

# *Straight from the "Hart"*

May 22, 2022



## **Call to Worship**

Lay Reader: Come to the God of all creation with grateful hearts, for he has envisioned and created a universe that reflects his glory – a vision of hope for harmony and wholeness. Come and refresh your hope, lest we grow weary from the strife that seems to dominate our world. Come and receive power to be transformed to live lives filled with worship as we turn our vision toward him.

Music Leader: Therefore, for this hour at least, let's let go of the struggles of the week past, the worries of the week coming, and allow the warm love of God to become the overwhelming thoughts of this hour. Let's sing about our desire to allow God's presence being the light of our days and nights.

## **Music**

### **Be Thou My Vision**

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;  
naught be all else to me, save that thou art.  
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,  
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true word;  
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord;  
thou and thou only, first in my heart,  
great God of heaven, my treasure thou art.

Great God of heaven, my victory won,  
may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun!  
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,  
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

CCLI # 2561297

## **Theme**

Trying to stay focused while living in a world that likes to distract is quite a challenge. Dennis Miller was trying to teach this responsibility to their very young son. When they felt he was old enough, they allowed him to walk to a friend's house a few blocks away, with the provision that when he arrived, he would call home to say he had safely arrived. As the son grew more comfortable with his journey, he started forgetting to call. The first time, Dad called to be sure he had

arrived, and told him the next time he forgot to call, he would have to come home.

A few days later, the telephone again lay silent. Dad did not want to ruin his great time for such an understandable mistake. So he went to the telephone and prayed for wisdom. As he dialed, the Lord seemed to tell him, "Treat him like I treat you." When he heard the phone ring once, he hung up. A few seconds later the phone rang. "I'm here, Dad!" "What took you so long to call?" "We started playing and I forgot, but when I heard the phone ring, I remembered." "I'm glad you remembered, he said, "Have fun."

Too many people see God as someone who is eager to punish and exclude us the second that we forget to do what he asks of us. I wonder how often and in what ways he "rings in" as a reminder that he is there, waiting to hear from us, hoping we will reconnect with him amid all the distractions of life.

For this child, the distraction was the eagerness to start playing with his friend. Often, the more serious distractions can come from the voices that surround us. In most of our younger days, that was called peer pressure. Friends (or people we think are friends) that encourage us to do what they think is fun, or right, or exciting, -- whatever is good in their eyes. And sometimes it is good, but sometimes it can tempt us to travel down unfortunate paths.... The danger increases multifold today as our peers are expanded to "friends" or groups that are online from all over the world, some that teach some very negative qualities -- yet making their agenda sound like a reasonable, honorable and noble cause, especially to younger, impressionable minds who then feed on more and more of these sites, making the opinions seem leading to tragic results ... We must be careful who and what we listen to.

George Will wrote about the time that umpire Babe Pinelli called Babe Ruth out on strikes. Ruth argued with the weight of popular opinion [of peer pressure] -- "There are 40,000 people here who know that last pitch was a ball --- tomato head." Pinelli, unintimidated by the star player and unmoved by dissenting voices, replied with what he knew was the truth -- "Maybe so, but mine is the only opinion that counts".

Today we look at two men who were able to look beyond their traditional training, the surrounding peer pressure, the cultural norms that surrounded them -- and they listened to what God envisioned -- the only opinion that mattered. Here begins the story of the first man....

## Reading (1)

In Caesarea, there was a devout, praying, generous charity-giving, God-fearing, Italian regiment centurion Gentile named Cornelius. He had a vision of an angel telling him that his prayers and gifts to the poor have been noticed by God, and to send men to Joppa to fetch Simon Peter who was staying at Simon the tanner's house by the sea. Cornelius called for the two servants and a devout soldier who was among those who attended him. He told them his vision of the angel and its message and sent them to Joppa. When they came back with Peter and some believers -- Peter went inside and found that Cornelius had gathered a large number of people. Peter asked why they sent for him. Cornelius retold his angelic story, thanked Peter for coming, and concluded, "Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

(Summary of Acts 10:1-8, 27, 29-33)

Pastor: We understand from that description that Cornelius was sincerely seeking God, and God has begun the process of answering his search with the life-giving water of Jesus, just as last week, Jesus himself offered his grace to the woman at the well. Water that earlier in Ezekiel and later in Revelation is described as the river of the water of life -- flowing from the sanctuary and throne of God as clear and bright as crystal, nourishing the tree of life, whose leaves will bring healing, life, and wholeness to the nations, of those who in worship draw near to God. (See Revelation 21:1-2, Ezekiel 47:12)

### Special Music: **The Crystal Fountain**

So long of thirst my weary soul did languish,  
and naught of earth my soul could satisfy;  
But when to Christ I turned in bitter anguish,  
I found in him the answer to my cry.

