

THE CALL OF THE WILD

ACTS 10:1-16

There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always.

About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!" And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, "What is it, lord?"

So he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do."

And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually. So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa.

The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour (or noon, it was lunchtime).

Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth (it was

like a giant picnic blanket). In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air.

And a voice came to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat."

But Peter said, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean." And a voice spoke to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common." This was done three times.

And the object was taken up into heaven again.

According to an article in USA Today, folks are going wild over exotic meats. A growing number of meat markets and butcher shops are selling game meats.

Along with the usual staples: *beef, chicken, and turkey* - today people are adding *zebra, venison, buffalo, wild boar, ostrich, rattlesnake, antelope, kangaroo, even alligator and crocodile* to their diets.

The article quoted a chef in Dallas, Texas, "Ostrich and antelope are two of our biggest sellers. It used to be that I couldn't give it away, but now everybody wants to expand their taste-bud vocabulary."

Well, in Acts 10 the Lord seeks to *expand Peter's taste-bud vocabulary*. God serves a koshered Jew a variety of exotic meats, and commands him to eat.

At first Peter is reluctant, but eventually He obeys.

God repeats the vision three times to convince Peter that the new entrees' are good for *the body* - not necessarily *his body*, but for **the body of Christ!**

Eventually the Apostle Peter answers *the call of the wild* and obeys the Lord. He opens his mind, his heart, his mouth, and in the process the community of God.

In a daring act, Peter forever changes the scope of Christianity and the make-up of the Christian Church.

In Acts 10 God does a new work and chooses Peter to lead the way. Peter moves out into new territory. He blazes a new trail. He sails into uncharted waters.

Yet first, he has to overcome his own reluctance and hesitance. It's through this vision in Acts 10 that God gives Peter the courage to cut anchor and set sail.

You and I need to understand that God is always doing a *new thing*. Whenever He waters the earth no two raindrops or snowflakes are just alike. When God makes people no two thumbprints are identical.

God loves variety. The Creator likes to be creative.

The Scriptures tell us that God promised Israel **a new covenant...** He puts **a new heart** and **new spirit** within us... He places **a new song** in our mouth, and pours out **the new wine** of His Spirit... Jesus gave His disciples **a new commandment** - to love one another...

When we embrace Christ we're told that old things are passed away and behold **all things become new**.

One day God will even create **a new heaven and a new earth...** In fact, the Bible ends with this declaration, Revelation 21:5, **"Then He who sat on the throne said, 'Behold I make all things new.'"**

The one true God is a God of newness.

God always has a new work He wants to start - a new plan He wants to employ - new changes He wants to initiate. The words "**God**" and "**new**" go together.

This all sounds exciting! We like to talk about new ventures and dream of new territory - but if the truth be told, most human beings are creatures of habit...

I heard of a man who lived on a lake far from the nearest city. He owned an airplane and enjoyed taking his wife on weekend flights. But he hated the long drive from his house to the airport where he stored his plane.

So he decided to replace the tires on his airplane with pontoons so that he could land his plane on the lake in front of his house, and avoid the drive into town.

Once the modifications had been completed he took his wife on the maiden voyage. But when he returned, *out of habit*, he headed for the airport to land the plane.

He'd started his descent when it dawned on his wife what was happening. She screamed, "**You can't land on a runway! We've got pontoons, not tires!**" He pulled up the controls at the last second and averted disaster.

Well, needless to say the couple was seriously shaken. After they had safely landed their airplane back on the lake, both of them breathed a sigh of relief.

That's when the pilot turned to his wife and admitted, "**Honey, that was the stupidest thing I've ever done.**" *Then he opened the door and stepped into the lake.*

We are creatures of habit. We gravitate more toward *the rut*, than we do *the risk*. We're often slow to adapt to the changes God wants to make in our lives.

Rather than be ready to *branch out* we *stay put*.

God is the one who's quick to move ahead. We're the ones, *who more often than not*, are lagging behind.

God wanted to begin a new chapter in His plan for the ages with this man named Peter. Jesus chose Peter to take the first step in a brilliant new direction.

For 2000 years God had worked almost exclusively among the descendants of Abraham. To participate in God's plan for salvation a person had to be a Hebrew.

