

The Church Expecting

Anna Carter Florence

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

I have learned, over the years, that the Bible contains its own treasure house of preaching manuals. The book of Job, for instance, or the book of Acts: each is dealing with questions of what a person can possibly say, or preach, in what seems like an impossible situation. In Job, that situation is unbearable loss. In Acts, it is unimaginable change. The characters in both books are grappling head on with what can and cannot be said, what can and cannot be done, when things are happening faster than we can keep up with, let alone stomach or understand. And since the job is to speak about God—because *God* is the subject of all our preaching, and the preacher is not—what can we say about who God is, and where God is, for these people in this moment? How can we speak of the eternal when the present is only rupture?

As I write this, churches are beginning to lift their heads from a season of loss and change we might once have thought unbearable and unimaginable, until we were in it. Preachers are wondering who will return to worship when the multiple pandemics recede—or if “return” and “recede” do not apply here, who will be in worship, and in what format. Will our old members come back to church when all this is past, or will we be welcoming newcomers through our doors? Can we preach to reach particular audiences (young adults, young families, seekers, hipsters) in the thoughtful ways we used to do such things, or is it too soon to know who those listeners are and have become, post-COVID? Will anyone *want* to get up on a Sunday morning to sit in a sanctuary, or will we be worshipping in our homes or streets or on front stoops and in church parking lots? Will worshipping in person be the exception rather than the norm, with online worship a given in most faith communities? What can we expect? *Whom* can we expect?

Many of us have been asking panicked versions of these questions week to week for a while now, with the truth gradually dawning that this improvisational way of being may be the new reality. We *don't* know what to expect anymore. About anything, really. And oddly, the best preparation for preaching into that uncharted landscape may be the experience of the past two years: we know how to lose now. We know how to be utterly disrupted: to discover that our prior experience, knowledge, and training may not apply this week, and in order to stay present, we'll need to set some of it aside. We know how to be taken completely by surprise: to regroup, reset, recalculate, and reconfigure—not once, but multiple times. We know how to stumble, fumble, and fall flat on our faces, as preachers, by what we thought our sermons were supposed to be and do. And we know that in spite of it all, the Word sets its own course: it moves, with or without us. It finds a hearer. *Our* job is to catch up, and then, not to seize up. To live...in an Acts 10 frame of mind.

The tenth chapter of Acts might just be the preaching manual of the season. Peter is facing his own spiritual pandemic, we might say: disturbing visions, *invasive* visions, that threaten his worldview and rearrange his homiletical framework—and some of those visions aren't even his. They originate with another person who passes them along, like it or not. Peter does his best to mask up, but to no avail: once joined, the

two visions become one, and airborne. They spread throughout the church, and we are who we are today because of it. It should be noted that the contagion is a joyous one that breeds hope and gives life, not death. But the book of Acts is filled with such surges. Love keeps exploding faster than a preacher can contain it and speak it. And the people we *aren't* expecting, and never imagined or targeted in our long-range plans, are the ones who teach us what preaching is becoming: how to speak of God, to *these people, today*.

The sermon below was preached at the 2020 Festival of Homiletics, which of course was virtual. My assignment for this article was to think about preaching to young adults. The more I read the book of Acts, the more homiletical wisdom I find; a preacher need only substitute “young adult” (or young families, seekers, hipsters) for Cornelius in Acts 10, and you have a lesson in reaching new listeners. The key is to wait for the piece of the vision we *don't* have, to live in a permanent state of expectation, to have faith that we will be taught what we need to know and speak.

“The Church Expecting”
Anna Carter Florence
Festival of Homiletics 2021 (online)
Isaiah 43:19, Acts 10

You know, as great as it would be to have precise blueprints for preaching and the future church, I'm kind of glad we don't. Especially after a passage like this. Imagine if we'd logged on this morning and a team of future-minded experts was here, saying, “Good news, everyone: *God* is about to do a new thing in your preaching, and *you* are about to perceive it, and we're going to tell you how, because we've developed a biblical model based on Acts chapter 10 that lets you preach your way straight into the future church without a hitch; and it's a simple matter of

you, having a vision over here,
while someone thirty miles away has a vision over there,
and *that* person sends three people to your door,
while the Spirit sends *you* down to open it,
and the people at the door say,
“Look, you don't know us,
but please come with us,
because our guy just saw an angel,
and the angel gave him your name and address,
and now our guy's expecting you,”
— which will be your cue to go with them, to that person's house,
where fifty-three strangers will be waiting for you to give a testimony;
and when you see them, in that split second,
you will *truly understand* that *God shows no partiality*;
and this vision you had, the one that freaked you out,
is a big wake-up call to reevaluate your entire homiletical framework,
because what God has made clean,
we can't call profane anymore;
we can't say, “That's not how preachers do it!”