#### **Refrain**

Oh I have found it, the Crystal Fountain,  
where all my life's deep needs have been supplied;  
so freely flowing from Calv'ry's mountain,  
and now my soul is full satisfied.

I tried the world with its alluring pleasure.  
It mocked my soul, all burden'd down with care.  
But grace and help in blessed, boundless measure I  
've found in Christ, the Fount of Life, so fair.

#### **Refrain**

Dear fainting heart, of, do not longer tarry,  
 Come now to Christ and drink, your soul renew.  
 He knows your need, the heavy load you carry.  
 This blessed Fount is open now for you.

**Refrain**

**Reading (2)**

Lay Reader: Jumping to the end of the story -- Peter concluded "all he was commanded to tell them" by saying that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name. While he was saying this, and to the astonishment of the Jewish Christians that had come with Peter, the Holy Spirit came upon all who heard the message -- for they were praising God just like when the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Jewish believers --

(Summary of Acts 10:43-47)

**Pastor:** Cornelius and company discovered the joy of Jesus. When Haldor Lillenas accepted Christ at age 21 he increasingly began to write music that expressed his faith and joy. In this song, Wonderful; he captures the joy of his salvation -- and expresses the kind of joy Cornelius and company must have felt that day in Caesarea.

**Music:**

**Wonderful**

Oh, my heart sings today, sings for joy and gladness.  
 Jesus saves, satisfies, takes away my sadness.  
 Guilt is gone; peace is mine, peace like to a river.  
 Jesus is wonderful, mighty to deliver.

**Refrain**

Wonderful, wonderful, Jesus is to me! Counselor,  
 Prince of Peace, Mighty God is he!  
 Saving me, keeping me, from all sin and shame,  
 wonderful is my redeemer, praise his name!

Once a slave, now I'm free, free from condemnation.  
 Jesus gives liberty and a full salvation.  
 Now the sins of the past have been all forgiven,  
 and my name is inscribed in the book of heaven.

**Refrain**

Living here with my Lord in a holy union,  
 Day by day, all the way holding sweet communion;

Oh what change grace hath wrought in my lowly station  
since my soul has received full and free salvation.

### Refrain

**Music Leader:** So as the Spirit fell on the original disciples and on those gathered with Cornelius, let us prepare our hearts to pray that God's Spirit will again come on us and continue shaping us according to his will...

**Prayer Music**    *Spirit of the Living God*

### Prayers

Lord we are prone to move in the circles of our comforts - surrounding ourselves and listening to like-minded people. It is helpful and empowering to join others to reinforce in our lives our convictions of what is good and right. Yet there is always a danger and temptation that over time we tend to isolate ourselves from others and close ourselves off to something new you that you may be wanting for us and from us. We pray that we will always seek to align our purposes with yours, leading us by your love. Stir us to your noblest visions; bring us closer to Christ and each other. Strengthen peacemakers; comfort those who mourn; feed to the hungry, bring hope to the oppressed, make us hungry and thirsty for justice, mercy, and kindness. Restore and renew all that is feels worn out and run down. Show us how to use what you have gifted us with to reach people in need. **Praises and Petitions**

