



**DIGITAL LIVING**  
**Acts 10:1-23**

We began our sermon series in the book of Acts with the dramatic conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Today we will see the ‘continuing conversion’ of Peter the Apostle. John Wesley describes it as our “constant conversion.” Dr. John Stott believes there are two conversions taking place in our lesson today – one for Peter and one for Cornelius. Some revolutions – some conversions are so deep that their truths can’t be learned in one day or lesson. That’s how it was for Peter – that’s how it is for all of us.

The book of Acts is not so much the “Acts of the Apostles” as it is the ‘Acts of the Holy Spirit.’ This book demonstrates that no leader made a significant spiritual decision without the direct intervention or revelation of the Holy Spirit. Even Peter who was one of the original 12 disciples – an eye witness to the resurrected Lord – is spiritually impotent without the work of the Holy Spirit. However when fire, spirit, and the wind come upon a church or individual – they are completely transformed and driven out into the world in ministry and mission.

We see that the power of the Easter movement continues when a Roman centurion named Cornelius steps onto the stage of the biblical drama. We see an “**outsider become an insider.**”<sup>1</sup> The church has as much to learn from this story in the year 2008 as it did almost 2,000 years ago when Peter first learned it.

We see both Peter and Cornelius caught up in what I call ‘**digital living.**’ There is a big difference between digital living and living by the spirit of God. I have always had an intense dislike for digital watches – especially those that beep during my sermons. Perhaps it is my undergraduate training as an historian.

A digital watch only tells us what time it is now. While it describes the present moment in exact numbers, it leaves out the past and the future all together.

In my personal study, I have a clock that has the face of Jesus on it. While it does help me to be on time – it reminds me of another sense of time – which is eternal.

Today, many Americans live only in the present – they are ‘**digital livers.**’ They want it all now. They want immediate gratification. They don’t want to wait for anything. We desire style and not substance. But we serve a God who began things a long time ago, and who will end things some time in the future. Jesus was at the beginning – and He will usher in the ending. Jesus declares in **Revelation 22:13**, “I am the Alpha and

the Omega, the First and the Last – the Beginning and the End.” God has an incredible sense of time.

The biggest problem and challenge with a digital sense of timing is that it unfortunately leaves out two important dimensions of our lives and journey. It leaves out the **past** and the **future**. Both are important. We see this in churches that have abandoned the Apostle’s and Nicene Creeds, the Lord’s Prayer – and other parts of our historic Christian faith. It is as though the past 2,000 years of the Christian faith have absolutely nothing to teach us. When Dan Brown’s book **THE DA VINCI CODE** came out a few years ago – evangelical scholars turned to the historic counsels of the church almost 1600 years before to refute every false claim he made. We not only want to know the Apostle’s Creed – but to acquire the apostolic faith and spirit that produced those outstanding works of biblical truth and faith. In **Jeremiah 6:16**, this is what the Lord says: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it. And you will find rest for your souls.”

This brings me nicely to our scripture lesson from **Acts 10:1-23**. Here we see that Peter and Cornelius are locked into digital living. They are going to learn that it is the Spirit of God who opens up the future – and prods the church into doing things it can never learn from the reality of digital living. We can get so caught up in the ‘**now**’ – we forget the ‘**how**’ moments of the past – and the ‘**wow**’ moments of the future. We need all three dimensions of time to live faithfully.

A distinguished African-American minister in the city of Atlanta, Ga., during the 1960’s – would often pray before the service, “**Lord – may something happen in this service today – that is not printed in the bulletin.**”<sup>2</sup> Well, today we see the work of God in the lives of two men – that is not included in their game plan and their goals and objectives for that day. They wind up doing something not printed in the bulletin.

A German theologian by the name of Rudolf Otto startled the academic community 100 years ago when he wrote that “Western scholarship has turned God into an idea – a philosophic concept.” Religious faith focused solely on the academic dimension. We are to love God with all our heart – mind – soul – strength. In his book **THE IDEA OF THE HOLY** – he called it the “mysterium tremendum.” He believed we must also experience the mystical – the deep – the profound. The book of Acts confirms this when it talks about wind, fire, and spirit. To this day most protestant churches are afraid and threatened by the word “Pentecostal.”

