

Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism³⁵ but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.³⁷ You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. (Acts 10:34-38)

Christians Have Epiphanies

Have you ever had an epiphany? Do you know what I mean? You had been turning something over in your mind, maybe for years, and suddenly, you put it all together. One of my professors told us once about an epiphany he had. After years of thinking and wrestling, his great realization was this: tests don't have to be fair. Another kind of epiphany is when you always knew something in your head but it didn't have much impact in your life. Then you experienced whatever it was and suddenly it was real and powerful for you. In a minor way, I've had that kind of experience when I've visited places like Arlington National Cemetery or the Arizona Memorial in Hawaii. We all know that thousands of Americans have given their lives to secure our freedom. But when you stand in a place like that, you understand on a much deeper level just how true that really is. Have you ever had an epiphany?

Why do we call it that? Epiphany is a Greek word that means that something is made clear or visible. We're in the Epiphany season right now. This season reminds us that God made himself visible for us when he came to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Every time a new sinner comes to realize that, he or she has a kind of epiphany. But that isn't the end of the line for us. We Christians can have epiphanies all through our lives on this earth as we come to appreciate more and more of what God tells us. It's a sign of a living and active faith. **Christians have epiphanies.**

I.

Our reading for today really shows us two different epiphanies for two different Christians, Peter and Cornelius. **Christians have epiphanies. What were theirs like?** The first epiphany in our text is that of the apostle Peter. Now, he had had other epiphanies. He had that thunderclap of realization when he confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. On the day of Pentecost Peter was the one who got up and preached the mighty sermon that God used to convert three thousand people. That day, Peter turned a corner in his faith that day and became a great leader among the apostles. But that doesn't mean he ever finished learning more about Jesus. Almost every time we see him, he overcomes some weaknesses or incomplete part of his faith. That is very true today.

God sent Peter a vision of a sheet lowering down from heaven every kind of unclean animal – all the stuff that Jews weren't supposed to eat. Then a voice told him to kill and eat those forbidden animals. When he argued, the voice said, **"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."** He saw this vision three times. Almost as soon as it was done, he received an invitation to go to the home of Cornelius. Cornelius was a gentile. He was everything that Jews considered to be unclean. But Peter understood God's message and he went. When he arrived, Cornelius had gathered his family and friends to hear the gospel from Peter.

That's when Peter had his epiphany. He said, **"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right."** Now, this wasn't new information for him. He had heard Jesus say, **"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."** On the day of Pentecost when he preached that great sermon, he specifically mentioned the fact that some of his listeners were gentile converts. Peter's epiphany was not that he suddenly understood a point of doctrine that he had never heard before. No, his epiphany was how true it is. Suddenly, he realized how real and important this was going to be for God's church and that this was a part of the work God intended for them to do. It all came home for him in a powerful way. That impact caused him to proclaim Christ to Cornelius and his family and then to baptize them. His work led directly to the other epiphany in our reading this morning, that of Cornelius.

This was a different kind of epiphany. Cornelius was one of those gentiles who had come to share the Jewish faith. He was centurion in the Roman army. Roman soldiers tended to serve long deployments, sometimes five to ten years. So he was probably living in Israel when John the Baptist and then Jesus began their ministries. Peter says, **“You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.”** In fact, he says, **“You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.”** Cornelius knew about John and Jesus. He even knew the gospel. So what was the problem?

He didn't believe it, yet. Cornelius was an Old Testament believer. He knew the prophecies of the coming Savior but even though he knew about Jesus, he didn't understand that Jesus was that Savior. He knew what Jesus had done and what he had claimed to be, but he didn't grasp that it was true. He didn't understand that it was all for him. So God sent Peter to connect the dots for him. Then Cornelius knew and believed. Suddenly, Cornelius had the peace that Jesus came to give. Suddenly, he understood who Jesus was and why he lived and died and rose again. He showed his faith by being baptized that very day.

You know what both of these epiphanies have in common? They were the work of the Holy Spirit. Peter did not make Cornelius a believer. He did not change Cornelius' heart or convince him of something through great arguments. God worked through Peter's message and gave Cornelius faith in Christ. Peter himself didn't come to his realization through hard work or dedication. God gave him the gospel. And God put him in a situation in which that word worked in his heart. The Holy Spirit matured his faith so that he had a deep understanding and appreciation of what God had done. For Peter, this was a step in a lifelong process of spiritual growth. All that growth came from God. All true spiritual epiphanies do.

II.

