

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Stumbling: Vision Casting”

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Acts 10:1-16

September 4, 2022

We continue this morning in our Fall sermon series “Stumbling,” and if you’ve been with us, you’ll remember we’ve been talking about how the walk of faith is an inherently messy one.

You may have noticed the start of a shift in focus from the beginning, from the individual to the communal. Two weeks ago we talked about stumbling blocks and yet how God still seeks out the one lost sheep, leaving behind the 99. Last week, Anne Apple shared on how that acceptance plays out in the life of the church, in the challenging, even confrontational nature of forgiveness in the life of the church.

So today, we continue that arc toward how we as a church stumble forward, and as we do, we’re turning to a particular section of the Book of Acts, the story of the early church. We’ll be in the tenth chapter of this book, which represents something of a lynchpin the life of the church, in which some of the long-held assumptions about what it meant to fear and follow God, to love and serve Jesus, were turned on their head. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

10 In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. ² He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. ³ One afternoon at about three o’clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, ‘Cornelius.’ ⁴ He stared at him in terror and said, ‘What is it, Lord?’ He answered, ‘Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; ⁶ he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.’ ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, ⁸ and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa. ⁹ About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. ¹² In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ¹⁴ But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.’ ¹⁵ The voice said to him again, a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Acts 10:1-16

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.

A few years ago, a striking bald man spoke at a professional event. (It’s not important that he was bald, but being that I’m heading in that direction, I thought I’d mention it.) He spoke at a professional event and took a few questions.

One question was just how he was able to stay focused on such a long-term vision for his company. He replied, “You need a vision. That’s a touchstone: it’s something you can always come back to if you ever get confused.” And then later on, he added, “So I would always encourage people to hold, powerfully, [to] a vision and be so stubborn of it. Don’t let anybody move you off of your vision.”

That striking, bald man, as it turns out, puts his money where his mouth is. It was Jeff Bezos, until recently the well-known CEO of Amazon. He’s got no shortage of detractors, but you can’t deny the growth and ubiquity of his company. And the way he does so was to be “stubborn on vision,” but “flexible on details.” Years ago he had this vision of a digital marketplace, leveraging the potential of a newer technology just getting its feet under it, the internet. Even when the so-called dot-com bubble burst in the early 2000s, he didn’t waver from this vision.

One time he described how he responds to the seemingly regular rhythm of quarterly reports. He said, “We’ll announce our Amazon quarterly results, and [people will say], ‘Great quarter, congratulations!’ And then I say, ‘Thank you!’ But what I really think about is [how] that quarter was kind of baked and done 2 or 3 years ago, and right now the senior executives at Amazon are working on a quarter that’s going to happen [2 or 3 years from now.]”

Obviously, it’s been an effective strategy for the guy. No doubt there are lots of others in the Amazon ranks paying close attention to the day-to-day—it’s a luxury of scale to be able to focus almost exclusively on long range vision—but regardless, he’s done well with this relentless, almost fanatical devotion to a vision for what his company could become.

In the text we read from the Book of Acts, we find not one but two visions, one given to each of two men. The first man who is given a vision is a man named Cornelius, a centurion, that is, a Roman officer, something like a sergeant-major in the way they did their army. And he received a vision of an angel telling him his prayers and alms had ascended and that he was to send for a man named Peter who was in a home in a town just about 40 miles away. And that’s it. That’s all the vision he got.

The second man who is given a vision is the very man that Cornelius was supposed to look for: Peter, the disciple of Jesus who was now one of the leaders of the early church. Peter’s vision got weird though. He’s on the roof of this house praying, but he was also hungry, and as hungry people tend to do, he has a vision about food. He sees something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, and on that sheet were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds. Then a voice said, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” Peter flinches. Though some of the animals would have been fine in Jewish dietary law, others were not. They were unclean, against the law, and more to the point, going against what it meant to follow God. So Peter protests. Then a voice replies, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” He gets the same vision two more times, just in case he wasn’t paying attention, I guess, but nothing more than that. End of vision.

We’ll get to where things go from there in coming weeks. But I want us to pause here, after these two visions are given, because as far as visions go, these don’t give you much to go on. “Hold on stubbornly to your vision,” Jeff Bezos might say. Well if Cornelius and Peter wanted to do that, what on earth do you do with these two? There’s a multi-billion-dollar industry out there that has grown up around that question: what do you do with a vision? How do you cultivate a vision? What strategies can lead an organization or a company to the sort of growth and success like Amazon or Apple?

And it’s a mixed bag, as many of you who may have dipped into those waters may already know. Sure, there are some lessons to be learned from successful companies and how a shared, stated vision can focus what

you do. But then again if the silver bullet solution were truly as simple as having and following a “vision statement,” then you’d expect every business to have the same growth as Amazon and Apple. Obviously, that’s not the case. That same industry has spilled over into the church world, with congregations and consultants adopting much of the same jargon of cultivating vision and establishing a niche, all to similarly mixed effect.

For Cornelius, I’m not sure he would know what else to do. His vision was pretty straightforward. He just got some instructions: send for a man named Peter in a town about 40 miles away. Cornelius was an interesting case. He wasn’t just a Roman officer. He was “a devout man who feared God with all his household.” He was generous. He prayed constantly. Reading between the lines, it seems that Cornelius was in that rare category of someone who, after coming into contact with the Jewish people, probably through his service in the region as a Roman soldier, rejected the Roman gods and sought after the God the Jews were praying to, even though he wasn’t one of them.