But with the coming of Jesus into the world, God made a major change. No longer would you have to be a *child of Abraham* to become a *child of God*.

Now everyone, Jew and Gentile, could join God's family by simply *expressing faith and embracing Jesus*.

On the cross Jesus died to forgive the sins of the whole world - not just those of the Jews. This meant God's family would no longer be a Jewish fraternity.

The family of God was now for all people - of all races - of all tribes and ethnicities... We're no longer first and foremost *Jew or Gentile, black or white, young or old, male or female, Bulldogs or Yellow Jackets*.

We're now one new race of people... **Christians.**

Just before our Lord ascended into heaven, He told His disciples to take the Gospel to Jerusalem, and Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Earlier, Jesus had given to Peter the keys of the Kingdom. It would be Peter's joy and privilege to open the door of the Church to each new people group.

In Acts 2 Peter swung open the door to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost... In Acts 8 He opened the door to Samaritans... Now in Acts 10 Peter has the privilege of swinging open the door of God's family to Gentiles...

Before this chapter is through, Peter will preach the Gospel to a group of Italian soldiers in the city of Caesarea - *and a new day - a new era* - will dawn.

Without a baptism or a circumcision - without offering a tithe or a sacrifice - without engaging in a ritual or making any attempt to keep the Jewish Law - through faith in Jesus alone the first Gentiles will be welcomed into God's family and filled with His Holy Spirit.

What an exciting breakthrough to be part of - yet Peter was initially resistant. Despite understanding his calling, Peter gravitates back to familiar ground.

He camps out on old territory.

He's comfortable where he's at. He's use to certain protocols and it takes a nudge from God to move him in a new direction. The Lord spoke to Peter in a vision.

Peter had been staying with Simon the tanner in the city of Joppa. It was noontime and the Mediterranean heat had

begun to soar. Peter decides to move to the rooftop patio to enjoy the shade. Ole Peter has a cold glass of lemonade in one hand and his Bible in the other. He's chilling, and spending time with the Lord.

But it doesn't take long for Peter to get hungry - not just hungry for the Lord, but hungry for a Big Mac.

It's lunchtime! *And it's comforting to me to realize that God not only speaks to us while we're fasting, but also while we're waiting on lunch.* God can speak to me while I'm on my knees, or while I'm in the drive-thru line at Wendy's. **If the Lord uses Peter's stomach to speak to his spirit - then there's hope for me!**

Peter falls into a trance and he sees a vision. A giant picnic blanket descends from heaven. God was the cook who prepared the lunch, but when Peter looked at the menu it was full of what Judaism considered exotic meats - *pork chops, bacon, sausage, shrimp...*

This was all stuff a good Jewish boy couldn't eat.

Yet God was inviting Peter to eat what had previously been forbidden. *He was doing a new thing!*

It reminds me of a man who moved his family to the back country of Arizona to try his hand at farming, but times got tough. The situation became desperate.

His family was starving, so when a giant condor flew over his house, and landed in his front yard, he ran inside and grabbed his shot gun. It was provision from God! *Blam, the bird was dead!* He plucked the huge fowl, and served it up as a feast for his wife and kids.

But as the family sat down to dinner the game warden showed up. He busted into the house, grabbed the bird as evidence, and handcuffed the man.

The farmer was so sorry. He explained the dire and desperate circumstances that had driven him to kill a priceless bird on the state's endangered species list.

The man begged for mercy, "Please, my poor wife and children were starving. We had no food. I'm so sorry. I'll never do it again!" The game warden was sympathetic to his pleas... and decided to let him go...

But as the game warden walked off, he turned and asked the farmer, "*Hey, off the record, just tell me one thing, I've always wondered, what does condor meat taste like?*" The man looked up rather matter-of-factly and answered, "O, condor meat is a little sweeter than bald eagle, but not quite as tender as spotted owl."

Well, as far as Peter was concerned he would be in big trouble with the Jewish game wardens if he ate an animal off Moses' forbidden list. In Leviticus 11, God deemed certain foods "*unclean.*" They were taboo - off limits. Jewish people were only supposed to eat kosher or "*clean*" animals - sheep, and goats, and the like.