\* Ukraine, \* Senseless violence caused by hate, \* storms up north of us, \* Earl asks prayers for Chuck who has broken hip surgery, for the family and friends of Don Arnold who died tragically last week, for Terri's friend Carol's sister Janet -- recovering from what was supposed to be a routine procedure but wasn't, and for Jan Martin's 15 year old grandson who with others who all survived without physical injury an ATV fire that was completely destroyed. \* A couple weeks ago a regular online viewer asked that we pray for a daughter's friend who was going to Ukraine with supplies. He is now in Kyiv with volumes of stuff and helping out... continue to pray for his safety. **SLIPS** There are others on our hearts and minds, and we pray for them as well, knowing that you will accomplish your purposes in your time. Meet our weaknesses with your resurrection power and our failures with your forgiveness. Repair the fabric of life and bring to completion the work you have begun in us, for you are our source, our goal, our hope and our joy, who taught how to live by teaching us to pray: **LORD'S PRAYER**

## Introduction to and Responsive Reading

Lay Reader: Paul summarizes where we will end up today – writing of God’s grand vision of a world that is united under Jesus Christ – explaining that Jesus was not only the predicted Jewish Messiah, but the Savior of **all** peoples. Therefore, even Gentiles were to be accepted and included among the Jewish Christians. Read responsively with the pastor on the yellow font, while I lead you on the white.



## Bible Responsive Reading (L - Lay Reader, C – Congregation)

L: Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, gave us new life with Christ even when we were spiritually dead in transgressions —

**P: it is by God’s grace that you have been saved...**

L: remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth ... were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship... and foreigners to the covenants of the promise,

**P: You were lost, without hope and without God in the world.**

L: But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away from God have been brought near to God through the blood sacrifice of Christ...

**P: For Christ himself is the reason we are now at peace.**

L: He has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier of hate, the dividing wall of hostility...

**P: His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two groups,**

L: thus making peace, and after they became one body, to reconcile both of them to God. He did this through his death on the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away from God and peace to those who were near to God.

**P: For through Christ we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.**

L: Consequently, you are no longer visitors, foreigners, and strangers, but citizens together with God’s holy people.

**P: You belong to God’s family.**

(From Ephesians 2:4-5,11-14,15b-19 (NIV, ERV))

Music Leader: Like Jesus, Paul’s aspiration was to bring together people who had, to put it mildly, very incompatible world views -- and unite them under the

one Creator God and Spirit through the one Lord Jesus, and for these different people to unite to work together in ways that would reach all people with God's amazing grace. If you are comfortable standing, stand and stretch before the sermon as we sing, *Together We Serve*.

### **Music # 2175**

### ***Together We Serve***

Together we serve, united by love,  
 inviting God's world to the glorious feast.  
 We work and we pray through sorrow and joy,  
 extending your love to the last and the least.

We seek to become a beacon of hope,  
 a lamp for the heart and a light for the feet.  
 We learn, year by year, to let love shine through  
 until we see Christ in each person we meet.

We welcome the scarred, the wealthy, the poor,  
 the busy, the lonely, and all who need care.

We offer a home to those who will come,  
 our hands quick to help, our hearts ready to dare.

Together, by grace, we witness and work,  
 remembering Jesus, in whom we grow strong.

Together we serve in Spirit and truth,  
 remembering love is the strength of our song. CCLI # 2561297

### **Sermon Accepted: Gentiles**

Two weeks ago, we heard of Saul's transformation from persecutor of Christians to proclaimer for Christ – primarily to the Gentiles. Something that would never have happened if some Jewish Christians did not stand up and advocate for him. Last week you heard Jesus cross a religious-racial barrier to offer grace to Samaritans. Today we have already heard how Cornelius listened to God by ignoring the typical cultural attitude toward Jews and sent for Peter. We heard the start of the story, and the end of the story -- now we need to hear the middle.

At this point, the church is still primarily Jewish Christ believers, who you may remember were scattered

**(See Acts 8:1-4ff, 9:32-43)**

when persecution broke out against Christians. But rather than treat their struggles of life as a defeat of faith, wherever they went, they proclaimed the victorious grace of God over sin and death through his Son Jesus Christ, so the number of Christians did not decline, but grew. Simon Peter went on tour to visit these new

believers, healing people as he went. His travels took him to Lydda, Someone in nearby Joppa heard he was there, and they sent for him to heal a believer named Tabitha (or Dorcas, depending on the language). She had used her skills as a seamstress to make coats and other clothes for widows and those in need. She had died, but Peter raised her anyway. Then he stayed in Joppa with Simon the tanner. Even this would raise our eyebrows of the Jewish Christians. All those animals, that blood -- Jewish law would forbid being around such a home working with dead animals.