You didn't come here today just to hear Bible history stories. You came here to give the Holy Spirit a chance to work on your faith. Like Peter, you and I are taking steps every day in our spiritual growth. Sometimes, we have these great epiphanies. Sometimes, our growth is slower and less obvious. But all through our lives here on this earth, God shows us our Savior and works in our hearts through the gospel. He changes us and leads us to understand him better. Whether it's a big moment like Peter had or just a lot of little steps, all those things are kinds of epiphanies. **Christians have epiphanies. What would ours be like?**

The first and greatest epiphany is the one that Cornelius experienced: God leads us to know that Jesus is our Savior. Part of that is teaching us the story. Every Sunday, you hear a gospel lesson. You studied the life of Christ in Sunday school and Lutheran elementary school. I hope you read about Jesus in your personal devotions and that you come to adult Bible class and learn more. But not one of those lessons is complete until you understand not just what Jesus did and said, but what it means: he is the Savior of the world. That implies the greatest epiphany of all: he is your Savior. He died and he rose for you. He was baptized and anointed with the Holy Spirit, he went around preaching and teaching and doing miracles so that you would trust in him and have eternal life.

Day by day, we grew in that knowledge. It matters, because we're all dying. One of the greatest privileges I've had is serving dying Christians who firmly confessed their faith in Christ. It has amazed me how fearless they were, how ready to meet their Lord. God grant every one of us that strength and trust when the time comes. But don't wait until then to seek the epiphanies. Because sin does a lot more to us than just kill us. It tortures us here, too. It makes us feel horribly guilty. Every one of us is a sinner. Most of us have sins that we fight against and still commit over and over again. Those sins might have a permanent effect on our lives. But Jesus gives us peace. In our baptism, God gave us the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. God applied to us the perfect life he lived. God applied to us the death he died. God applied to us the resurrection of our Savior. So all that sin is washed away, just like bath water drains all the filth of your body away. You are forgiven and free. And one of the greatest epiphany experiences we can have is peace in our minds and hearts for the sins we have committed.

But in our baptism, God gave us the life of Christ, not just to cover our sinful lives, but also to give us power to live a new and holy life. Baptism is the gospel, so it is God's power. Jesus now lives inside us. He actively fights against our sin. He gives us the gifts we need to serve him. He leads us deeper into his word. He gives us a sense of wonder and awe at all that he has done. He guides and directs our lives so that we have

those moments when we suddenly appreciate all that God has said. Those moments of insight and conviction, those epiphanies are keystone events in our lives of faith.

Like he did with Peter, God leads us into an epiphany about his work: it is for all people. Now we all know that? But what would it mean for that lesson to hit home right now? It would mean having a heart like the heart of Jesus. He loves sinners. He loves them so much that he left heaven to win them. He loves them so much that he spent three years traveling by foot to visit isolated villages, sleeping on the ground, eating whatever was put before him, so that he could heal the sick and drive out demons and comfort the grieving with the good news that he was their Savior. Christians have epiphanies. Those epiphanies include a Christ-like love for the people around us.

Do we love each other like Jesus loved us? When fellow Christians are grieving, are we quick to pray for them? Are we quick to offer them a shoulder to cry and an ear to listen? Are we quick to do what we can to help them? Do we love the people around us like Jesus did? Are we excited, like Peter was, that God intended the gospel to go out to everyone? I hope we are. But I know that I am not always like that. I still need to grow in my faith because too often, I'm too afraid to comfort, or too lazy to reach out, or just plain too self-absorbed to even notice opportunities to share Jesus, let alone to love people who need to hear. Are you like that?

That's just sin. I know it and so do you. But that sin is why Jesus came. He was baptized and anointed with the Holy Spirit so that he could tell us who he was and what he came here to do. Then he died and paid for all that sin. Then he rose and God declared that it is gone forever. Then he came to us in the waters of holy baptism and he truly washed our sins away. We died with Christ in our baptisms and we have now risen with Christ to live a new and holy life. A life of growing in our love for him. A life of growing in our understanding of what he wants us to do and to be. A life of love for each other in here, and for all those out there who still need to hear. For as long as we live, we will need God to give us epiphanies – we will need God to work in our hearts so that we understand his Word and love the people he sent us to serve.

He will do that. Do you know how? By what we're doing right now. That's the lesson of Peter and Cornelius. Their epiphanies came through the Word of God, through the gospel. God showed Peter that he wants gentiles like us in his kingdom. God showed Cornelius that Jesus is his Savior. God shows us those same things. Every time he shows us his love, every time he shows us Jesus, every time he shares the gospel with us, he works in our hearts. He breaks down our sin and unbelief. He opens our minds and hearts to understand and to trust. He gives us the will to live for him. My friends, every time you see Jesus, it's an epiphany. Treasure those moments. Store them up in your heart. Share them with each other and with the world. Amen.