(when apparently, it is now),
—so you will tell those fifty-three people what you know about Jesus,
and they will listen and praise God,
and the Holy Spirit will pour down all over the place,
and you will say, “Could it be more obvious
that we have all the jurisdictional approval we need?! —
let’s baptize these people and throw an interfaith potluck!”
—which you will, for the next three days,
before going home to tell your church
that they’ve just taken in fifty-three new members
from a neighborhood they’ve never heard of, with more to come,
because the Holy Spirit falls there the same way it does here...
and *that* is how you preach to form the future church in twenty-two easy
steps and forty-nine verbs. Here’s the manual. Any questions?

Imagine if that’s what we’d heard, the first day of this conference—that *preaching to form the future church* would be this complicated. That this was the script: Cornelius and Peter in the tenth chapter of Acts. Would you even want to know?! Would you have wanted to know, this time last year, what the rest of 2020 would bring—and would any of us have believed it?

It’s hard to say. But if preaching to form the future church looks like the preaching that formed the *early* church, then maybe this *is* what we have to look forward to: visions and trances and road trips with complete strangers, and twenty-two steps and forty-nine verbs, none of which we are going to see coming, all of which are random to the point of absurdity, and any of which we could miss and blow the whole thing—which is pretty much what the preachers in the book of Acts are doing. What are we expecting this new preaching to be? What are we expecting, period?

At this conference, we’ve heard great lectures and theories of what the future church may look like. We expect preaching will play a role to get us there. But what we preachers are expecting... we don’t really know. We’re expecting to be surprised; we know that. We’re expecting God will show up and the Spirit will move and take us with it—forward, we hope.

But maybe what we’re expecting or who we’re expecting aren’t everything. Maybe there’s another question, an Acts 10 question. *Who is expecting us?* Because whatever new thing God is doing, we can’t perceive on our own. Whatever vision God gives us, we only get half of. And we need to find who holds the other half. Who is expecting us, and what vision has God given them to join with ours?

Peter had to learn this—that he hadn’t witnessed everything, and he wasn’t the holder of the complete vision, and he couldn’t perceive every new thing on his own—because by the tenth chapter of Acts, Peter was the leading voice of the church. He was the one who spoke up when something needed interpreting.

(Acts chapter 2) “Why are these people speaking in multiple languages on the day of Pentecost? Because what was spoken through the prophet Joel has come to pass: ‘The Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophecy.’”

(Acts chapter 3) “Why did a man lame from birth suddenly jump up and begin to walk, leaping and praising God? Because the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob has glorified Jesus Christ, and faith in his name has made this man strong.”

(Acts chapter 4) “By what power or by what name do we do this—teach the people about the resurrection of the dead? By Jesus Christ, whom God raised from the dead; there is salvation in no one else.”

(Acts chapter 5) “Why are we standing in the Temple teaching instead of in the prison, where you locked us up yesterday? Because an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, and we must obey God rather than any human authority.”

Peter had an explanation for every new thing that God was doing in the first days of the early church, and he didn’t hesitate to speak it and preach it and testify to the name of Jesus Christ, of whom he was proud to be a witness. And maybe he’d disrupted so many persons’ theologies that he needed reminding that God could disrupt his, too! Peter wasn’t always going to be the man with the answers. He was good, but he wasn’t God. So just like every other preacher in the book of Acts, he smacks his head on an epiphany he didn’t see coming.

They all get a turn, these newly minted preachers, especially in chapters 8, 9 and 10: Philip, with an Ethiopian Eunuch; Paul, on the road to Damascus; Peter, on a rooftop in Joppa. Three faithful men, godly men, but not one of them could let go of the idea that some things were pure heresy—like baptism for outsiders, or God becoming a man, or tampering with laws that tell us what is holy and what is not. So they get addressed by angels, and struck by blinding light and weird visions that spell it out for them in no uncertain terms: “Listen! What God has made holy, you must not call blasphemous! What God has made clean, you must not call profane! Wake up and get with the program, because the realm of God is a whole lot bigger than you thought it was, and it’s breaking its way in!” For three consecutive chapters, 8, 9 and 10, it’s one preacher epiphany after another, and it opens up the whole church.