It was while Peter stayed here that Cornelius had his angelic vision to send for Peter. While the trio Cornelius **(See Acts 10:10-23)** sent neared the end of their 40-mile journey, Peter was in his daily prayers and had a vision of his own. He saw foods that for him were religiously forbidden. God was saying declaring them pure and edible. Peter protested -- he had never eaten such unclean food. God told him not to call anything impure that God has made clean. It is a hard lesson to change a world view that has been instilled in you as a truth from birth.

It would have been easy for Peter to dismiss this vision as an tempting desire to acclimate his faith with the powerful influence of the Greco-Roman culture and their values that were challenging and influencing his lifelong Jewish training and corrupting his faith, and difficult to believe it is a God-given vision of truth. It would have been much more comfortable to settle for the letter of his life-long faith training and not its new Spirit in Christ.

I told you the story of Edwin, whose fancy car instructed him by voiced phrases. Initially amused when what he called “the little woman” gently remind him to fasten his seat belt and tell him he was low on fuel. On one trip he even began by nodding and thanking the computer voice. But looking at the gauge he pressed on. Every few minutes the car computer would again given him the gentle nudge about the level of fuel. Even though it was the same recording, to Edwin it was transforming from a sweet reminder to an irritating nag. Exasperated, he pulled over, reached under the dash and “pulled out the little woman’s vocal cords.” “That’ll teach her.” he said as he resumed his journey. A couple miles later the car sputtered to a stop, and in Edwin’s imagination, he could hear the silent laughter of the little woman coming from under the dash. Edwin learned the hard way that the little voice that is inside of us, although ignored and even disconnected, often tells us exactly what we need to hear and obey...



Cornelius overcame his Gentile prejudices and preferences, heard the right voice, listened and sent for Peter. God has to show Peter the same unclean/clean vision of food three times, but fortunately for us, he too heard the right voice and listened, giving an opportunity for acceptance of and ministry to the Gentiles to be officially ratified by the church.

Just as Peter was finishing his vision, the men from Caesarea arrived. Peter took that as an additional sign to go with them, which he did. Peter enters the crowded room of eager to listen to him Gentiles -- and Peter realizes that the vision of food was not only about food, but about people. He begins by saying, "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." (Acts 10:28-29) and then he added, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. You know the message God... announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all..." (Acts 10:34b-36)

Then Peter began to recount the news of Jesus Christ beginning with John the Baptist and ending with his resurrection appearances and noted as we heard earlier that "all the prophets testify about [Jesus --] that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." (Acts 10:43)

The Holy Spirit came on all the listeners, Peter's companions were astonished - and Peter nailed down the whole message of the day by saying, "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." (Acts 10:47) and they stayed there a few days.

News about the Gentiles entering the body of Jewish Christian believers spread quickly. It reached Jerusalem before Peter did, and they were not happy. This issue had been fiercely debated for centuries, and in many way, still is today: Do we preserve the purity of our faith by closing ourselves off from other people, faiths, and cultures? Or do we seek to become a light to the nations by throwing wide the doors and inviting all creation to return to the worship of its one true Creator? In the days after the exile and in the days of Jesus, the former thought (of walling off from others) took precedence, and this is why when Peter did arrive back in Jerusalem, he was heavily criticized for entering the home of and eating with people who were not a part of the Jewish heritage.

**See Acts 11**

(Jesus was highly criticized for this too, by the way).

A Chicago bank once asked for a letter of recommendation from a Boston investment house concerning a young Bostonian they were considering for executive employment. The investment house could not say enough about the young man. His father, they wrote, was a Cabot; his mother a Lowell. Further back was a happy blend of Saltonstalls, Peabodys, and other of Boston's finest families. Coming from all these old money bluebloods, they recommended him without hesitation. The Chicago bank sent a note back saying the given information was inadequate. They were considering the young man for work, not for breeding purposes."

