

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Stumbling: Sidetracks”

Dr. Jay Howell

Acts 10:17-33

September 11, 2022

We're in the middle of our series “Stumbling,” and we've been talking about the messy walk of faith. That can mean the messy walk of faith we take as individuals, whether from doubts or struggles or whatever it might be. And that's where we started, how an individual's faith can be and usually is messy, but also how the good news is that Jesus is right there in it with us and loves us, that Christ calling us into faith is not the same thing as saying that we have to be 100% perfect or certain all the time. That can be what it means for faith to be messy.

And it can also mean the messy walk of faith that Christians take together, which kind of makes sense. You take a bunch of messy, stumbling people individually and put them together, it's not like you should expect an institution of pristine precision. Lo and behold, this life of faith shared together is just as messy, if not more so. It has a name—we call it the church.

So in these later weeks of this series, we're spending a few weeks in the Book of Acts, a particular section of it. It's a story that changes everything in the life of the church, but it comes about in just about as stumbling, inexact a way you might imagine, but through it, we see God by his Spirit leading the church through every doubt and every stumble. Let's go to God's Word together.

¹⁷ Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. ¹⁸ They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. ¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Look, three men are searching for you. ²⁰ Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.' ²¹ So Peter went down to the men and said, 'I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?' ²² They answered, 'Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.' ²³ So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging. The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. ²⁴ The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshipped him. ²⁶ But Peter made him get up, saying, 'Stand up; I am only a mortal.' ²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; ²⁸ and he said to them, 'You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?' ³⁰ Cornelius replied, 'Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I

was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. ³¹ He said, “Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. ³² Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.” ³³ Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.’
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The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Peter shouldn't have been there. That's the long and short of it. There's no shortage of reasons why Peter should *not* have been where he was. He had just followed a few people who he didn't know to a whole other town 40 miles away, and then he finds himself in the home of a man who he also does not know, surrounded by many other people who he also does not know, and then on top of it, even he had known who they were, he shouldn't have associated with them in the first place. Peter shouldn't have been there.

If you were with us last week, you'll remember the first part of this story. It started with two visions given to two men of faith: Peter and then to this other man named Cornelius. Peter was a disciple of Jesus and now a leader in the early church. Cornelius was a Roman centurion, but nevertheless, he had come to what might be called a “seeking faith” in the God of the Jewish people, even though he wasn't one of them.

Cornelius gets the first vision, and it's fairly straightforward. An angel directs him to send men to a town named Joppa, which was about 40 miles away from where he was. (This is all over on the Mediterranean coast of modern-day Israel, by the way.) And there in Joppa, they were to look for a man named Peter. That's it, and that's what Cornelius does. He sends men on the way to Joppa to find this Peter.

The next day, Peter gets the second vision. He's on the rooftop of the house he's staying in, and he has a vision of a sheet coming down from heaven, filled with all sorts of animals. He then hears a voice saying, “Kill and eat.” He protests because some of those animals were against Jewish dietary law, to which the voice responds, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” And that's it. No other explanation. Just a confusing vision, as far as Peter was concerned, and that brings us up to today.

We come back to Peter, and he's kind of thinking, “What did I just see?” He doesn't know what to make of it. And just then, Cornelius's men arrive. Remember, Peter really has no idea who they are or why they're there, nor does he have much of an idea what that strange vision of animals on a heavenly sheet was supposed to mean either. But the Spirit says to him, “Go with

these men.” They share that they were sent by Cornelius and about his own vision the day before, so he invites them to stay the night before they set out the next day.

And at this point, I’ve at least got to hand it to Peter, to head out with these men based only on a fuzzy vision and just their word that it was at an angel’s direction that the whole thing got set into motion. I suppose it shouldn’t go without saying that what really clinches it may not be that Peter was so trusting or intuitive, but that he listened to the Spirit of God guiding him.

Because that’s hard to do right? To just go off on what others might think to be a whim. Something completely unexpected. Some might admire that for spontaneity, but others might find it simply impulsive. Regardless, whether spontaneous or impulsive or whatever other adjective you want to put next to it, it doesn’t exactly fill you with confidence that, no matter what, things will pan out just about as expected.

That sort of thing is tough for me. I’m the sort that appreciates the benefits of a strategy, of a plan and of sticking to it. The whole, make it up as you go along thing or change course unpredictably in the middle doesn’t put wind in my sails. So it’s hard to imagine myself in Peter’s shoes and think, “Yeah I probably would’ve gone along with these guys.”

And yet, when it comes to the life or the walk of faith, a central part of it, or so we claim, is that we seek to be led by the Spirit. It’s just that, if this story and others like it are any indication, being led by the Spirit gets messy. Being led by the Spirit can take us places we didn’t think we could or should be, much less places we ever expected.

It’s telling to me that Peter’s sidetrack to Caesarea wasn’t just an isolated excursion, something like a controlled but limited burst of spontaneity. Something like, you’ve got a trip meticulously planned out, every stop, every stay, every meal, every transport, all planned out and reserved ahead of time, and then maybe at one juncture on the trip, you have a bit of extra time, and you think, yeah why not do this extra thing I hadn’t planned on? But really it doesn’t affect anything. It’s not like that. It’s almost like it’s a trend for Peter, because these sidetracks are just layering one on top of another.