For Peter, it all happens because someone named Cornelius was expecting him. Peter is the one in the spotlight at this point in the book of Acts, and true to form, he is stubbornly (big surprise) clinging to his dietary practices and harboring certain prejudices against Gentiles. He’s about to get his mind radically changed by a vision of a sheet, some non-kosher delicacies, and a barbecue pit; but before he does, we get this little story about a Roman centurion named Cornelius, who lives miles away in another city. While Peter is dreaming about grilled pork and shellfish, Cornelius the Gentile is dreaming about *him*. Cornelius has a vision about an angel and a man called Peter, whom he has never met. The vision takes place while Cornelius is praying, and instead of dismissing it as a momentary lapse when he must have drifted off, he decides the angel meant business and he’d better take it seriously. And you know what happens: he sends his trusted servants to Joppa to invite Peter to return with them to Caesaria, which Peter does after a nudge from the Spirit. When they get to Cornelius’ house, a bleacher-full of Gentiles is waiting politely to hear what Peter has to say, and as they do, the Spirit moves, and God does a new thing in Peter, and

Cornelius and his entire household are baptized.

By the time chapter 11 begins, Cornelius and Peter have parted company and the spotlight moves with Peter to Jerusalem. Cornelius doesn't appear again in the book of Acts, but the story of what happened at his home in Caesaria is one Peter will continue to tell, over and over, as he tries to explain his *own* conversion: "Once," he will say, "I thought we were God's people, and the Gentiles were not. But that was before I had my dream, and my friend Cornelius had his vision, and God brought us together. And now I'm sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor religious differences nor shrimp cocktails nor pulled pork barbecue with oysters and cheese grits on the side can separate a people from the love of God in Christ Jesus!"

It's such a beautiful story, a familiar story, about insiders and outsiders, before and afterwards, and God's astonishing knack for messing with our heads: no matter what *we* think the game (or the menu) is about, no matter how hard and fast the rules, God likes to change things up at a moment's notice—to flick the switch on what we think qualifies as clean and profane, faithful and unfaithful, Christian and non-Christian, or wildly unexpected. God likes to do a new thing. Just to keep things lively, you know? Just to keep a church vital and the people hopping while amazing grace floods the field.

Whatever Peter was expecting that day on the roof in Joppa, I don't think it was Cornelius. *But Cornelius was expecting him.* He was expecting a person of another faith and nationality and power and privilege (since Cornelius was a wealthy Roman official, and Peter most certainly was not), and he was expecting to give Peter his full attention, to really listen to him, across theological divides and religious differences. He wasn't like Nicodemus, going to Jesus by night. He was willing to risk what his friends and family would think about this situation. What's more, he even invited them to come hear Peter too, which must have been an interesting conversation. Cornelius was expecting that God might do something new—that the vision he had was incomplete. Not profane, just startling. Not absurd, just vast. Not awe-inspiring—not yet—but a two-dimensional view on a screen, with potential. Cornelius was expecting that whatever new thing God was about to do would require him to do some accommodating and integrating and interpreting, once he figured out who held the other half of the vision.

Peter preached a great sermon that day, arguably his best. But Cornelius shows us where that sermon came from. It came from deep listening. It came from great expectation. It came from an encounter with the other, which that one initiated. And what if the vitality of the church's witness is totally dependent on our willingness to discern that—to recognize when our biggest aversions, our greatest fears, are really invitations to God's next new thing?

I wonder about that. Does every preacher need an encounter with Cornelius in order to perceive the next thing? Is this what we ought to be praying for—that God would send us our *own* Cornelius, someone with whom we share deep theological differences as well as overlapping dreams? Will the Pentecosts of the future church take place in a living room—someone else's living room—instead our own sanctuaries?

Perhaps so. Maybe this painful year of multiple pandemics will give us a heightened sensitivity. Maybe we hear God best through a person we differ from most. Maybe we proclaim God best when we stop aiming for the conversion of others and start listening for our own conversions. Maybe vitality is the willingness to be depleted,

so that God can form us for a future church.

It would be nice to know what to expect when this season is over, to have blueprints for how emerge from a pandemic with a church that's still vital. But I don't think we need them. We've got this wild book of Acts, which really puts the words "Reformed and always being reformed" into perspective. We've got Peter, for whom God arranged a wild rumpus of a picnic on the roof that day. And we've got Cornelius, who is out there somewhere, expecting us to bring our half of a messy cryptic, crazy vision. What God has made clean, we must not call profane. What God will make vital, we must go out and seek. And what God is doing next in our preaching for the future church—it will spring forth. Let's dream our half of it.