But now God was changing the rules... ***And God can do that by the way!*** God established the rules in the first place, so He can change them if He likes.

The dietary laws were put in place for a certain period of time - and for specific purposes - but once the reason for the

rules had expired, and the time period had elapsed - the rules were no longer necessary.

A voice from heaven reiterates to Peter three times, "What God has cleansed you must not call common."

Peter's reluctance and hesitance to obey God is almost comical. He sits down to the picnic and the voice of God thunders, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat."

That strikes me as a pretty authoritative command!

But Peter responds, "Not so, Lord!"... *Peter, that's an illogical statement - you can't say, "Not so, Lord!"* You can say, "not so, friend" - or "not so, buddy" - or "not so Mister" - but you can't say, "Not so, Lord!" You can't call Jesus "Lord," "Master," "Boss" - then refuse to obey Him. Peter's answer is the ultimate oxymoron!

Yet before we laugh too hard at Peter, we should recall how many times God has tried to initiate a change in our lives. He gave us new marching orders, but for one reason or another, we were obstinate.

We echoed Peter's response, "Not so, Lord!"

Here's what I believe... Usually, for a Christian it's not that we don't want to obey. We know the changes God requires are needed. We're even excited about the newness He bring to our lives. We know and believe that what God does in us is for our good... *yet why the reluctance, the hesitance, the apprehension?*

There are three obstacles Peter had to overcome before he could embrace and cooperate with the new work God wanted to do *with him* and *through him*.

The first obstacle was **prejudice**.

The second was **precedent**.

And the third was **preference**.

And these are the same three obstacles you and I have to overcome if we want to cut anchor and be free to follow the new directives of the Holy Spirit.

To escape the rut and move along a new path for God we also have to overcome the roadblocks of **prejudice**, and of **precedent**, and of **preference**.

The first inner roadblock Peter had to overcome was **prejudice**. Prejudices are *false notions* and *erroneous assumptions*. And Peter's Jewish upbringing had spawned all kinds of prejudices about Gentiles.

Some of the Jewish rabbis taught that Gentiles were physically contaminated and unclean. They were painted as carriers of disease and transmitters of sin.

The rabbis prohibited a Jew from entering a Gentile's house, or a Gentile from entering a Jewish home.

If a Jew accidentally brushed up against a Gentile while walking down the street as soon as he arrived home he was suppose to burn his tainted clothes - and take a ritual bath to cleanse himself of the impurities.

Some rabbis went so far as to teach that the Gentiles had but one purpose - *they were created to stoke the flames of*

Hell. First century Jews had forgotten the OT prophecies that spoke of God's love for Gentiles, and His intention to use Israel to be a light to the Gentiles.

This vision was important to Peter not only because it permitted him to eat bacon for breakfast, but because it allowed him to eat it with Gentiles. The vision cleared up his misconceptions and dispelled his prejudices.

As vision goes, it caused Peter to see clearly - to see *people different from himself - people other than his Jewish brethren - Gentiles* - as God Himself saw them.

The change God required in Peter's diet illustrated the changes He was making in Peter's relationships.

For centuries Jews had been considered **clean** - and Gentiles **unclean**... Jews were **special** - everyone else was merely **common** - but God is showing Peter that now the line of demarcation has changed.

In God's eyes humans are no longer separated as Jews and Gentiles, but as believers and unbelievers.

God makes everyone who embraces Jesus a special person - *regardless of their race, age, gender, nationality, economic status, or football team loyalty.*

It's now cool for Peter to eat a barbecue pork sandwich - and more importantly, it's cool for him to do it with Gentile believers. **In Christ we're all one.**

Let me suggest Peter is not the only person who's had a prejudice that kept him from moving in the new direction God desired. We all hold on to man-made traditions, or Scriptural

misunderstandings - *that keep us out of new venues - away from new people - closed to new ideas - and deprived of new experiences.*

I'm not sure Peter was aware of his prejudice until it was challenged - until the picnic blanket of exotic meats descended from heaven and he was told to eat.

*Are you sure your reluctance to move in a certain direction - or embrace a particular person - is founded on a biblical conviction, **or is it a mere prejudice?***

I recall when I first met Pastor James - after a few weeks I had to repent of thinking it was impossible to be a Tech fan *and* a Christian. It was pure prejudice!

