I wouldn’t be the person I am today if I had never traveled. Traveling allows you to pick up stories like few other experiences. From entering temples in Sri Lanka and being overcome with the smell of incense and deep reverence to dodging the mean monkeys and snake charmers outside. To sailing off the coast of Scotland, hoping not to freeze with fear and cold as you’re half way up the main mast, awake in the middle of the night looking for rocks, ships and other obstacles. From waking up on a bus as the sun rises over the Pyrenees’ to missing the bus from Barcelona back to your campsite, and standing in the street as a thunderstorm drenches you.

The feeling of awe, being on top of the world as you look up and see the armpit of the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro, only to bump into a friend you went to school with. From booking a hostel online because it shared your name, to eating donkey sausage on an overnight train across the Hungarian plain into Romania.

I don’t get to travel like this anymore. I have had to become creative in how I seek out new cultures, people, places, and languages. And this week I found all of it as I read straight through the Acts of the Apostles in preparation for this sermon. I know what you’re thinking. “I’ve read Acts, Emma, and it was nothing like eating donkey sausage on an overnight train across the Hungarian plain.” Stick with me. Acts is better than the weirdest episode of Bear Grylls. Acts brings us stuff like tongues of fire on people’s heads with no injury! A spirit that speaks through people in languages they don’t know! A jail that mysteriously falls down without injuring the unjustly imprisoned! Localized earthquakes! Casting out demons! The momentary eradication of poverty! Murder! Malta! Rome! Cyprus! Crete! Syria! …. Sri Lanka ain’t got nothing on Acts.

No wonder faith is often described as a journey. So, let’s go!

To set the scene: After the persecution following the stoning of Stephen, the new believers scattered to towns and areas outside of Jerusalem. And although things had calmed down a bit, these young Jewish followers of The Way remained outside of the city. They set up house churches and meetings and grew in size. Their reputation grew so much that Peter made it his mission to visit them all.

On his journey around the fledgingly church groups, Peter got up to some crazy stuff and news was beginning to spread. He has already been to Lydda and Sharon, where he healed a man named Aeneas. In Joppa, he brought a dead woman named Tabitha back to life, which apparently is an act that will garner some extra attention. It certainly made him super popular with the people of Joppa, who demanded he stay. So Peter boarded at Simon the Tanner’s house down by the sea.

Meanwhile, farther down the road in Caesarea, we have Cornelius. Cornelius has an awesome name. He is a centurion in the Italian Guard who has been faithfully following the example of Jesus Christ. Unlike other followers of Jesus, Cornelius is not Jewish. This was crazy. Remember Jesus, a Jew, whose Twelve disciples were Jews that since Jesus’ death and resurrection primarily preached and taught in synagogues and at the Temple…to other Jews. This, even after the events of Pentecost, was a movement within the Jewish faith. Cornelius was not a Jew, and yet this is his story, let’s pick up in Acts 10 verse 1:

*“He [Cornelius] and his whole household were pious, Gentile God-worshippers. He gave generously to those in need among the Jewish people and prayed to God constantly. One day at nearly three o’clock in the afternoon, he clearly saw an angel from God in a vision. The angel came to him and said, “Cornelius!” Startled, he stared at the angel and replied, “What is it, Lord?” The angel said, “Your prayers and your compassionate acts are like a memorial offering to God. Send messengers to Joppa at once and summon…Peter. He is a guest of Simon the Tanner, whose house is near the seacoast.” When the angel who was speaking to him had gone, Cornelius summoned two of his household servants along with a pious soldier from his personal staff. He explained everything to them, then sent them to Joppa.”*

Let’s pause at verse 8, we jump back to Peter in Joppa. He’s gone up onto the roof of Simon’s house, and he’s hungry. So hungry he falls into a trance. I don’t know about you, but I’ve never fallen into a trance while waiting for a meal. The closest I’ve come is a dangerous fit of hanger rage. Anyway, in Peter’s hanger trance, he sees visions. In verse 11, we read:

*“He saw heaven opened up and something like a large linen sheet being lowered to the earth by its four corners. Inside the sheet were all kinds of four-legged animals, reptiles, and wild birds. A voice told him, “Get up, Peter! Kill and eat!” Peter exclaimed, “Absolutely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” The voice spoke a second time, “Never consider unclean what God has made pure.” This happened three times, then the object was suddenly pulled back into heaven. Peter was bewildered about the meaning of the vision.*

*Just then, the messengers sent by Cornelius discovered the whereabouts of Simon’s house and arrived at the gate. Calling out, they inquired whether…Peter was a guest there. While Peter was brooding over the vision, the Spirit interrupted him, “Look! Three people are looking for you. Go downstairs. Don’t ask questions; just go with them because I have sent them.”*

Peter follows them to Caesarea, bringing a few of his Jewish friends from Joppa. He arrives at Cornelius’ house the next day only to find the whole place filled with people waiting to hear him speak. He’s taken back because he knows that it is forbidden for a Jew to visit with Gentiles. But after he hears Cornelius’ story of the angel visiting him, Peter says this in verse 34-36:

*“I really am learning that God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him. This is the message of peace he sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all!”*

This is an important moment. Peter, who walked with Jesus, is given a further revelation of the work of God. This is the journey of faith, this is the adventure…and it’s not always smooth sailing for Peter, or for us. The Holy Spirit is fulfilling the promise of Jesus made in John 15, verse 26 & 27.

*“When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father - the Spirit of truth, who comes from the Father - he will testify on my behalf. You are also to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.”*

Peter, realizing this, begins to speak. He is about to testify to what God is doing right then and there. And as he speaks, the Holy Spirit moves through the room and pours over everyone - Jew and Gentile. Peter and the believers who travelled with him are astonished. Peter’s moment has come. He, who was with Jesus from the beginning, must testify. Share with this young church how God is decidedly to move among them.