Faithfulness to national and religious bloodlines are no longer the way to purity and salvation, if it ever was. God paves the way through his amazing, transforming grace -- offered through a believing relationship in Jesus Christ. Salvation is not just for people who are just like us, who have the same tastes, the same culture, the same political party, the same opinions. God looks at the heart. At best, all we can do is guess at someone's heart based on external words and actions, but we can never see enough and know enough to be the umpire. The circumcised made all kinds of assumptions about the non-circumcised. But they did not know their heart's desires, and because they sought to isolate themselves from them - they could not even begin to draw accurate conclusions on their external behaviors.

Therefore, Peter recounted his experience with the vision and with Cornelius and the Spirit coming upon them and then asked his critics -- "So if God gave them the same gift that he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:17)

In a world where people are encouraged to stick to their guns (sometimes literally) no matter what, and to never change their mind about anything, it is nice to hear a story where people are willing to grow in a radically different direction under Christ's transforming hand. Perhaps it is because they remember so well that we are all products of grace. I suspect it was not a unanimous decision of heart and attitude when Luke records their response when they heard Peter recount his experience: they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, *even* to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life." (Acts 11:18) (emphasis added) "Even" is an important word in that sentence. It indicates how unbelievably difficult it would be for the Jewish Christians to believe others so very unlike themselves could be considered potential prospects for the faith.

And the still scattering news of the gracious forgiveness offered through Jesus spread to a great number of people, and now began to include more and more Gentiles. (Acts 11:21), including Antioch, the third largest city behind Rome and Alexandria, a city known for its loose living in its worship of pleasure. Christian travelers bravely ignored what would be the naturally expected criticism -- that they welcome and eat with sinners, and they gave them that city the exact message they needed and were waiting for, showing them that power, hope, help, salvation and true joy could be found in Jesus Christ, who had only recently (for them) become a man, suffered, died, and conquered the grave in Palestine. Antioch became the metropolis of Gentile Christianity, and it was here, in the middle of this awful moral setting, that our faith made great strides in moving from a local to a world religion.

This news about Antioch also reached Jerusalem. They sent Barnabas (the Encourager) to Antioch to check it out and he saw what God's grace had done and he "encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts." (Acts 11:23b)

Barnabas went and recruited Paul to come and they spent a year teaching a great number of people. And it was here that disciples were first called Christians. (and you need to "spit" when you say the word -- it was initially meant as a derogatory label -- "those Christ people", just as the Protestant name was initially a negative descriptor of "protesters against faith", and those Methodists - a nickname used to mock their methodical approach to faith... in each case, insults that were

And on a final note: Due to a prophetic prediction of a severe famine, the believers of Antioch - as were able - took up the first UMCOR \* offering (well it doesn't say UMCOR), but they sent their gift to provide help for believers living in Judea who would be suffering the effects of the famine.

\* UMCOR = United Methodist Committee on Relief, whose mission is to bring relief wherever people are suffering from natural or human-made disasters.

The primarily Jewish Christian church in Jerusalem, having learned from Peter, instead of criticizing Gentiles coming in to the church, they sent Barnabas. "the gracious encourager" to the them. In turn, the cosmopolitan church in Antioch, made up of some Jews, but mostly Gentiles, Greeks, barbarians, and etc. returned an offering to help with the coming famine. Early Christians set aside differences that would never be overlooked in their culture and religious cultures, and in the name of Christ, they connected and cared beyond local, beyond nation, beyond

race, beyond all differences, offering resources, time, energy, and effort to help others in their time of need. May we do the same.

**Prayer** Let's pray. Lord, so long ago, to a people thought completely incompatible with faith, your Spirit is poured out on their hearts, proving they were also accepted by you -- let us also be filled and live in step with the Spirit's guidance, demonstrating to *all people* -- your grace and love and holy character and your intense sacrificial desire to be in relationship with all of your humanity. Amen.

Let's stand as comfortable and sing that we are willing to answer the call to be ready to work together to build bridges -- to show and spread Christ's love -- to all people.

**Music Filled with the Spirit's Power (to God of the Ages)**

**Blessing** Now may God, whose love -- like rolling waves -- is never ceasing -- always refreshing -- bathe you as in clear, calm, living streams of water. May his gracious forgiveness fall over you -- so that the borders of failure, of opposition, and of incompatibility may be washed away and you are renewed in the tides of his mercy. **Amen.**