If I hadn't overcome it I would've been deprived of a good friend... *What prejudices are holding you back from the new work God wants to do in your life?*

The second roadblock Peter had to overcome was **precedent**. Peter was being asked to do what he had never done before - he'd stayed kosher his whole life.

He wasn't sure he wanted to start a new precedent.

Listen to his rebuttal, **"For I have never eaten anything common or unclean."** Peter is saying, **"I'm a good Jewish boy. I've taken pride in my diet. My faith has been based on my choice in food. I've never had sausage on my pizza - and I'm too old to start now!"**

Some steps are hard to take just because we've never taken them before. We like living in the comfort zone. The shallow end seems safer. There's less risk.

Sadly, some of us would rather stay close to home - even if it means missing out on God's best for us.

I admit there's a sense of security in the routines of life. We get use to patterns, and resent the disruptions.

Some of us get silently ticked-off when a visitor comes to church and they sit in our sanctuary seat. *How dare them!* I have to find a new seat - and adjust to a different angle! It's an un-welcomed disturbance.

Once, a young woman was helping her mother-in-law prepare Thanksgiving dinner. She noticed her mother-in-law sliced off the end of the turkey before putting it into the pan. The young lady asked her why...

Her puzzled mother-in-law answered, "To be honest, I'm not sure. That's just the way my mother did it."

The next year the young lady was helping grandma prepare for the family's Thanksgiving feast. She asked, "Why do you slice off the end of the turkey before you put it in the pan?" Grandma was also surprised.

She answered, "To tell you the truth, I'm really not sure. That's just what great-grandmother always did."

Later that night the daughter-in-law asked her great-grandma why she'd cut off the end of the turkey before putting it in the pan. The matriarch of the family explained, "Why honey, we were so poor. My pan wasn't big enough for the turkey." Often we get stuck in patterns that have long outlived their original purpose!

We do stuff, but we no longer know why! “*We’ve always done it that way*” isn’t a good enough answer.

Do you know why you do what you do - *especially when it comes to your relationship with God*? Are you following truth, or are you bowing to a precedent?

Too many Christians are weighed down by the familiar. Your balloon is filled with hot gas, but you’ll never get off the ground, and soar in a new direction - until you cut the tie-lines, and drop the sand-bags.

The third roadblock Peter had to overcome was **preference**. This is similar to precedent, but there's a difference. **Precedent** is addiction to what's familiar, while **preference** is addiction to what's comfortable.

Precedent does things because that's the way we've always done them... Whereas, **preference** does things just because it feels good, or it feels right at the time.

Many Christians resist God’s growth - and the new experiences He desires for them - because initially new ventures are accompanied by uncomfortable feelings.

Here’s a truth you’ll want to jot down, “**All growth requires change, all change requires loss, and all loss requires pain.**” This is why we don’t grow, we refuse to branch out, when it causes some initial discomfort.

This is why I empathize with Peter. Diet was no small matter to a Jew. Peter was trained and conditioned from childhood to view foods as *clean and unclean*.

To change his perspective at the drop of a hat, he would now have to ditch long held beliefs, and violate his convictions, and throw tradition to the wind.

This wouldn't be easy. This would be a tall order for an orthodox Jew. In a million ways, for Peter to eat a barbecue pork sandwich... *it just wouldn't feel right.*

This is like a die-hard Southern Baptist wearing shorts to Church - or mowing their grass on Sundays.

It's a behavior that goes against their grain. It's not how they were taught. It violates their conscience.

There are certain behaviors that are not morally or biblically wrong, they just fly in the face of our tradition.

This is the visceral reaction some traditional church-folks might have when they walk into A church that's playing rock'n music. There's nothing in the Bible to suggest one style of music is any holier, or more pleasing to God, than another - but if you're not use to, or if you've been told it's wrong... *it doesn't feel right.*

All too often prejudices, precedents, and preferences are based on our *feelings*... rather than *God's truth*.

And here's a shocking statement, "**The Holy Spirit is always biblical, but He is not always traditional.**" God's truth can take us outside the boundaries of our tastes. God's Spirit isn't bound to conform to our preferences.

Let me make another shocking statement. Often the Holy Spirit's enemy in our life is our own conscience.