This whole sequence for Peter is part of a journey in which he was just going “here and there among all the believers” (Acts 9:32). He’s just going around. On that meandering trip, he goes to a town named Lydda, where he heals a man who had been bedridden.

But then, while he was in Lydda, some people from a nearby town called Joppa hear that he’s there, send people to him and ask him to come to Joppa, where he miraculously revives a woman named Dorcas, but then somehow comes to stay at the house of a tanner who lived there.

Then it was there in Joppa at this tanner’s house, and this is where we come into the story, that Cornelius’s men come and ask him to come back with them.

All that means, if you're keeping score at home, that this trip to Caesarea and the whole encounter with Cornelius and his household is a sidetrack on top of another sidetrack which was all stacked on top of a meandering, loosely planned trip to begin with. Now if Peter were just sightseeing that'd be one thing. Knock yourself out Peter. Go at your own pace. See what you want to see. But that's not what's going on. Peter, empowered by the Spirit, is doing amazing things, healing, teaching, you name it, but the trajectory of the entire church is about to change based on what he would witness on a sidetrack of a sidetrack off a loose itinerary.

So when he arrives at Caesarea, this sidetrack off a sidetrack, things are messy. First, the man he had been brought to meet, Cornelius, doesn't really know what to do. Cornelius bows down and worships Peter—did you catch that happening? It's like in the movie *Braveheart* when new recruits come to join William Wallace's army—Wallace is this great Scottish revolutionary leader—and one of them bows down to Wallace, to which Wallace in that thick, questionable Scottish accent says, "Get up, man, I'm not the Pope."

Contrast that messy first encounter with what we're seeing from the United Kingdom after the death of Elizabeth this past week. A time of national grief for our friends across the pond, but every single step, every bit of protocol and when this or that happens and what it's supposed to look like is all scripted out to the T, and the notion of Charles bowing or being bowed to at the wrong time is incomprehensible in that context.

Here though, between Cornelius and Peter, it's messy. The church is stumbling forward.

And yet somehow in that mess, Peter starts to understand, even just a glimpse for now, of why he may have been led there. He acknowledges that he shouldn't be with this group of Gentiles gathered there at Cornelius's house—and it says something that this crowd had assembled there, but more on that next week—but he says to them, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." Something to point out here: that's not exactly what Peter was told in his vision. His vision just had to do with animals and dietary laws. But here he is, being led by the Spirit, beginning to realize that that confusing vision on the rooftop really wasn't about food but about this man and his household that he came to meet on a sidetrack of a sidetrack in this meandering road he had been taking, and now they were all there to listen to all that the Lord had commanded him to say.

It seems God does a lot of work through sidetracks and the unexpected, perhaps more than we would typically imagine.

Let me recognize at this point that not everything that's unexpected or unplanned is necessarily good. That's obviously not the case, and even a hurtful thing to say.

I mean to think even of the anniversary that today's date recognizes. To say the least, September 11th was unexpected, and was not good. President Bush at the beginning of his term was expecting his presidency to focus on other things, but then after the deadliest attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor, it became focused on something else entirely.

Or to think of the news out of the other side of the state, out of Memphis in the past week and a half, of the abduction and murder of Eliza Fletcher. To say the least this unexpected, horrific act has rattled a city and beyond.

So I want to be clear that when we're talking about the unexpected, or sidetracks, I don't want the message we take to be, "Just look on the bright side," because clearly sometimes the unexpected is not a good thing.

But let us also not ignore the powerful ways that God can bring about something amazing, miraculous even though events that were completely unexpected. If this story is any guide, it's almost as if that's how the church works.

Just this past week, our International Missionary Committee was hearing from one of the missionaries we partner with, Linda Attia. (By the way, if you've never stopped in the Spitzer hallway or the Ramp Room or even just on the website to look more closely at the profiles of some of our global mission partners, take a moment and do so someday soon. It's powerful stuff.) Linda was giving an update on the mission and ministry for her and her husband Fawzy, who are based in Amman, Jordan.

You see Linda's story involves something a series of sidetracks itself. She and Fawzy first felt a call to go to Amman, Jordan, not necessarily for missionary work, per se, but for her to learn Arabic, so that's why they went there years ago.

But then, once they were there, they were faced with wave upon wave of refugees from places like Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, all of whom were crying out for help, so that's what they started doing there in Amman, even though the reason they had gone there was to learn a language.

But then, they started forming relationships in a village about two hours outside of Amman, out in the middle of nowhere, out where the lights of the city were barely visible in the middle of the desert. They would go there and establish a rapport within the village, bearing witness to the love of Christ with Muslim and non-Muslim residents alike, but in particular with a village leader named Khasim, even though the reason they had stayed in Amman was to serve refugees and even though the reason they had come to Amman in the first place was to learn a language.

Over time, their relationship with Khasim and others in the village grew. They would come and spend time with the people there, sharing the good news of Christ in ways they felt led to,

but also knowing that inevitably they would face resistance. They felt a pull toward this particular man Khasim, both in response to Khasim's hospitality to them but also because he was well respected in the community. But in all their time with him, all the time spent in his home, though the relationship deepened, an opening for the gospel has never seemed to appear.

