

STRETCHING THE IMAGINATION....

Acts 11:1-18
Psalm 148
Revelation 21:1-6
John 13:31-35

“What’s next?” As we continue in the Easter season, I think that was the critical question the followers of Jesus were trying to answer, as they sought to figure out what following Jesus meant with all the changes that were coming their way: from his death on the cross, to his resurrection, to his ascension... Jesus wasn’t with them in the same way anymore.

And with the lectionary texts that have been put together today, I think the organizers wanted to emphasize that one of the primary tasks of the Holy Spirit **then and now** was/is to **stretch the imagination of believers as to “what’s next?”** In other words, the Holy Spirit helps a person think about things in a way he or she hasn’t before, bringing them to new depths of understanding.

I’m going to start with our Gospel lesson first today. Our text is the start of the farewell message Jesus gives his closest followers before his betrayal by Judas and the resulting events of Holy Week. Why are we going back to this conversation now?

I think John is giving us a picture of Jesus prepping his disciples for “what’s next?” Jesus **knows** what’s coming and is willingly moving toward it. He **knows** the disciples will soon feel abandoned and bewildered. He **knows** what Judas will do, what Peter will do, he **knows** none of them will come out of the shadows when he could use their love and support. The disciples **didn’t know** what was ahead. We don’t either. Jesus does.

Yet Jesus loves them. He shows his love in doing mundane tasks like feeding them, washing their feet. He talks with them, knowing they will need to ponder and hang on to and imagine what these last words he shares with them mean. He knows he will soon be called on to love in the greatest way possible, by sacrificing his life for them.

So Jesus lets them know that as Judas has left to do what he will do, critical events are falling into place that are part of God’s plan that will result in the glorifying of God and His Son. The disciples can’t go with him. But they will still be his disciples, and the thing that will hold them together through everything coming down the pike is love. Jesus tells them to love one another as he has loved them. How’s that for a challenging stretch of the imagination! What does that mean for how they should treat one another? When they’re afraid? When they’re grieving? When they’re feeling life is out of control? Through big changes?

Now, in turning to our Acts text, if the story sounded vaguely familiar, that proves you were listening on Easter Sunday when we looked at Acts 10. Our text today in Acts 11 is actually a re-telling of the story Peter told in Acts 10.

Who is Peter telling the story to now? He's recounting his experience with Cornelius and his gang of family and friends to leaders and friends in the Jerusalem church. The Jerusalem church was sort of the "mother" church, where it had all started.

The Christians there had bristled when they heard that Peter, a church leader they respected and a circumcised Jew, had entered the home of a non-Jew, an uncircumcised man, and had sat down at table and had eaten with him.

So now, they're calling him on the carpet, demanding an explanation for such behavior, which they think may be the ruination of their reputation.

Remember that Hebrew scripture was clear in the message that God's big-picture plan was to bless all the nations and peoples of the earth, starting with Israel but then spreading out to the ends of the earth.

And remember that over time the Jewish people had twisted God's blessing of them into favoritism, that then grew into racial pride and hatred of everything non-Jewish. Entrenched prejudice took root. Practicing Jews would never enter the home of a Gentile, much less eat with them. Had Peter lost his mind?

Then Peter answers, in a testimony, in a simple witness of what happened.

I think we Christians today often think of conversion to Christianity as a one-time thing where a person makes the initial commitment to Christ. But isn't conversion something that happens whenever someone discovers they are not living the way God wants them to, and repents, turns around and goes the way of God? I see that as a process that the Holy Spirit engineers, throughout the lifetime of a believer.

In this passage, I see three conversions. There is Peter's conversion. God gave him a vision while he was praying, of something like a huge blanket being lowered by ropes at its four corners, and the blanket was full of non-kosher food, stuff the Jews were not supposed to eat.

Then Peter heard a voice, encouraging him to eat that food. He protested! *"No way! I've never so much as tasted non-kosher food."* But the voice responded, ***"If God says its okay, its okay."*** That happened three times before the blanket in the vision disappeared.

Just then, three men showed up at the house where Peter was staying, asking for him to go with them to the house of a God-fearing Gentile asking for Peter to come. Peter sensed the Holy Spirit urging him to go with no questions asked. So Peter went, along with six friends.

Upon arriving at the home of Cornelius, they heard Cornelius' side of the story - of a vision of an angel telling him to go find Simon Peter in Joppa and bring him here. Cornelius was told in the vision that Simon Peter had a message that would save

their lives. So Cornelius had gathered his household together and they were **ready to listen**.

Peter testified that before he'd spoken much at all the Holy Spirit fell on the household of Cornelius, like the disciples had experienced. Peter then remembered the words Jesus had said: ***"John baptized with water; you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*** And Peter reasoned, *"If God gave the same exact gift to them as to us when we believed in the Master Jesus Christ, how could I object?"* Now he understood. The vision now made sense. If God says something is okay, its okay!

