never eaten anything unclean or profane and never will!”

“If God says something is clean, it is clean. You do not get to call it unclean.”

This was getting scary. “You’re hungry, Peter. Here is food. Kill and eat.”

Peter’s voice was less sure. “Never, Lord? I have never eaten anything unclean or profane and never will.

“If God says something is clean, it is clean. You do not get to call it unclean.”

[Knock Knock] “Peter? It’s Simon. I’m sorry to interrupt your prayer, but there are some men here from a Roman named Cornelius who wants you to go visit him. I told them that Jews aren’t permitted to go to the homes of Gentiles, because they’re unclean, but they insist on seeing you.”

“I think . . . I think I’m supposed to go with them.”

And so he did. The good Jew went to the home of a Roman, self-consciously went inside, and found Cornelius and all his household waiting. Cornelius told Peter about the angel who had appeared to him and that he’d told him to send for Peter, including exactly where to find him.

“An angel appeared to *you*?”

“That’s right. He said God had heard my prayers.”

“God heard *your* prayers?”

“Yes. And now we’re all gathered to hear whatever God has commanded you to tell us.”

His whole life, Peter had been told to have nothing to do with Gentiles, who were unholy and unclean and unloved by God. “I think . . . I think I’ve had something wrong for a long time,” Peter said at last. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to tell you, but here’s what I have. You’ve probably heard of Jesus of Nazareth, who went around teaching and healing and whom the priests had crucified. Well, I’m his friend. And he’s alive – more alive than any of us. Let me tell you about that.” And so he started to talk about his friend, and as he talked the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and all his household, and they began speaking in tongues, and it was Pentecost all over again.

And Peter said, “You’re kidding. And now I’m going to need to baptize them, aren’t I? Oh, they’re going to love this in Jerusalem.”

This is the high point of our chapters today –Peter’s realization that God loved everyone, even the ones he’d been taught to hate – and I thought about stopping here, but there’s a little bit more to do, so let me wrap up with one more story, partly for the fun of it. Luke, the author of Acts, has a sense of humor.

The Jerusalem believers were *not* excited when Peter came and told them about baptizing Gentiles, but when he had told them the story of his vision and how the Holy Spirit had filled Cornelius and his family, there wasn’t a whole lot anyone could say. Maybe some of the more

far-sighted among them could see that this was going to change everything, but for the time being nothing did change. Cornelius was in Caesarea, and they were in Jerusalem. Besides, they had other things to worry about. King Herod, looking for a way to increase his support among the Jews, arrested the apostle James, brother of John, and had him beheaded. Herod's popularity soared, so he tried again and arrested Peter. It was right before Passover, so Herod didn't kill him right away but left him in prison, under heavy guard. It's disrespectful to execute people on a holiday, I guess. So Peter waited for death, while the church prayed.

That night, as Peter slept in chains between two guards, he saw an angel. You've probably noticed that there were a lot of visions going around, so Peter waited to get the message that the angel had for him. The angel said, "Get up." The chains fell from his wrists. The guards didn't move. "All right, I'll play along." Peter stood, and the angel led him to the door, which swung open. Then the next door. They walked by motionless, unseeing guards, and finally out the front gates. The angel said, "You can find your way home from here? Good. I'm off now."

It wasn't much of a divine message. Peter waited a moment, expecting to wake up, but he didn't. The gate closed behind him, so he started walking. He still hadn't woken up and was starting to think this might be real when he reached the house where the believers were praying. [Knock Knock]. It took a while, but eventually a maidservant – her name was Rhoda – came to the door and looked out. Her eyes widened. Peter. The one they were praying for. On the doorstep. Rhoda slammed the door and ran upstairs.

"Peter's at the door!"

"No, he's in prison. Remember? That's why we're praying."

"No, really. I saw him. Just outside."

"Maybe they already killed him, and you saw his spirit. Or an angel."

"I tell you it was him! On our doorstep! He's out of prison!"

"Well if Peter came to our door, why didn't he come upstairs with you?"

"Because I shut the door!"

[Knock Knock]

Eventually they let him in. He went in, convinced them (and himself) that it was really him, prayed with them, then left town. He needed to stay out of sight for a while. With things this hot in Jerusalem, the Jesus movement was going to have to shift its headquarters for a while. So next week I'll tell you about Antioch.