But then one night, Linda and Fawzy were there with Khasim and his family, when Khasim's son asks Fawzy to come help him gather firewood, so they take another little sidetrack away from the home, even though the reason they had come to the home had been to try to share Christ with Khasim, and even though they hadn't planned on being in this village but rather in the capital Amman to help refugees, and even though they hadn't come to Amman in the first place to help refugees but rather to learn a language. But there, out in the darkness of the desert, Khasim's son shared with Fawzy that he had wanted to talk with him privately, and that getting firewood was the best way to do that. He said he needed to know what it meant to follow this Jesus they spoke of, this Jesus who had led them to Amman and to help refugees and to this village and into his family's home.

You never know how God might use the unexpected or the sidetrack that seems like just a distraction or the messy road that the church takes together to do an amazing thing, if we would just listen.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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So when he arrives at Caesarea, this sidetrack off a sidetrack, things are messy. First, the man he had been brought to meet, Cornelius, doesn't really know what to do. Cornelius bows down and worships Peter—did you catch that happening? It's like in the movie *Braveheart* when new recruits come to join William Wallace's army—Wallace is this great Scottish revolutionary leader—and one of them bows down to Wallace, to which Wallace in that thick, questionable Scottish accent says, "Get up, man, I'm not the Pope."

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And yet somehow in that mess, Peter starts to understand, even just a glimpse for now, of why he may have been led there. He acknowledges that he shouldn't be with this group of Gentiles gathered there at Cornelius's house—and it says something that this crowd had assembled there, but more on that next week—but he says to them, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." Something to point out here: that's not exactly what Peter was told in his vision. His vision just had to do with animals and dietary laws. But here he is, being led by the Spirit, beginning to realize that that confusing vision on the rooftop really wasn't about food but about this man and his household that he came to meet on a sidetrack of a sidetrack in this meandering road he had been taking, and now they were all there to listen to all that the Lord had commanded him to say.

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But then, once they were there, they were faced with wave upon wave of refugees from places like Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, all of whom were crying out for help, so that's what they started doing there in Amman, even though the reason they had gone there was to learn a language.

But then, they started forming relationships in a village about two hours outside of Amman, out in the middle of nowhere, out where the lights of the city were barely visible in the middle of the desert. They would go there and establish a rapport within the village, bearing witness to the love of Christ with Muslim and non-Muslim residents alike, but in particular with a village leader named Khasim, even though the reason they had stayed in Amman was to serve refugees and even though the reason they had come to Amman in the first place was to learn a language.

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but also knowing that inevitably they would face resistance. They felt a pull toward this particular man Khasim, both in response to Khasim's hospitality to them but also because he was well respected in the community. But in all their time with him, all the time spent in his home, though the relationship deepened, an opening for the gospel has never seemed to appear.

But then one night, Linda and Fawzy were there with Khasim and his family, when Khasim's son asks Fawzy to come help him gather firewood, so they take another little sidetrack away from the home, even though the reason they had come to the home had been to try to share Christ with Khasim, and even though they hadn't planned on being in this village but rather in the capital Amman to help refugees, and even though they hadn't come to Amman in the first place to help refugees but rather to learn a language. But there, out in the darkness of the desert, Khasim's son shared with Fawzy that he had wanted to talk with him privately, and that getting firewood was the best way to do that. He said he needed to know what it meant to follow this Jesus they spoke of, this Jesus who had led them to Amman and to help refugees and to this village and into his family's home.

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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So when he arrives at Caesarea, this sidetrack off a sidetrack, things are messy. First, the man he had been brought to meet, Cornelius, doesn't really know what to do. Cornelius bows down and worships Peter—did you catch that happening? It's like in the movie *Braveheart* when new recruits come to join William Wallace's army—Wallace is this great Scottish revolutionary leader—and one of them bows down to Wallace, to which Wallace in that thick, questionable Scottish accent says, "Get up, man, I'm not the Pope."

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And yet somehow in that mess, Peter starts to understand, even just a glimpse for now, of why he may have been led there. He acknowledges that he shouldn't be with this group of Gentiles gathered there at Cornelius's house—and it says something that this crowd had assembled there, but more on that next week—but he says to them, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." Something to point out here: that's not exactly what Peter was told in his vision. His vision just had to do with animals and dietary laws. But here he is, being led by the Spirit, beginning to realize that that confusing vision on the rooftop really wasn't about food but about this man and his household that he came to meet on a sidetrack of a sidetrack in this meandering road he had been taking, and now they were all there to listen to all that the Lord had commanded him to say.

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But then, once they were there, they were faced with wave upon wave of refugees from places like Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, all of whom were crying out for help, so that's what they started doing there in Amman, even though the reason they had gone there was to learn a language.

But then, they started forming relationships in a village about two hours outside of Amman, out in the middle of nowhere, out where the lights of the city were barely visible in the middle of the desert. They would go there and establish a rapport within the village, bearing witness to the love of Christ with Muslim and non-Muslim residents alike, but in particular with a village leader named Khasim, even though the reason they had stayed in Amman was to serve refugees and even though the reason they had come to Amman in the first place was to learn a language.

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but also knowing that inevitably they would face resistance. They felt a pull toward this particular man Khasim, both in response to Khasim's hospitality to them but also because he was well respected in the community. But in all their time with him, all the time spent in his home, though the relationship deepened, an opening for the gospel has never seemed to appear.