Peter's conversion: God plays no favorites! God so loved the world! Share Jesus with whoever will listen.

Cornelius and his household were converted too. They were a God-fearing family that the Holy Spirit was working on. They came to the point where they were ready to listen and obey. When they heard the message of Jesus, they believed and were baptized.

The Jerusalem church leadership also had a conversion. They must have been aware of the scriptures that promised that someday God's blessing would bless other nations. But now they realized that **God had broken through**, and that while they may have been a barrier to that happening before, **now** they wanted to go with God's way. They wanted what God wanted! A stretching of the imagination can result in transformation! Some questions we may ask ourselves: Where are our prejudices? Where are we blocking God from breaking through?

Psalm 148 works to stretch our imagination in considering who God is, how worthy of praise he is! We need this. We often make God too small.

I call this a **"pile-on"** call to praise God. The calls to praise just keep piling on, making the instruction impossible to ignore.

I also think that - too often - we imagine that only humans can praise. The first four verses of this psalm are a call for the heavens to praise God, including God's angel-messengers, God's warriors, as well as the sun, moon, stars and sky. The basis for such a call to praise is found in verses 5 & 6. They are God's creations! By being who or what you are made to be by God, you praise God!

Verses 7-14 then make a call to praise from the earthly realm: elements of nature - fire, hail, snow, frost, wind; and also mountains, hills, fruit trees, cedar trees, wild and domestic animals, creepy crawlers, birds. And then, of course, humans - all people.

The psalm ends with the reasons for praise. God alone is worthy of praise. His radiance exceeds anything or anyone in the heavens or the earth.

Many of you probably realize that St. Francis of Assisi is the author of the hymn *All Creatures of Our God and King*. What a beautiful call to praise!

It is well known that St. Francis loved nature. A story is told of him that while hiking through Italy's Spoleto Valley, he came upon a flock of birds. When they didn't fly away, he decided to preach to them. He reportedly said, *"My brother and sister birds, you should praise your Creator and always love him. He gave you feathers for clothes, wings to fly, and all other things you need. It is God who made your home in thin, pure air. Without sowing or reaping, you receive God's guidance and protection."*

The flock, it is said, then flew off rejoicing. (Then Sings My Soul Special Edition: 150 of the Worlds Greatest Hymns)

Our Revelation passage stretches the imagination a great deal! God wants us to know that this life as we know it is not all there is. And, whereas, many of us grew up picturing heaven as a place where bodiless souls go to be with God, that is not the vision John was given.

While the Bible doesn't give a clear picture of the present condition of those who have died, it does assure us that while away from the body, they are at home with the Lord. (2 Cor 5:8). But this is only an interim state, while they, too, wait for the final Resurrection.

The ultimate goal of God is to raise believers and the earth and heaven to new life.

John saw a new heaven and new earth, transformed! Gone was chaos of any kind. Gone was anything marred or tainted by sin. As John said, *"I saw Heaven and earth new-created. Gone the first Heaven, gone the first earth, gone the sea."* (The Message)

And then, as a number of writers have said, "While the Bible began with a garden it ends with a city." John said, *"2 I saw Holy Jerusalem, new-created, descending resplendent out of Heaven, as ready for God as a bride for her husband."* (The Message) But we're not talking about the kinds of cities we're familiar with, where greed and envy and lust and anger and sloth and pride and vanity often rule the day. Where slums grow. Where people have to be houseless because housing is unaffordable. Where people are victimized. Where people go hungry. Where people are lonely and nameless. There's nothing beautiful about that.

Imagine cities where family relationships, art, political dealings, economic patterns and education were purified of anything evil, where city planning and architecture worked to make the city a garden. Where there was food for all. Where worship of God was a work everyone embraced. Where serving ourselves was no longer the number one priority, but rather serving others. That's a beautiful picture, like a breathtaking bride!

And if one thinks it can't get better than that, listen to these promises.

3-5 I heard a voice thunder from the Throne: "Look! Look! **God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women!** They're his people, he's their God. He'll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good—tears gone,

crying gone, pain gone—all the first order of things gone.” The Enthroned continued, “Look! I’m making everything new. Write it all down—each word dependable and accurate.” (The Message)

To me, this sounds like a promise that one day our faith will become sight. God will live with us once again, as in that first garden, or like when Jesus was on this earth. God will abolish everything that has to do with “the horrible, disgusting and tragic effects of human sin.” (Revelation for Everyone, N.T.Wright)

John continues: **6-8** Then he (Jesus) said, “It’s happened. I’m A to Z. I’m the Beginning, I’m the Conclusion. From Water-of-Life Well I give freely to the thirsty. Conquerors inherit all this. I’ll be God to them, they’ll be sons and daughters to me.” (The Message)

So do these pictures stretch our imaginations about what’s next? I pray they do. And I pray that they lead us to greater worship and witness.