

Sermon for January 17, 2016 – 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

Acts 10:34-38 (Evangelical Heritage Version)

Theme: Peace through Jesus Christ,

- 1) *Who is Lord of all,*
- 2) *As proclaimed at his Baptism*

<sup>34</sup>Then Peter began to speak: “Now I really am beginning to understand that God does not show favoritism, <sup>35</sup>but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. <sup>36</sup>He sent his word to the people of Israel, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.<sup>37</sup> “You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached. <sup>38</sup>God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the Devil, because God was with him.

Do you know what’s going to happen on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017? (I’ll give you a hint: it happens every four years.) The next president of the United States will be publicly inaugurated into office.

All politics aside, this event is very important. Why? Because it is the public declaration that the person taking the oath of office is our president and should be recognized as such. We get to hear him promise to uphold the constitution, defend our country and faithfully discharge the duties of his office for all citizens - regardless of their race, age, gender, religion or political persuasion.

This Sunday we Christians are celebrating an inauguration of sorts: the public inauguration of Jesus into his office as the Christ. When did this happen? At Jesus' baptism, when the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove, and the Father declared from heaven: *This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*<sup>1</sup>

Now we should certainly understand that Jesus was the Christ even before his baptism, but at this event his Messiahship was revealed to all – so much so that even Gentiles like Cornelius heard about it! Jesus' public ministry would now begin in earnest, as he would go around doing good – offering healing to *all* who are oppressed by the devil.

With Peter’s words to Cornelius as our guide, let us consider the good news Jesus’ Baptism proclaims to us, under the theme: **Peace through Jesus Christ, 1) Who is Lord of all, 2) As proclaimed at his Baptism.**

Part One: Peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

Our sermon text is part of a longer account of the apostle Peter visiting a gentile centurion named Cornelius after Jesus' ascension into heaven.

The book of Acts describes Cornelius as *a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment*.<sup>2</sup> *He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.*<sup>ii</sup>

Cornelius was not Jewish. He grew up in a different country in a family that probably worshipped different gods. But something happened when he was stationed in Caesarea: he came into contact with the Jewish religion. He heard about how the LORD is the one true God – maker of heaven and earth. He heard about God’s perfect, loving laws, how mankind fell into sin and our need for a Savior. More importantly, he heard that the LORD promised to send a Messiah – a Savior who would pay for the sins of the world and grant forgiveness, peace and salvation to all who would receive him in repentance and faith.

This news about the LORD changed Cornelius. He began to realize that all his idols were false: that the LORD alone was the only true God. And, trusting in the LORD’s promised mercy, he freely confessed and repented of all his sins: looking forward to the salvation the promised Messiah would bring.

Now Cornelius certainly heard reports about Jesus: the miraculous event that happened at his baptism, his miracles, teachings, as well as his crucifixion and rumored resurrection. Many people believed him to be the promised Messiah. However, the Jewish religious leaders rejected him.

Poor Cornelius – I am sure that he didn’t know what to think. Worse yet, he couldn’t just go into the local synagogue and ask the Rabbi. Why? Because he was a gentile, and it was against Jewish ceremonial traditions for any Jew to associate with a gentile or visit him.<sup>iii</sup>

But the LORD loved Cornelius and wanted him to know the truth about his Son so that he might have peace. This is why he sent an angel to tell Cornelius to send for Peter. This is also why the LORD gave Peter a special vision – showing him that he *should not call any man impure or unclean.*<sup>iv</sup> God’s grace is for all – Jew and Gentile alike.

Peter visited Cornelius and, after hearing about his vision, said: *“Now I really am beginning to understand that God does not show favoritism,<sup>35</sup> but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*

Understand Peter’s words correctly, because many try to misinterpret them to fit their false ideas about the Gospel. He is not saying that you can believe whatever you want about God because God will accept you as long as you’re a good person. No, he isn’t saying this at all!

Rather Peter is saying that God does not accept or reject people on the basis of their outward appearance: skin color, gender, age, clothing, culture, or anything like that. God looks at the heart. This is what he cares about.

The one *“who fears him and does what is right”* is a person in whom the Holy Spirit has worked a sincere sorrow and repentance over his sinful heart. Such a person will turn to Christ in faith, trusting in him for the full forgiveness of sin. He will cling to Christ alone for salvation.

Only faith in Jesus makes a person acceptable to the Lord. Why? Because it is only through faith that we are clothed with his righteousness.