In the latest edition of the “**Weavings**” publication – a spiritual director with extensive training and credentials in psycho-therapy believes that “most of us don’t see or experience the ‘holy’ in the middle of our lives because we are so busy juggling and multi-tasking that we are run by our lives – rather than living them as gifts from God.”<sup>3</sup>

We pick up our story in **verse 1** where we learn about a man called Cornelius who was living in the city of Caesarea. We learn that he is a man of power and influence – a military office – a Centurion. A Centurion was in charge of a company of

100 fighting soldiers. This man is a symbol of the oppressive establishment – whose iron rule they lived under. He is part of the status quo.

We learn in **verse 2** that he has a special reverence for God – and actually prayed to God. He also is described as a man who cared about the Jewish people – was charitable in his use of money. This was not the average run-of-the-mill military type who was usually cold and heartless to those who they ruled over. He sounds like a person who served on the Caesarea Chamber of Commerce and the local United Way Board of Directors. His picture could have been on the cover of “**Time**” magazine. We would probably call him a seeker in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He has some religious connections, but no real faith commitment to the living God. He knows some of the vocabulary words – but has not fully submitted in obedience to their truth.

This is why Peter is needed. Peter is a great preacher with a powerful message – if God can only teach him that others – besides the Jews – need to hear the word as well and be invited to consider the claims of faith. Cornelius is open to receive the message – but needs a messenger to share the message of salvation with him. There are many like Cornelius in Lancaster County. They are not far from the kingdom.

The Apostle Peter was mentored by our Lord for three years as a disciple (a student – a learner). Jesus had taught and modeled for them how to reach beyond the paradigm of Jewish Messianic nationalism and to rejoice in the universality of the gospel message.

Peter has seen Jesus’ interaction with the Canaanite woman and daughter, the Samaritan woman at the well, and the Roman Centurion. Jesus was trying to teach them that faith in the living God was not dependent on racial background or financial position – but on the heart set on God. Jesus was trying to get Peter to think outside the box – but not outside the bible. Peter has been a major player at the day of Pentecost in **Acts 2** – and the Samaritan Pentecost in **chapter 8**. He was not far from the kingdom Jesus was ushering into human history.

In our lesson today – Peter’s familiar world is first challenged and then enlarged. The Holy Spirit is helping Peter move beyond prejudice – bigotry – and snobbery. Now you know why – in this lesson – the Holy Spirit must get Peter’s attention – not once – not twice – but three times. I am so thankful that God is patient with us. If it took Peter three times – imagine how long it’ll take for God to get it through our hard heads.

Both Dr. James Boice and Dr. John Stott believe that what Jesus said in **Matthew 16:19** to Peter is being fulfilled. Jesus said to Peter, “I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.” Peter was given two keys. He used the first key to open the door of the gospel to the Jewish people at Pentecost – which he did masterfully. He used the second key to open the door of the gospel to the Gentiles, which takes place in our lesson today.<sup>4</sup> Although the Apostle Paul is primarily the missionary to the Gentiles – Peter was the **first** to bring the gospel to a strictly Gentile audience.

Dr. Luke, who – under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – writes both the book of Acts and the gospel bearing his name – gives a foreshadowing of this great event when he writes about the birth of the Messiah/Christ in **Luke 2:10** – “I bring you good news of great joy that will be to **all** the people.” (NIV)

Peter knows about the impartiality of God and the universality of salvation and – after this pivotal event – he “**knows**” about it. As Rudolf Otto would say, ‘He experiences it as more than an academic answer – but on a much more profound and mystical level.’ As Zig Ziglar often shared, “Hardening of the attitude is the most deadly disease on the face of the earth.”

In the early 1980’s – Dr. Jerry Falwell, Dr. Bob Jones, and a host of conservative Republican senators – criticized Dr. Billy Graham for going to Moscow, Russia to preach and hold a crusade. Dr. Graham went anyway. He was more concerned about how God was going to use him than the Russian government. He obeyed God rather than man as **Acts 5:32** clearly teaches us. It is tough to move beyond nationalism, racism, classism – but that is exactly what is happening in our lesson today.