But then one night, Linda and Fawzy were there with Khasim and his family, when Khasim's son asks Fawzy to come help him gather firewood, so they take another little sidetrack away from the home, even though the reason they had come to the home had been to try to share Christ with Khasim, and even though they hadn't planned on being in this village but rather in the capital Amman to help refugees, and even though they hadn't come to Amman in the first place to help refugees but rather to learn a language. But there, out in the darkness of the desert, Khasim's son shared with Fawzy that he had wanted to talk with him privately, and that getting firewood was the best way to do that. He said he needed to know what it meant to follow this Jesus they spoke of, this Jesus who had led them to Amman and to help refugees and to this village and into his family's home.

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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So when he arrives at Caesarea, this sidetrack off a sidetrack, things are messy. First, the man he had been brought to meet, Cornelius, doesn't really know what to do. Cornelius bows down and worships Peter—did you catch that happening? It's like in the movie *Braveheart* when new recruits come to join William Wallace's army—Wallace is this great Scottish revolutionary leader—and one of them bows down to Wallace, to which Wallace in that thick, questionable Scottish accent says, "Get up, man, I'm not the Pope."

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And yet somehow in that mess, Peter starts to understand, even just a glimpse for now, of why he may have been led there. He acknowledges that he shouldn't be with this group of Gentiles gathered there at Cornelius's house—and it says something that this crowd had assembled there, but more on that next week—but he says to them, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." Something to point out here: that's not exactly what Peter was told in his vision. His vision just had to do with animals and dietary laws. But here he is, being led by the Spirit, beginning to realize that that confusing vision on the rooftop really wasn't about food but about this man and his household that he came to meet on a sidetrack of a sidetrack in this meandering road he had been taking, and now they were all there to listen to all that the Lord had commanded him to say.

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But then, once they were there, they were faced with wave upon wave of refugees from places like Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, all of whom were crying out for help, so that's what they started doing there in Amman, even though the reason they had gone there was to learn a language.

But then, they started forming relationships in a village about two hours outside of Amman, out in the middle of nowhere, out where the lights of the city were barely visible in the middle of the desert. They would go there and establish a rapport within the village, bearing witness to the love of Christ with Muslim and non-Muslim residents alike, but in particular with a village leader named Khasim, even though the reason they had stayed in Amman was to serve refugees and even though the reason they had come to Amman in the first place was to learn a language.

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but also knowing that inevitably they would face resistance. They felt a pull toward this particular man Khasim, both in response to Khasim's hospitality to them but also because he was well respected in the community. But in all their time with him, all the time spent in his home, though the relationship deepened, an opening for the gospel has never seemed to appear.

But then one night, Linda and Fawzy were there with Khasim and his family, when Khasim's son asks Fawzy to come help him gather firewood, so they take another little sidetrack away from the home, even though the reason they had come to the home had been to try to share Christ with Khasim, and even though they hadn't planned on being in this village but rather in the capital Amman to help refugees, and even though they hadn't come to Amman in the first place to help refugees but rather to learn a language. But there, out in the darkness of the desert, Khasim's son shared with Fawzy that he had wanted to talk with him privately, and that getting firewood was the best way to do that. He said he needed to know what it meant to follow this Jesus they spoke of, this Jesus who had led them to Amman and to help refugees and to this village and into his family's home.

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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So when he arrives at Caesarea, this sidetrack off a sidetrack, things are messy. First, the man he had been brought to meet, Cornelius, doesn't really know what to do. Cornelius bows down and worships Peter—did you catch that happening? It's like in the movie *Braveheart* when new recruits come to join William Wallace's army—Wallace is this great Scottish revolutionary leader—and one of them bows down to Wallace, to which Wallace in that thick, questionable Scottish accent says, "Get up, man, I'm not the Pope."

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And yet somehow in that mess, Peter starts to understand, even just a glimpse for now, of why he may have been led there. He acknowledges that he shouldn't be with this group of Gentiles gathered there at Cornelius's house—and it says something that this crowd had assembled there, but more on that next week—but he says to them, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." Something to point out here: that's not exactly what Peter was told in his vision. His vision just had to do with animals and dietary laws. But here he is, being led by the Spirit, beginning to realize that that confusing vision on the rooftop really wasn't about food but about this man and his household that he came to meet on a sidetrack of a sidetrack in this meandering road he had been taking, and now they were all there to listen to all that the Lord had commanded him to say.

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But then, once they were there, they were faced with wave upon wave of refugees from places like Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, all of whom were crying out for help, so that's what they started doing there in Amman, even though the reason they had gone there was to learn a language.

But then, they started forming relationships in a village about two hours outside of Amman, out in the middle of nowhere, out where the lights of the city were barely visible in the middle of the desert. They would go there and establish a rapport within the village, bearing witness to the love of Christ with Muslim and non-Muslim residents alike, but in particular with a village leader named Khasim, even though the reason they had stayed in Amman was to serve refugees and even though the reason they had come to Amman in the first place was to learn a language.