Remember, Peter brought believers with him. These believers are Jewish. They understand their identity as Christians as rooted in their Jewish faith. They think they understand God. They think they understand God’s message of salvation, and they, up until this point, thought God meant it for the Jews and for the Jews alone. But, God was not done speaking. For…so often…where we put a period, God puts a comma.

Friends, Christians today aren’t so different. We aren’t so different. We often think we understand God’s message of salvation. It’s easy to see it applying to those like us. It’s easy to love our neighbor when our neighbor is next door, roots for the same sports team, speaks the same language, and sends their kids to the same school. Period.

But what about our neighbor in the pew near us, who posted something political on Facebook that we radically disagreed with? What about our neighbor across the street, who voted differently than you? What about the neighbor across town, whose kid goes to a different school? Or the neighbor in another state, who is a diehard fan of your rival sports team? Or the neighbor across the globe, who speaks a different language? (yet answers the phone when you need tech support) Or the neighbor across the globe who doesn’t pledge allegiance to the American flag?

The fact is, we believe in a God that is still working? Don’t we. Isn’t God still revealing truth in 2017? Still putting replacing our periods for commas.

We aren’t good at being neighbors in the way Christ calls us to be. And the rest of the world knows it. All it takes is a cursory Google search. Enter the phrase “Why are Christians so” and Google will suggest the most commonly searched endings to that sentence. The first of which is “Why are Christians so hateful?” Then “Why are Christians so judgmental?” The church should mourn this. We should mourn this. And we should pray and seek to change this. But how?

Acts shows us these are struggles the church has always held. But Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit are still moving today, giving us their strength in our weakness, empowering us to overcome hatred and judgment with the power of love. Because while true, that faith grows and matures as it is nurtured, it perhaps grows even more as it is challenged.

Friends, I think we are living in a time when our faith is being challenged.

And by God’s grace, we find ourselves alive for such a time as this. So what are you made of? On what truth do you put your faith? For what cause do you fight? On what foundation are you building? What values are you instilling in your children and grandchildren? What does the God you worship demand of you? What will it take to break your silence, you who have been with Jesus from the beginning?

We are traversing new terrain, just as Peter did, and we can learn from his experience. When Peter and Cornelius first meet, Cornelius falls at the Peter’s feet and worships him. In response Peter lifts him up and says, “Get up! Like you, I’m just human”. Here’s our lesson:

Humility.

Church, humility comes straight from God. Humility is counterintuitive and it’s risky. But it opens us up to learning and growing. It allows us to be willing to acknowledge that we may not know everything. Humility suggests that incorporating the perspectives and ideas of others into our own lives could actually enrich us, and strengthened our faith. The reality is that we all struggle with humility. We are all arrogant at times - and pride underlies most of our vices. This is why humility is key. It is the only effective antidote to our own ego. Humility is the key to keeping God on the throne, and us out of it. This is what is referred to in John chapter 3 verse 30: “God must increase, and I must decrease.” And as my 2017 mantra goes: “God is God and I am not.”

Peter was willing and humble, when encountering difference, to take the risk to extend the Gospel. Peter, who walked with Jesus. Peter, whom had every right to be prideful or boastful…instead, chose to walk with God, to work within the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit who was moving and revealing new things that any disciple of Jesus would need to testify to. So, Peter chose humility. And this choice was the key that opened his eyes to the miraculous salvation God intended for all people. We too must choose humility in order to be faithful to the Holy Spirit’s whispers.

We must also allow the gift of humility to open us up to the presence of God in unexpected people and places. How? As, fear of the unknown dogs our every step. When the climate right now seems so negative and fraught with suspicion and accusation. Yet, in the journey or life, just as in the journey of faith the still small voice of God persists, inviting us to step into our fear and discomfort. Sometimes we need to be reminded that everyone…with no exception..is made in the image of God.

Friends, this inclusive impulse of God is not easy. Historically, the church at large has struggled with putting into action. The history of Methodism in America is an excellent case study of humans struggling and missing the mark when it comes to spreading God’s messageto all. In fact, for nearly 100 years, the Methodist Episcopal Church was divided into North and South wings over whether the gospel was meant for enslaved Africans, and what that then meant in terms of the morality of owning slaves, especially for their ministers and bishops. One can chart through history the times when the Holy Spirit was not-so-gently nudging believers to extend the Gospel further, because God was still moving. Still revealing truth, still placing commas in our understanding of the world, our faith and ourselves. So, good news was extended even to those fellow humans who were black…even to those fellow humans who were women…even to those fellow humans who couldn’t read, or couldn’t speak English…even to those fellow humans who called God by a different name, or prayed in a different way…who sang without music or danced. God is still calling the church to reach out to the ostracized today. Where are these people in our times? How do we open our arms…choosing humility over hostility…inclusion over exclusion, recognizing the divine spark inside every human being…whether we agree with them or not isn’t the point…the point is to extend the hope of the Gospel with them.

The trajectory of scripture is one of extending invitation to the highways and back alleys, even the image of the Kingdom from Revelation is one where

*“There was a great crowd that no one could number. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They were standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”*

I believe that my passion for travel is a God given gift. I haven’t always understood it as such. Yet as I reread the Book of Acts this week, this truth became evident to me. God loves all people, and the salvation of Christ is for all what a humble and hopeful message. What incredibility good news. As the Apostle Peter explains it,

*“I really am learning that God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him. This is the message of peace he sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all!”*