

The Acts 10 reading picks up at verse 34. If you read this story in isolation, it sounds like a well-trod vanilla sermon you've surely heard:

"God loves everybody, bad people hurt Jesus, but he forgives you too when you believe in him. Yada yada yada."

I don't want to minimize these core truths. On the contrary, I hope you can hear this story without the contempt of familiarity. The freshness is in the context.

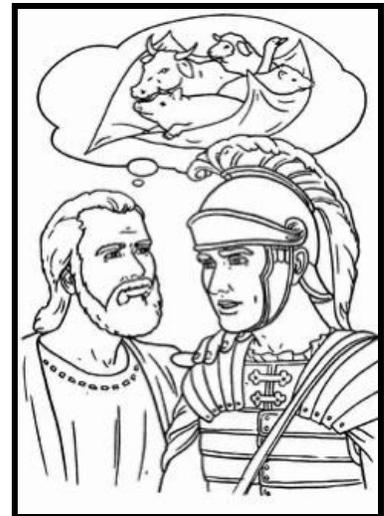
God is not just a story.

God is not just personal encounter.

God does show up in love through the biblical narrative *and* our own stories.

Context to get to Cornelius (and his family who gets baptized just after today's reading)

- Acts chapter 2 - huge multicultural party at Pentecost.
- Acts chapter 9 - a bicultural figure dies (Dorcas- a woman), leaves a hole in the community, She is raised from the dead. Things get even better because the whole community of Joppa heard and believed what had happened to her.
- Acts chapter 10 - Peter is struggling with how to deal with non-Jewish people in light of all he experienced with Jesus. Hint: God is calling him to be more of a bicultural figure -- like Dorcas. Peter reluctantly responds to God's call to visit a non-Jew, Cornelius. This man's righteousness and faith will completely change Peter's perspective and Peter does a fairly radical thing (for the time.) He eats with them (gasp), and then baptizes many in the household v 47 (double gasp).



.Context: Simon the Tanner-- early Acts 10 (before Cornelius)

Before Cornelius, Peter had been staying at a tanner's house. These character bookends: Simon the Tanner and Cornelius the centurion would have been heard at least as irony, and at most as a farce.

Simon the Tanner (a Jew) was a pitiable figure. He was probably well to do, but considered to be beneath polite society. For most of human history, tanners were just on the margin of acceptable society.

Simon the Tanner was a potent image of the divide between Jew and Gentile, pun intended. Leather was extremely important for war and worship, but the people who made it were considered dirty because they literally walked around in poo. Peter had less of a problem with that than hanging with a righteous Gentile.

Fun Fact *The Mishnah* is a compilation and interpretation of Jewish oral law. It states that a tannery should be on the east side of town no more than 50 cubits from the town outskirts (there is a wide variety of interpretation of a cubit's length.). A synagogue could never be repurposed for a tannery. Because they literally stunk up the heavens. In religious life, the tanners themselves could not even be part of Temple festivals.

Rabbi Meir – was of the opinion that even if a woman married a tanner, she could later change her mind and summarily divorce him. And did not have to marry his brother if her husband died.

Final fun fact: Those from the tanners' trade could never be king or high priest.

Context: Baptism and Cornelius' household

Peter hesitates to go to Cornelius because Jews and Gentiles were in two different worlds. Peter could stay in the home of the stinky Jewish tanner, but felt improper entering the home of a holy Gentile who was likely more "clean" with respect to the Law than the tanner.

God was knocking Peter loose from his rigid convictions. God's mission to the world finds a new gear in the relationship between Cornelius and Peter. The Baptism that happened in v 47 is less about cleaning off a stinking sinner, and more about a new community where the water of baptism is a sign of the marriage between the two distinct worlds of Gentile and Jew. The Holy Spirit threw a big multicultural party that day.

So:

God can change the world through you, if you say 'yes' to God and follow where God leads.

You are never

too rotten, outsider, old, tired, never too bad to start over again with whoever is knocking at your door.

You are also not done.

not too holy, too accomplished, too content to start again.

God is always in the business of resetting our tightly framed sense of who is good and who is bad -- who is a Gentile who is a Jew. It is in these "reset moments" where the Holy Spirit breathes through us.

Todd