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but also knowing that inevitably they would face resistance. They felt a pull toward this particular man Khasim, both in response to Khasim's hospitality to them but also because he was well respected in the community. But in all their time with him, all the time spent in his home, though the relationship deepened, an opening for the gospel has never seemed to appear.

But then one night, Linda and Fawzy were there with Khasim and his family, when Khasim's son asks Fawzy to come help him gather firewood, so they take another little sidetrack away from the home, even though the reason they had come to the home had been to try to share Christ with Khasim, and even though they hadn't planned on being in this village but rather in the capital Amman to help refugees, and even though they hadn't come to Amman in the first place to help refugees but rather to learn a language. But there, out in the darkness of the desert, Khasim's son shared with Fawzy that he had wanted to talk with him privately, and that getting firewood was the best way to do that. He said he needed to know what it meant to follow this Jesus they spoke of, this Jesus who had led them to Amman and to help refugees and to this village and into his family's home.

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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So when he arrives at Caesarea, this sidetrack off a sidetrack, things are messy. First, the man he had been brought to meet, Cornelius, doesn't really know what to do. Cornelius bows down and worships Peter—did you catch that happening? It's like in the movie *Braveheart* when new recruits come to join William Wallace's army—Wallace is this great Scottish revolutionary leader—and one of them bows down to Wallace, to which Wallace in that thick, questionable Scottish accent says, "Get up, man, I'm not the Pope."

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And yet somehow in that mess, Peter starts to understand, even just a glimpse for now, of why he may have been led there. He acknowledges that he shouldn't be with this group of Gentiles gathered there at Cornelius's house—and it says something that this crowd had assembled there, but more on that next week—but he says to them, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." Something to point out here: that's not exactly what Peter was told in his vision. His vision just had to do with animals and dietary laws. But here he is, being led by the Spirit, beginning to realize that that confusing vision on the rooftop really wasn't about food but about this man and his household that he came to meet on a sidetrack of a sidetrack in this meandering road he had been taking, and now they were all there to listen to all that the Lord had commanded him to say.

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But then, once they were there, they were faced with wave upon wave of refugees from places like Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, all of whom were crying out for help, so that's what they started doing there in Amman, even though the reason they had gone there was to learn a language.

But then, they started forming relationships in a village about two hours outside of Amman, out in the middle of nowhere, out where the lights of the city were barely visible in the middle of the desert. They would go there and establish a rapport within the village, bearing witness to the love of Christ with Muslim and non-Muslim residents alike, but in particular with a village leader named Khasim, even though the reason they had stayed in Amman was to serve refugees and even though the reason they had come to Amman in the first place was to learn a language.

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but also knowing that inevitably they would face resistance. They felt a pull toward this particular man Khasim, both in response to Khasim's hospitality to them but also because he was well respected in the community. But in all their time with him, all the time spent in his home, though the relationship deepened, an opening for the gospel has never seemed to appear.

But then one night, Linda and Fawzy were there with Khasim and his family, when Khasim's son asks Fawzy to come help him gather firewood, so they take another little sidetrack away from the home, even though the reason they had come to the home had been to try to share Christ with Khasim, and even though they hadn't planned on being in this village but rather in the capital Amman to help refugees, and even though they hadn't come to Amman in the first place to help refugees but rather to learn a language. But there, out in the darkness of the desert, Khasim's son shared with Fawzy that he had wanted to talk with him privately, and that getting firewood was the best way to do that. He said he needed to know what it meant to follow this Jesus they spoke of, this Jesus who had led them to Amman and to help refugees and to this village and into his family's home.

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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So when he arrives at Caesarea, this sidetrack off a sidetrack, things are messy. First, the man he had been brought to meet, Cornelius, doesn't really know what to do. Cornelius bows down and worships Peter—did you catch that happening? It's like in the movie *Braveheart* when new recruits come to join William Wallace's army—Wallace is this great Scottish revolutionary leader—and one of them bows down to Wallace, to which Wallace in that thick, questionable Scottish accent says, "Get up, man, I'm not the Pope."

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And yet somehow in that mess, Peter starts to understand, even just a glimpse for now, of why he may have been led there. He acknowledges that he shouldn't be with this group of Gentiles gathered there at Cornelius's house—and it says something that this crowd had assembled there, but more on that next week—but he says to them, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." Something to point out here: that's not exactly what Peter was told in his vision. His vision just had to do with animals and dietary laws. But here he is, being led by the Spirit, beginning to realize that that confusing vision on the rooftop really wasn't about food but about this man and his household that he came to meet on a sidetrack of a sidetrack in this meandering road he had been taking, and now they were all there to listen to all that the Lord had commanded him to say.

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But let us also not ignore the powerful ways that God can bring about something amazing, miraculous even though events that were completely unexpected. If this story is any guide, it's almost as if that's how the church works.

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You see Linda's story involves something a series of sidetracks itself. She and Fawzy first felt a call to go to Amman, Jordan, not necessarily for missionary work, per se, but for her to learn Arabic, so that's why they went there years ago.

But then, once they were there, they were faced with wave upon wave of refugees from places like Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, all of whom were crying out for help, so that's what they started doing there in Amman, even though the reason they had gone there was to learn a language.

