

The Conversion of Peter

Matt. 3:13-17

Acts 10:34-48

Unless you are a very exceptional or a very fortunate person, you have probably had the unfortunate experience of saying something and having something come out all wrong; you've said something that you didn't mean to say. The good news is that if you catch it in time, you can take it back. Written mistakes are another story. They are there forever, and they are public, sometimes very public, like the regrettable newspaper headlines that state that *Kids Make Nutritious Snacks*, or that the *British Left Waffles on Falkland Islands*, or the classified ad for "free farm kittens, ready to eat."

My sermon title today is not particularly humorous, I'm afraid, nor is it a mistake, as I suspect a number of you out there have suspected it might be. It says exactly what I meant for it to say, which is that this is the story of the conversion of Peter. But I can see why you might get that, since in the verses immediately before this it is Cornelius who hears the gospel and comes to believe. He goes from being a devout Roman, which means a polytheist, to a Christian, all because of a vision he has one afternoon while he is praying, and he is told to send to Joppa for a guy named Peter, who will tell him the most amazing story he has ever heard. But while it is Cornelius' conversion that takes center stage, the truth is that God is working on both of them. Cornelius isn't the only one who goes home that day a changed man.

Here's what happened. At almost the very same exact moment that Cornelius was having his vision in one city, Peter was miles away having his own unsettling dream. He had been up on the roof praying, when he saw a sheet come down out of the heavens, and in that sheet was a smorgasbord of all the things that he had previously been forbidden to eat – bacon, sausage, shrimp, scallops – and he heard a voice say to him, "looks yummy, doesn't it? Go ahead, Peter, take a bite!"

Peter couldn't have been more horrified if the heavenly messengers had told him that the Promised Land was really supposed to be the island of Borneo, or that it was perfectly okay for God's chosen people to enjoy the mystic delights of hallucinogenic drugs. Peter was an insider, a Jew's Jew. Maybe he was only a simple fisherman, but he still knew his Torah, backwards and forwards, and he knew just as surely as any professional rabbi did that pork and shellfish and rabbit and camel were off limits. Moses didn't eat them; Elijah didn't eat them. Jesus certainly never suggested weenie roasts, or a clam bake down on the beach. What Peter's vision was suggesting was absolutely unthinkable to him.

And of course, it wasn't really about food. There *was* literal truth to it – bacon wrapped scallops and kielbasa were not only NOT unclean, they were pretty tasty – but that really wasn't the main point of the vision. The main point was much bigger than that. If all food was okay in God's book, simply by virtue of the fact that God created it, then all people were okay, too. There were no unclean, icky, despised, outsiders. No abominations. God was just as big a fan of Gentiles as he was of Jews.

And again, Peter couldn't have been more shocked if angels had told him that the Abominable

Snowman was real. And maybe shocked doesn't even go far enough to convey what must have gone on inside Peter at that moment. You can be objectively shocked. Something can startle the socks off of you, say, seeing a dog fly, and still not touch you personally. Flying dogs might upset your world view some, but it's not going to be emotionally catastrophic for you. This was absolutely devastating to Peter.

Nothing he had ever seen or heard had prepared him for this moment, this revelation that God didn't sort people into separate, distinct piles. Good and bad. Right and wrong. In and out. How many of the stories he had grown up hearing about his ancestors had good guys and bad guys? God's elect and God's enemies? Isaac vs. Ishmael? The Hebrews vs. the Egyptians? The Israelites vs. the Canaanites and Jebusites and Hitites and Amonites, and later the Babylonians and Assyrians and Persians and Romans?

Not even Jesus ever said or did anything to suggest that God had much interest in anyone but them. When he sent the disciples out to practice preaching and teaching and healing, they were only supposed to go to Jewish towns, not to Gentile or Samaritan ones. In Mark when Jesus was accosted by the Syrophenician woman – which was a pejorative term, by the way – and she begs Jesus to heal her daughter, he calls her a dog and tells her that he came for the Jews not people like her. He never suggested that they go across the Jordan or down to Egypt to take the Good News to the people over there.

Peter had been there from the very beginning. He was Jesus' very first disciple and he saw and heard everything that Jesus did. He was present for that first startling pronouncement that the meek would inherit the earth, and he was one of the first to the empty tomb, and he had been there for all of the healings and parables and lessons in between. He saw it all, and heard it all. And right up to the very moment that sheet full of forbidden delicacies came down out of the heavens; Peter might have said that he was an expert. Of all people, Peter understood what God was doing. But this knocked him flat. This was new, and completely contradictory to everything he had previously believed and thought he knew to be true about God. God loved everybody. "Even" the Gentiles, as Luke says.

That was a life-changing moment. Peter's revelation didn't just say to him that they had a much bigger job ahead of them than they had thought, and that they had better get their passports in order and start learning some foreign languages so they could take the gospel to people everywhere. What happened to Peter that day was nothing short of a conversion experience. It meant that he had to rethink everything he had heard Jesus say and watched him do. It meant that he had to rethink God. As JB Phillips said in the title of his old 1960's book, Peter learned that day that his "God was too small," and his own thinking was too limited, too certain, and certainly too prejudiced. Jesus had said repeatedly that following him was all about servanthood and humility, and probably, a whole lot of pride-swallowing, and once again, Peter learned just how true that was.

And for us this stands as a cautionary tale. It sends a word of warning to those of us who find ourselves on the inside, who feel secure that our church upbringing and devotion put us on solid ground in understanding what God is up to, what God thinks, who God is for and who God is against, whether God is a Democrat or a Republican, and what being a disciple is all about. It is

a tale that reminds us that we will never have God pinned down, and that there is a solidly good chance that God will pull the rug out from under us one day and set us on a path we never could have dreamed of or wished for.

It is a reminder that conversion isn't a one-time event. If it was only a matter of believing that Jesus was God and died and rose again from the dead, that would be one thing, but we aren't just baptized into doctrinal standards. We are baptized into a new life, a life of conformity to Christ. And as long as we are human, as long as we are finite and fearful and opinionated, we are never going to understand God completely right. We'll think we have the will of God and this Christian life business all in hand only to be smacked in the face one day with some appalling new insight about God, and our world, and the people we inhabit it with: the earth is round, and we are not the center of the universe. Owning other human beings is wrong. Women are equal to men. God is not an angry, vindictive God with standards so high that we could never meet them. And every new thing we learn, every fresh insight we have, will change us completely. We will be converted once again and have to rethink everything we thought we understood about what it means to be God's people; what ministering to people in the name of Christ means.

It's the beginning of a new year, a new decade, and most of us are conditioned to be thinking about changing ourselves over, making a new start, developing better habits, living in healthier ways. I'm going to encourage you to go one step further: expect to be converted again this year. Expect God to step in the middle of your path one day, and shake up your world, your life.