Just from that profile alone, Cornelius is in an odd situation. On one hand, he’s one who’s in power. He’s a Roman. On the other, he’s decidedly on the outside—not completely at home as a Roman, but not completely welcome either among others who followed the same God he did. So when the angel says to him in the vision, “Your prayers have ascended,” I wonder if that’s what was meant: a prayer for his faith, his doubts as an outsider, for his sense of alienation to be heard. But the vision he received wasn’t a view of him, later in life, sharing in close fellowship and prayer with others sharing the same faith. Instead, the vision he got was a simple instruction: send for a man named Peter in a town about 40 miles away. Peter’s vision had a bit more to interpret but definitely wasn’t as clear. When the sheet with all the animals came down from heaven and he was told to “kill and eat,” there wasn’t much in the way of explanation. Was the vision leading him to embrace a new diet? Hopefully it wasn’t calling him to mess with a good thing.

You see, when we come to Peter on this rooftop, we come to a leader in a church that, at the time, was experiencing great growth and peace. The church throughout the entire region was being built up. For the most part, though, this growth had been taking place almost exclusively among Jewish converts, which makes sense, since the church began as a gathering of Jewish followers of a Jewish man. Things were going well. And then comes along this cryptic vision that would seem to go against, as Peter understood it, what it meant to be a faithful believer, a Jewish believer. No further instructions. No clarity. What’s he supposed to do with that?

Peter soon meets Cornelius, and what happens next changes things forever, but we’ll get to that in the next couple of weeks.

For now, though, I hope we can catch a glimpse, if you will, of how the church follows vision, namely that it’s not as simple as following a statement put on a memo. This is where all that language of vision casting and strategy sometimes misses its mark within the context of a church. Things that are true and effective in secular contexts like the business world don’t always carry over easily into the church, for a number of reasons.

That doesn’t mean that nothing carries over. Churches could learn a lot by watching effective practices in other contexts. We just can’t take them as gospel. There can be a benefit in casting a vision and seeking to live into it.

And that’s the sort of work we’ve been doing over the past couple of years. Beginning back in 2020, the Session has been guiding work in developing long-range planning and strategy, working with consultants and different teams within the church, identifying and discerning just how we sense God calling us to move forward.

A few things come up. First, it's not like we're reinventing the wheel. We are moving forward from the heritage left to us by the saints who came before us. Literally etched in stone on the sign of our church are the words, "Inwardly Strong, Outwardly Focused," a vision for a church that seeks growth and strength in seeking after the Lord together, but with that strength focused not internally or upon serving ourselves, but rather outwardly. This isn't anything new.

What this whole strategy and vision process discovered, though, is that while we greatly *want* to be outwardly focused, we may not in practice be as outwardly focused as we might think we are. Case in point, when we put out feelers into our neighborhood, a small poll of how our immediate neighborhood sees our congregation, the single most common response was, "Oh, I hear they have a great preschool," which is true. Then the second most common response was, "Who? I know it's there, but don't know anything about it." Not the sort of impact a church that is truly outwardly focused would expect to have.

So that began discernment and discussion on how we might recapture that spirit, that focus, that vision of being "Inwardly Strong, Outwardly Focused." And a phrase kept coming up throughout the process of being a church that connects, that connects people with God, that connects people with each other, that is connected powerfully in mission in the community and abroad in focused, impactful ways, not just sending checks all over town, that is connected not primarily for ourselves but for those who aren't here yet. That became of vision for how an inward strength becomes focused outwardly. And that vision could impact how we go about the work of discipleship, our study together. Yes, we seek to grow stronger in faith, but to what end? For the sake of sharing it, expressing it. That vision could impact how we welcome others of any generation: do we place a higher value on a newcomer's welcome than on our own comfort? That vision could impact how we approach updates and improvements to our building: does our building help or hinder this work of connection? Well, when there are five different elevations on the main level of the church, none of which are connected to the other in an ADA accessible way, that presents a problem if a church is hoping to live out a vision of being outwardly focused, of being welcoming and connecting to a newcomer. All of that went into the plans we put together and shared with you back at the 75th Anniversary Lunch in May, which we're continuing to refine and develop. All of that has been building upon and clarifying a vision for a church that is "Inwardly Strong, Outwardly Focused."

But if the visions given to Cornelius and Peter are any indication, we have a long way to go yet. And we always will. The visions given to them, visions that would come to shape and change the church forever, were anything but clear, and each was incomplete without the other.

We've been talking a lot about in this series on "Stumbling," and in the early weeks, it's been more a conversation on how we as individuals face doubts and struggles. With this look in the Book of Acts, we see more about what it means for a church to stumble. And yes, a church can stumble in the sense of a church collectively failing, but I think it also means, maybe a bit more positively, that the way God calls us forward, the vision God sets before us, is often messy, even confusing. It may challenge our very understanding of what it means to follow Christ, and it is never set in stone. It constantly calls us to come back over and over again seeking the next word for the next step.

And yet somehow, miraculously, the church has stumbled forward by the grace of God, and maybe without our noticing, stepping further into the vision he has for us.

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