But then, they started forming relationships in a village about two hours outside of Amman, out in the middle of nowhere, out where the lights of the city were barely visible in the middle of the desert. They would go there and establish a rapport within the village, bearing witness to the love of Christ with Muslim and non-Muslim residents alike, but in particular with a village leader named Khasim, even though the reason they had stayed in Amman was to serve refugees and even though the reason they had come to Amman in the first place was to learn a language.

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but also knowing that inevitably they would face resistance. They felt a pull toward this particular man Khasim, both in response to Khasim's hospitality to them but also because he was well respected in the community. But in all their time with him, all the time spent in his home, though the relationship deepened, an opening for the gospel has never seemed to appear.

But then one night, Linda and Fawzy were there with Khasim and his family, when Khasim's son asks Fawzy to come help him gather firewood, so they take another little sidetrack away from the home, even though the reason they had come to the home had been to try to share Christ with Khasim, and even though they hadn't planned on being in this village but rather in the capital Amman to help refugees, and even though they hadn't come to Amman in the first place to help refugees but rather to learn a language. But there, out in the darkness of the desert, Khasim's son shared with Fawzy that he had wanted to talk with him privately, and that getting firewood was the best way to do that. He said he needed to know what it meant to follow this Jesus they spoke of, this Jesus who had led them to Amman and to help refugees and to this village and into his family's home.

You never know how God might use the unexpected or the sidetrack that seems like just a distraction or the messy road that the church takes together to do an amazing thing, if we would just listen.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Because that’s hard to do right? To just go off on what others might think to be a whim. Something completely unexpected. Some might admire that for spontaneity, but others might find it simply impulsive. Regardless, whether spontaneous or impulsive or whatever other adjective you want to put next to it, it doesn’t exactly fill you with confidence that, no matter what, things will pan out just about as expected.

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And yet, when it comes to the life or the walk of faith, a central part of it, or so we claim, is that we seek to be led by the Spirit. It’s just that, if this story and others like it are any indication, being led by the Spirit gets messy. Being led by the Spirit can take us places we didn’t think we could or should be, much less places we ever expected.

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So when he arrives at Caesarea, this sidetrack off a sidetrack, things are messy. First, the man he had been brought to meet, Cornelius, doesn't really know what to do. Cornelius bows down and worships Peter—did you catch that happening? It's like in the movie *Braveheart* when new recruits come to join William Wallace's army—Wallace is this great Scottish revolutionary leader—and one of them bows down to Wallace, to which Wallace in that thick, questionable Scottish accent says, "Get up, man, I'm not the Pope."

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And yet somehow in that mess, Peter starts to understand, even just a glimpse for now, of why he may have been led there. He acknowledges that he shouldn't be with this group of Gentiles gathered there at Cornelius's house—and it says something that this crowd had assembled there, but more on that next week—but he says to them, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." Something to point out here: that's not exactly what Peter was told in his vision. His vision just had to do with animals and dietary laws. But here he is, being led by the Spirit, beginning to realize that that confusing vision on the rooftop really wasn't about food but about this man and his household that he came to meet on a sidetrack of a sidetrack in this meandering road he had been taking, and now they were all there to listen to all that the Lord had commanded him to say.

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But let us also not ignore the powerful ways that God can bring about something amazing, miraculous even though events that were completely unexpected. If this story is any guide, it's almost as if that's how the church works.

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But then, once they were there, they were faced with wave upon wave of refugees from places like Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, all of whom were crying out for help, so that's what they started doing there in Amman, even though the reason they had gone there was to learn a language.

But then, they started forming relationships in a village about two hours outside of Amman, out in the middle of nowhere, out where the lights of the city were barely visible in the middle of the desert. They would go there and establish a rapport within the village, bearing witness to the love of Christ with Muslim and non-Muslim residents alike, but in particular with a village leader named Khasim, even though the reason they had stayed in Amman was to serve refugees and even though the reason they had come to Amman in the first place was to learn a language.

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but also knowing that inevitably they would face resistance. They felt a pull toward this particular man Khasim, both in response to Khasim's hospitality to them but also because he was well respected in the community. But in all their time with him, all the time spent in his home, though the relationship deepened, an opening for the gospel has never seemed to appear.

But then one night, Linda and Fawzy were there with Khasim and his family, when Khasim's son asks Fawzy to come help him gather firewood, so they take another little sidetrack away from the home, even though the reason they had come to the home had been to try to share Christ with Khasim, and even though they hadn't planned on being in this village but rather in the capital Amman to help refugees, and even though they hadn't come to Amman in the first place to help refugees but rather to learn a language. But there, out in the darkness of the desert, Khasim's son shared with Fawzy that he had wanted to talk with him privately, and that getting firewood was the best way to do that. He said he needed to know what it meant to follow this Jesus they spoke of, this Jesus who had led them to Amman and to help refugees and to this village and into his family's home.

You never know how God might use the unexpected or the sidetrack that seems like just a distraction or the messy road that the church takes together to do an amazing thing, if we would just listen.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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And it can also mean the messy walk of faith that Christians take together, which kind of makes sense. You take a bunch of messy, stumbling people individually and put them together, it’s not like you should expect an institution of pristine precision. Lo and behold, this life of faith shared together is just as messy, if not more so. It has a name—we call it the church.