Such a saving faith will also demonstrate itself in the life of the person who has it. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the repentant believer will do all he can to avoid sin and do what is good. He will do this, not in an attempt to win salvation, but to the praise and glory of the LORD who has already saved him!

Brothers and sisters in Christ: Jesus does not show favoritism, but accepts all who turn to him in repentance and faith – regardless of who they are or how greatly they have sinned in the past. Jesus is the LORD and Savior of all. Through faith in Him we can have peace. Do you believe this?

Now you might be wondering why I ask this question. “Of course we believe this. Why else would we be in Church?” The reason I ask this is that I know my own heart – how unwilling it is to bow before the LORD in humility – confessing its utter sinfulness and need for forgiveness. Yes, I know my own sinful heart – how it longs to pursue sin, and wants to use the forgiveness Christ won as a license to do so. I also know what the Bible says: that every human heart is like mine – rebellious against God and in desperate need of salvation.

So, do you recognize these things about yourself? Are you willing to fall before Jesus in genuine sorrow over sin, submitting to his authority and trusting in him for forgiveness? If so, then be at peace. Why? Because Jesus is your peace. He is your God and Savior who took on human flesh and blood in order to suffer and die for the sins of the world. He has won the righteousness you need to stand before God. He has paid for your sins in full. Jesus is the LORD and Savior of all. Turn to him in repentance and faith and be at peace.

## Part Two: Peace with Christ Jesus . . . whose Lordship was proclaimed at his baptism

But how do we know we can have peace with God through faith in Jesus? Because of what Peter told Cornelius next: [God] *sent his word to the people of Israel, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.*<sup>37</sup> “*You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached.*”<sup>38</sup> *God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the Devil, because God was with him.*

Cornelius certainly heard a lot about Jesus. He heard about John the Baptist's ministry in the wilderness – preparing people for the LORD. He heard about Jesus' Baptism: how the Holy Spirit publicly descended on Jesus like a dove, and how God the Father declared in earshot of everyone gathered there that Jesus was his Son. All this was in fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures concerning the Messiah.

Not only that, but everything Jesus did after his baptism was also in line with what the Messiah was suppose to do. He went around doing good to all – healing the sick and providing for those in need. More important, he went around healing everyone oppressed by the devil – that is, not just those who were bodily possessed by evil spirits, but everyone who lived under the burden of

guilt and was enslaved to sin. And how did he heal them? By preaching the Gospel – the good news of His forgiveness. He is the only person who could ever say to another: “Your sins are forgiven,” and actually have the power to do what those words say. Why is that? Because He truly is the Christ

Brothers and sisters in Christ: is Jesus the promised Messiah? The events surrounding Jesus’ baptism answer that question loud and clear: Yes, Jesus is the Christ – the anointed Savior, who would go out in the power of the Holy Spirit to win forgiveness, life and salvation for all.

And this is exactly what Jesus did through his perfect life, innocent death and glorious resurrection: He won salvation for all. Through the preaching of the Gospel he invites to himself everyone who is weary and burdened – oppressed by all the temptations and accusations of the devil – to come to him for relief, rest and healing.

And what a comfort this is for us to know. Why? Because who of us isn’t harassed by the devil, world and our own sinful flesh? Who of us isn’t tempted to despair because of our sins, or to think that every hardship we face in life is God showing his anger, rather than loving discipline meant for our good? Who of us doesn’t need the forgiveness, life and salvation Jesus freely offers to all?

I don’t know about you, but I certainly need this healing – not just once, but every day of my life. And I think it's safe to say that you do too.

Peter went on to tell Cornelius how he was an eyewitness to other events in Jesus life – most importantly his death and resurrection, all which proved beyond any shadow of the doubt that Jesus is the Christ God promised to send ever since the fall into sin. Peter finished by saying: *Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*<sup>v</sup>

Cornelius and his household received this preaching in faith. They believe that Jesus was the promised Christ and received the gift of the Holy Spirit. What about you, do you believe this? I pray that you do. Why? So that you might receive the peace, pardon and protection Jesus was anointed at his Baptism to bring. Through faith, Jesus will rule as king over your heart – keeping your soul safe from every attack, until he brings you home to himself in heaven. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 3:17 NIV84

<sup>ii</sup> Acts 10:1-2 NIV84

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. Acts 10:28 NIV84

<sup>iv</sup> Act 10:28 NIV84

<sup>v</sup> Acts 10:43 NIV84