Our conscience can be our friend or our enemy.

The conscience is an interesting organ. It's trained by either tradition or God's truth. Usually the conscience is on God's side, but at other times it's not.

On occasion we have to step over our conscience in order to obey the Lord's command. We have to open ourselves up to the new work He wants to do in us.

Our text is a great example... Up until the time of Peter's vision his diet was a matter of conscience.

Even if Peter was tempted with a bacon biscuit his conscience wouldn't allow him to eat. But now God is requiring him to retrain his conscience...

Bacon biscuits might not be your challenge, but what about other *prejudices, or precedents, or preferences?*

Maybe you were taught to be suspicious of white people... or you shouldn't mingle with black folks...

Maybe you don't gravitate toward young people. You're more comfortable with folks your own age...

It could be that tattoos give you creeps, but your neighbor has one, and God has called you to befriend your neighbor. *Don't let a tattoo become a taboo...*

It could be you've never interacted with little kids, but that's the group God has laid on your heart to help...

Perhaps you've been biased in the past toward specific fashions, or styles of worship, or certain Christian liberties, or cultural traditions - and your likes and dislikes are now getting in the way of obeying God and moving into a new place. **Don't**

mistake a prejudice, or a precedent, or a preference for the truth.

God's truth is the truth, and it's truth that sets us free!

Here's another illustration....

Nothing is more uncomfortable, or unnatural, than snow skiing - especially if you're use to water skiing.

Here're two sports that require opposite motions. To water ski you lean back - to snow ski you lean forward. Lean back on snow and you end up on your backside.

To snow ski you have to resist your feelings, and former inclinations, and lean forward... and it feels odd.

You're flying downhill, and every instinct tells you to lean uphill. You've got to fight the natural tendency.

The only way you can learn to ski is to resist your fake feelings and make yourself do what's uncomfortable - the thing that doesn't come easy.

It's amazing how much of Christian discipleship doesn't feel natural at first. The will of God can cause a beginning fear and discomfort. This is why you have to endure the initial awkwardness to enjoy the blessing.

For example, worship is an activity that can feel strange at first. Closing your eyes and lifting your hands may cause you to feel a bit self-conscious - but our wonderful God deserves to be worshipped!

Think too about tithing - trust me, giving 10% of your income to God is not a natural impulse. At first it's uncomfortable -

you're filled with doubt - until you begin to see the blessings the Lord brings as a result.

Sharing your faith is also uncomfortable in the beginning - no one likes to bring up a subject that other people usually want to duck. But if another person's eternity can be altered, isn't it worth tolerating an awkward moment and some initial resistance?

Even getting involved in a new church can be disconcerting. We think, *"Well, I don't know anyone here. Or these people are not like me."* But that reluctance is robbing you of friendships that you need.

You open the door to incredible new experiences when you break out of your comfort zone, and you're willing to respond... *"Yes, Lord - anything you say!"*

Years ago the Denver Zoo was given a huge, white polar bear. The bear was beautiful! But the zoo had no place to exhibit the animal. Funds had to be raised to build an environment similar to its natural habitat.

In the meantime the bear was placed in a small, temporary cage. The space was so small the bear could only take three steps in any one direction - turn around - then take three steps in the opposite direction.

The bear repeated the pattern over and over.

Well, after a year or so of construction the bear finally got its new home - it was a magnificent venue - it had caves, waterfalls, rocks. There was plenty of room for the bear to roam. But when he was unleashed he took three steps -

turned around - and took three steps back. The bear repeated the maneuver over and over.

God wants to build a Christian life for you that allows you room to roam, and explore, and enjoy new environments, and new people, and new opportunities.

But it's up to you to shed your “three steps and turn around” mentality. We need to break out of the rhythm of faithlessness, and muster the courage to open ourselves up to the new work God wants to do in us.

It's no surprise Peter's vision was repeated three times. Hey, it shot down his **prejudices** - it overcame **precedent** – and propelled him past his **preferences**.

God expanded Peter's spiritual taste buds.

And He wants to do the same in your life! He wants to break up your bland diet and challenge you to try a few exotic dishes. *Will you answer the call of the wild?*

Let God do a new work in and through you!