So in these later weeks of this series, we’re spending a few weeks in the Book of Acts, a particular section of it. It’s a story that changes everything in the life of the church, but it comes about in just about as stumbling, inexact a way you might imagine, but through it, we see God by his Spirit leading the church through every doubt and every stumble. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

¹⁷ Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon’s house and were standing by the gate. ¹⁸ They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. ¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, ‘Look, three men are searching for you. ²⁰ Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.’ ²¹ So Peter went down to the men and said, ‘I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?’ ²² They answered, ‘Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.’ ²³ So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging. The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. ²⁴ The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ On Peter’s arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshipped him. ²⁶ But Peter made him get up, saying, ‘Stand up; I am only a mortal.’ ²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; ²⁸ and he said to them, ‘You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?’ ³⁰ Cornelius replied, ‘Four days ago at this very hour, at three o’clock, I

was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. ³¹ He said, “Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. ³² Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.” ³³ Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.’
Acts 10:17-33

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Peter shouldn't have been there. That's the long and short of it. There's no shortage of reasons why Peter should *not* have been where he was. He had just followed a few people who he didn't know to a whole other town 40 miles away, and then he finds himself in the home of a man who he also does not know, surrounded by many other people who he also does not know, and then on top of it, even he had known who they were, he shouldn't have associated with them in the first place. Peter shouldn't have been there.

If you were with us last week, you'll remember the first part of this story. It started with two visions given to two men of faith: Peter and then to this other man named Cornelius. Peter was a disciple of Jesus and now a leader in the early church. Cornelius was a Roman centurion, but nevertheless, he had come to what might be called a “seeking faith” in the God of the Jewish people, even though he wasn't one of them.

Cornelius gets the first vision, and it's fairly straightforward. An angel directs him to send men to a town named Joppa, which was about 40 miles away from where he was. (This is all over on the Mediterranean coast of modern-day Israel, by the way.) And there in Joppa, they were to look for a man named Peter. That's it, and that's what Cornelius does. He sends men on the way to Joppa to find this Peter.

The next day, Peter gets the second vision. He's on the rooftop of the house he's staying in, and he has a vision of a sheet coming down from heaven, filled with all sorts of animals. He then hears a voice saying, “Kill and eat.” He protests because some of those animals were against Jewish dietary law, to which the voice responds, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” And that's it. No other explanation. Just a confusing vision, as far as Peter was concerned, and that brings us up to today.

We come back to Peter, and he's kind of thinking, “What did I just see?” He doesn't know what to make of it. And just then, Cornelius's men arrive. Remember, Peter really has no idea who they are or why they're there, nor does he have much of an idea what that strange vision of animals on a heavenly sheet was supposed to mean either. But the Spirit says to him, “Go with

these men.” They share that they were sent by Cornelius and about his own vision the day before, so he invites them to stay the night before they set out the next day.

And at this point, I’ve at least got to hand it to Peter, to head out with these men based only on a fuzzy vision and just their word that it was at an angel’s direction that the whole thing got set into motion. I suppose it shouldn’t go without saying that what really clinches it may not be that Peter was so trusting or intuitive, but that he listened to the Spirit of God guiding him.

Because that’s hard to do right? To just go off on what others might think to be a whim. Something completely unexpected. Some might admire that for spontaneity, but others might find it simply impulsive. Regardless, whether spontaneous or impulsive or whatever other adjective you want to put next to it, it doesn’t exactly fill you with confidence that, no matter what, things will pan out just about as expected.

That sort of thing is tough for me. I’m the sort that appreciates the benefits of a strategy, of a plan and of sticking to it. The whole, make it up as you go along thing or change course unpredictably in the middle doesn’t put wind in my sails. So it’s hard to imagine myself in Peter’s shoes and think, “Yeah I probably would’ve gone along with these guys.”

And yet, when it comes to the life or the walk of faith, a central part of it, or so we claim, is that we seek to be led by the Spirit. It’s just that, if this story and others like it are any indication, being led by the Spirit gets messy. Being led by the Spirit can take us places we didn’t think we could or should be, much less places we ever expected.

It’s telling to me that Peter’s sidetrack to Caesarea wasn’t just an isolated excursion, something like a controlled but limited burst of spontaneity. Something like, you’ve got a trip meticulously planned out, every stop, every stay, every meal, every transport, all planned out and reserved ahead of time, and then maybe at one juncture on the trip, you have a bit of extra time, and you think, yeah why not do this extra thing I hadn’t planned on? But really it doesn’t affect anything. It’s not like that. It’s almost like it’s a trend for Peter, because these sidetracks are just layering one on top of another.

This whole sequence for Peter is part of a journey in which he was just going “here and there among all the believers” (Acts 9:32). He’s just going around. On that meandering trip, he goes to a town named Lydda, where he heals a man who had been bedridden.

But then, while he was in Lydda, some people from a nearby town called Joppa hear that he’s there, send people to him and ask him to come to Joppa, where he miraculously revives a woman named Dorcas, but then somehow comes to stay at the house of a tanner who lived there.

Then it was there in Joppa at this tanner’s house, and this is where we come into the story, that Cornelius’s men come and ask him to come back with them.

