

“Up Out of the Water” – Mat 3:13-17 & Acts 10:34-43 – Jan 12, 2011

Well, even though we're now on the second Sunday of 2011, it's still appropriate to celebrate a New Year with today's text from Matthew's gospel. It is appropriate because this text represents those that describe the start of Jesus' ministry, and so we start another year of recalling and proclaiming the meaning of his life, and death, and resurrection. Over the past couple of months we've looked at the start of Jesus' ministry, or at least the start of his life, in the gospels. We've reveled in the birth narratives from both Luke and Matthew. We've even looked at John's briefest of accounts. Mark doesn't include those details, but all of the gospel authors agree that the really definable start was at Jesus' baptism by John. Today we just heard Matthew's particular version, with Jesus receiving the power of the Holy Spirit and the affirmation from God as he came up out of the water of baptism.

And today we also heard that the apostle Peter also shares that same understanding - that the message of salvation announced by Jesus began with his baptism by John. The scripture in Acts that we heard is a portion of a sermon Peter preached to a group of people. This portion of that sermon gives a very concise summary of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, “beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced.” Peter also goes on to provide a powerful understanding of the importance of Jesus, claiming that “all the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Now when we hear that phrase, it just doesn't have a lot of impact, does it? As short as Peter's sermon is, we manage to tune out before the end. We've heard it all before, and so our eyes glaze over, our ears click shut, our mind wanders to wonder about lunch. Perhaps in order for us to hear the completely shocking importance of Peter's message it might help to remember what comes before and what comes after. Our passage begins with “then Peter began to speak to them.” The ‘them’ referred to is a large gathering of people, specifically the relatives and friends of Cornelius. But unless we understand just who Cornelius is, and who his relatives and friends were, the impact and importance of Peter's message is lost on us.

If we back up a little bit in the text, we discover Cornelius – a Gentile, a devout Roman, a member of the Italian Guard in Caesarea. Normally, devout Romans would pray to a collection of gods, and they would have a little family shrine at which they would do their praying, but we are told that Cornelius was constantly praying to God – that's “capital-G” God as we know God. Although Cornelius was not Jewish, an angel appeared to him – around 3:00 in the afternoon we are told – and in a divine moment instructed him to send men to Joppa to fetch a man named Simon (Peter).

Around noon the next day, Peter was indeed in Joppa, and we are told he went up onto the roof to pray. We don't know if he went there to feel closer to God, or to get away from some distractions, or perhaps he was merely seeking some peace and quiet. Whatever his reasons, while there on that rooftop Peter got hungry and sent downstairs for some take-out (kosher, of course!) and fell into a trance while waiting. In his trance he saw something like a sheet descending from heaven, full of all kinds of animals – definitely un-kosher. And then a voice – presumably the same voice heard at Jesus' baptism – instructed him, “get up, Peter, kill & eat”. “No way!”, protested Peter, “I've never eaten anything unclean!” The Voice replied, “Way! What God has made clean, you must not call profane!”, and just in case Peter thought it was a bad connection, repeated the same message twice more.

These two incidents – the angels talking to Cornelius and the Voice talking to Peter come together with the arrival of the men from Joppa – we can imagine Peter's vision being broken by the doorbell – they tell him why they are there, he returns to Caesarea with them, and Peter and

Cornelius tell each other about their respective visions. They – and we as well – cannot escape the conclusion that God has moved to bring these two together at this moment, and in preparation for this has opened Peter to a brand new understanding of just how significant Christ, God's Beloved, is – not just for Jewish people, but for all who believe.

And so Peter began to speak to them – Cornelius and his relatives and friends, this collection of Gentiles in a Gentile's house. Peter senses that these Gentiles needed to hear the whole story, and so he gives it to them – the entire gospel, the complete story of God's action in Jesus beginning with his receiving the Holy Spirit and God's affirmation during his baptism by John, continuing through his preaching peace and doing good and healing, including his death by hanging on a tree, being raised by God on the third day and appearing to his witnesses with whom he ate and drank and whom he also commanded to testify he is the one ordained by God. Peter concluded with a reminder that all the prophets testify about Jesus that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. Whew! That's a lot to handle in one sermon, let alone in a summary! The entire Christian story – the complete concentrated message of salvation, that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins.

Did those Gentiles hear the message that they were no longer excluded, but were totally included by God? Apparently so, because if we read on we discover that while Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. In a Pentecost-like event echoing the gospel account, the assembled listeners, who now become the talkers, speak excitedly in various tongues, and all were praising God. In this divine moment Peter realizes that the waters of baptism cannot be withheld from these believers, even though they are not Jews, and all who believe and respond are baptized. Mind you, Peter soon gets himself into all kinds of trouble back in Jerusalem when he reports his actions to corporate headquarters, and the struggle would continue for ages as to whether it was Peter or Paul who was the key figure in bringing the faith to the Gentiles - or the Gentiles to the faith! But that's a story for another day.

For the moment we can instead focus on the reality that the baptism of Jesus was a huge, even unique, turning point in the relationship between God and people. And here in this episode with Peter and Cornelius God provides another huge turning force – and point! – in the history of the Christian faith, and in the history of the world. This is a break-through moment when it becomes clear that what God has done in Christ is not merely for a single people, the Jews; neither is God's action only for those who meet some hugely difficult criteria of faith or who can cross some high threshold of righteousness. Here it is affirmed that through God's redeeming act of grace in Christ Jesus **everyone** who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

Recognize clearly just how sure and certain that declaration is – it is NOT “everyone who believes *can* receive, *might* receive, goes on a list to be considered to receive, is entered in a heavenly lottery to win to receive, ...” This is not the equivalent of that credit card spam, “you are already approved ... to apply” – this is a clear and irrefutable statement that “everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Sadly, throughout the ages there have always been plenty of people who would like to stuff conditions into that message of grace – in the first years many wanted to add the condition that you had to be Jewish before you could believe and receive. Often it has been the ‘right’ race or the correct skin colour that was touted as the necessary condition to receive God's grace. Even today there are plenty of people who would still like to stuff conditions into that clear and unconditional declaration – conditions like “you have to believe hard enough”, or “you have to believe in a particular way”, or “we'll act as your agent and apply for the forgiveness for you”, or

“we’re the central distribution center for God’s forgiveness, and we’ll let you know when you can have some”. How sad, especially when the real declaration is so clear, so simple, so available – “everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins in his name.” “All who believe” ... not some, not a few, not just the ones we like, or think appropriate, or worthy, or whatever. “All who believe, ...” While that seems to be a very frightening thought to some, it is an incredibly life-giving thought to us.

And so here we stand on the brink of another year, looking forward with some angst and trepidation about how the year will unfold. While there is always some uncertainty about what events we will experience, there is no uncertainty at all about our relationship with God. In that moment when Jesus came dripping up out of the waters of the Jordan, when God affirmed him as the Beloved, the Christ, the promise of our redemption and reconciliation with God was also affirmed. That promise was later sealed and confirmed in Christ’s death and resurrection, and delivered in our first moment of belief, however halting and incomplete that might have been.

Now, strengthened by the assurance that no matter what else might befall us through the coming year, and years, that our reconciliation with God is complete, we are freed to go forth and proclaim as Peter did that that reconciliation is there for everyone who believes in Christ. Just as Jesus came up out of the water of his baptism and went forth into the world proclaiming God’s love and mercy through acts of loving kindness and healing, so too are we called to emerge from the waters of our baptism and go out into the community around us doing the same. The message of God’s grace is there for the taking, and for the sharing. May God grant us the wisdom and strength to do both.