Now notice in **verse 5** – God commands Cornelius to send personnel to Joppa. Cornelius is used to giving orders – not taking them. However, as a soldier he knows the place of authority – and he does exactly what God tells him to do. (This is my first hint he is not a Methodist.) It was at Joppa many years ago – that a man called Jonah heard that God wanted him to preach to non-Jewish people and he tried to run away from that order. This is why we need to know our **past**.

So, here we pick up the drama at Joppa. Peter is staying with a tanner – which is a small miracle in itself. Tanners are people who own animal skins – many of which were unclean to the kosher dietary laws. This would be like me staying at the home of the manager of the most notorious night club or local bookie while on a preaching mission.

In **verse 9** we see Peter is praying and realizes that he is hungry. He orders a kosher burger and a vanilla shake (It is in the Greek text). However, God uses this Kodak moment to give Peter a larger picture of his beautiful and marvelous creation. God gives Peter a Jewish nightmare! Peter sees pork chops, bacon, lobster tail, a bottle of Boone’s Farm apple wine, and non-Kosher goodies.

So in **verse 13** the marching orders come from above, “Peter – put that pork chop in your mouth and clean the plate. However, in **verse 14**, Peter responds “Lord – I will certainly **not**. I never ate non-Kosher food – I ain’t going to start now.” However, God’s word reaches Peter in his vision as recorded in **verse 15**, “Don’t call anything I have created unclean.” It took the good Lord 3 ringie-dingies to get this through Peter’s thick skull. This is my first evidence that Peter was a United Methodist after all. However, this is why I believe there is hope for the United Methodist church – and the body of Christ as a whole. If born again – spirit-filled – Peter needed God’s nudge and

three ringie-dingies on more than one occasion – God will not forsake us as well. His grace is always greater than all my sin and stubbornness.

Only later does Peter make the transition that God is not talking about food alone – but about people. There are no ‘untouchables.’ If God touched the earth – and us – than no one is beyond the reach and touch of God’s hands or ours. So the big fisherman learned that the pool of life contained more fish than he knew of.

In my day we considered unclean those with long hair – those who wore blue jeans and sneakers to church – and don’t forget about those miniskirts. Those mini skirts helped me to get through a lot of long sermons.

If the truth is known – that’s how Mary got my attention one night. Now, I can’t go much farther with this story – so we must move on.

Every church should be a beautiful tapestry of people – not a bland one-colored blanket. We invite people to experience the transformational power for all of life. This is experienced in different ways by different people. However, what we hope is that our faith can make us a different person.

The strength and beauty of every church is not in the offering plates – but only in the faithfulness to Christ reflected there. If we live only by the digital watch and not the spirit of God – this church - and every church - will be spiritually dead in a few years.

I love the witness of John Wesley who – despite being a loyal Anglican and very orthodox in his theological orientation – was led by the Holy Spirit to touch and reach out to all the coal miners and other laboring class people who had fallen away from the church and - most tragically – the church had fallen away from them.

However, John Wesley and George Whitfield learned from the gospel of Matthew that if Jesus could go out and teach the disciples on a mountain – the famous Sermon on the Mount – then they could do it as well. They learned from the ancient path – and moved beyond being digital livers – and became spirit-filled disciples of Jesus Christ.

We can think outside the box – but looking inside this book – the Bible. It truly is a revolutionary book. This book is full of **wind** – **spirit** – and **fire**.

God just might do something that is not in the bulletin or portfolio. I believe there is some Cornelius out there who needs the invitation only you can extend. They are not far from the kingdom of God.

May God give us grace and courage so to do.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

August 10, 2008 Preached at both the 8:30 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. services

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Bishop William H. Willimon.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to the late Dr. William Holmes Border for this insight.

<sup>3</sup> Gunilla Norris, **THE HEART OF RESPONSIBILITY**, Weavings, July-August, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> James Boice, **ACTS: An Expository Commentary**, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1997, page 173.

Pastor Eric will be away on vacation and will not return to the pulpit until **September 14, 2008**. Pastor Eric will continue his series on the book of Acts. You may download Pastor Eric's sermons from our web site [www.eumcnh.org](http://www.eumcnh.org).