All that means, if you're keeping score at home, that this trip to Caesarea and the whole encounter with Cornelius and his household is a sidetrack on top of another sidetrack which was all stacked on top of a meandering, loosely planned trip to begin with. Now if Peter were just sightseeing that'd be one thing. Knock yourself out Peter. Go at your own pace. See what you want to see. But that's not what's going on. Peter, empowered by the Spirit, is doing amazing things, healing, teaching, you name it, but the trajectory of the entire church is about to change based on what he would witness on a sidetrack of a sidetrack off a loose itinerary.

So when he arrives at Caesarea, this sidetrack off a sidetrack, things are messy. First, the man he had been brought to meet, Cornelius, doesn't really know what to do. Cornelius bows down and worships Peter—did you catch that happening? It's like in the movie *Braveheart* when new recruits come to join William Wallace's army—Wallace is this great Scottish revolutionary leader—and one of them bows down to Wallace, to which Wallace in that thick, questionable Scottish accent says, "Get up, man, I'm not the Pope."

Contrast that messy first encounter with what we're seeing from the United Kingdom after the death of Elizabeth this past week. A time of national grief for our friends across the pond, but every single step, every bit of protocol and when this or that happens and what it's supposed to look like is all scripted out to the T, and the notion of Charles bowing or being bowed to at the wrong time is incomprehensible in that context.

Here though, between Cornelius and Peter, it's messy. The church is stumbling forward.

And yet somehow in that mess, Peter starts to understand, even just a glimpse for now, of why he may have been led there. He acknowledges that he shouldn't be with this group of Gentiles gathered there at Cornelius's house—and it says something that this crowd had assembled there, but more on that next week—but he says to them, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." Something to point out here: that's not exactly what Peter was told in his vision. His vision just had to do with animals and dietary laws. But here he is, being led by the Spirit, beginning to realize that that confusing vision on the rooftop really wasn't about food but about this man and his household that he came to meet on a sidetrack of a sidetrack in this meandering road he had been taking, and now they were all there to listen to all that the Lord had commanded him to say.

It seems God does a lot of work through sidetracks and the unexpected, perhaps more than we would typically imagine.

Let me recognize at this point that not everything that's unexpected or unplanned is necessarily good. That's obviously not the case, and even a hurtful thing to say.

I mean to think even of the anniversary that today's date recognizes. To say the least, September 11th was unexpected, and was not good. President Bush at the beginning of his term was expecting his presidency to focus on other things, but then after the deadliest attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor, it became focused on something else entirely.

Or to think of the news out of the other side of the state, out of Memphis in the past week and a half, of the abduction and murder of Eliza Fletcher. To say the least this unexpected, horrific act has rattled a city and beyond.

So I want to be clear that when we're talking about the unexpected, or sidetracks, I don't want the message we take to be, "Just look on the bright side," because clearly sometimes the unexpected is not a good thing.

But let us also not ignore the powerful ways that God can bring about something amazing, miraculous even though events that were completely unexpected. If this story is any guide, it's almost as if that's how the church works.

Just this past week, our International Missionary Committee was hearing from one of the missionaries we partner with, Linda Attia. (By the way, if you've never stopped in the Spitzer hallway or the Ramp Room or even just on the website to look more closely at the profiles of some of our global mission partners, take a moment and do so someday soon. It's powerful stuff.) Linda was giving an update on the mission and ministry for her and her husband Fawzy, who are based in Amman, Jordan.

You see Linda's story involves something a series of sidetracks itself. She and Fawzy first felt a call to go to Amman, Jordan, not necessarily for missionary work, per se, but for her to learn Arabic, so that's why they went there years ago.

But then, once they were there, they were faced with wave upon wave of refugees from places like Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, all of whom were crying out for help, so that's what they started doing there in Amman, even though the reason they had gone there was to learn a language.

But then, they started forming relationships in a village about two hours outside of Amman, out in the middle of nowhere, out where the lights of the city were barely visible in the middle of the desert. They would go there and establish a rapport within the village, bearing witness to the love of Christ with Muslim and non-Muslim residents alike, but in particular with a village leader named Khasim, even though the reason they had stayed in Amman was to serve refugees and even though the reason they had come to Amman in the first place was to learn a language.

Over time, their relationship with Khasim and others in the village grew. They would come and spend time with the people there, sharing the good news of Christ in ways they felt led to,

but also knowing that inevitably they would face resistance. They felt a pull toward this particular man Khasim, both in response to Khasim's hospitality to them but also because he was well respected in the community. But in all their time with him, all the time spent in his home, though the relationship deepened, an opening for the gospel has never seemed to appear.

But then one night, Linda and Fawzy were there with Khasim and his family, when Khasim's son asks Fawzy to come help him gather firewood, so they take another little sidetrack away from the home, even though the reason they had come to the home had been to try to share Christ with Khasim, and even though they hadn't planned on being in this village but rather in the capital Amman to help refugees, and even though they hadn't come to Amman in the first place to help refugees but rather to learn a language. But there, out in the darkness of the desert, Khasim's son shared with Fawzy that he had wanted to talk with him privately, and that getting firewood was the best way to do that. He said he needed to know what it meant to follow this Jesus they spoke of, this Jesus who had led them to Amman and to help refugees and to this village and into his family's home.

You never know how God might use the unexpected or the sidetrack that seems like just a distraction or the messy road that the church takes together to do an amazing thing, if we would just listen.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.