

Have you put up a 2026 calendar in your home yet? Maybe you don’t operate with a wall calendar anymore, that’s so 20th Century. But perhaps you do have a daily planner, or you fill a calendar on your smart phone? While doing some after-Christmas shopping the other day I saw a very large wall calendar that has multiple pages with categories for up to 6 different people’s schedules. A large active family could use a calendar like that because they could keep track of all the activities of their family members on it. I know I would be lost without my planning calendar, because it has 18 months’ worth of important dates. It helps me to plan things in advance.

In the early days of the Christian church the Apostles were planning some big things, too. After Pentecost, Jesus’ followers found themselves in Jerusalem but also scattered far beyond it. The mission work of the community of believers was growing and expanding. But there were also huge difficulties, like arrests, persecution, debate, disagreement, and confusion. Where should the gospel be preached and by whom? What should be required of new believers? How should they take care of the poor and widowed? What about the Gentiles—**were they acceptable?**

This question was a difficult one since many of the Jews who had become Christians felt that Gentiles were unacceptable unless they converted and followed all of the Jewish laws and customs. Other Christians did not agree and felt that Gentiles could become Christians without being circumcised and following Jewish law. When the apostles and other early church leaders met in Jerusalem to debate and make future plans for the mission of the church, Peter’s encouraging words about the acceptance of the Gentiles became very important. He spoke powerfully from his own experience saying: “*We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they [the Gentiles] are*” (Acts 15:11).

This hadn't been Peter's plan originally. He had not planned on converting the Gentiles to Christ. What changed him? He received a vision from the Lord and was summoned by three men to come to Caesarea to the house of the centurion Cornelius—a Gentile. The vision in which God told Peter that whatever God makes clean and acceptable is indeed clean and acceptable was not in Peter's grand plan. It caught him by surprise while he prayed on a roof top. The visit to the house of Cornelius wasn't in Peter's plan either, but God's Holy Spirit sends Peter on his way and the mission of the church is changed forever.

What a good story for us to hear early in the New Year and on this Sunday of fresh beginnings and the Ordination and Installation of elders and deacons. It is a story of surprises, new turns, and a voice outside of us. Just when we think we have everything planned—like Peter did—God stirs up a new vision or new insight. Just when we think we know what direction our lives will take, God's Spirit sends us out into unfamiliar territory. In this New Year we who follow Jesus should keep our eyes, ears, and hearts open to where God may be leading us. Maybe there is a new ministry in our congregation that needs our leadership. Maybe our time and talents can make a difference in the lives of others in our community. Maybe it is time for us to learn more about the needs of others and then pray that we will be led to serve in some new way. Maybe it is time to dedicate more time to the study of Scripture or more time in prayer with fellow believers, so that God's Spirit may give us new understanding and stronger faith. **The season of Epiphany that follows Christmas is about God revealing things to us.** What better season to pray that God would make a new mission or a new calling clear to each one of us!

Few accusations carry more emotional wallop than that of favoritism. Some children hurt their parents by accusing them of favoring one child over another. How many employees haven't at least quietly suspected their bosses were playing favorites with some of their workers? At least Peter has the courage to admit he'd always assumed even God played favorites.

Yet when he witnesses the Spirit's mighty work in and with a Gentile, Cornelius and his household, he must admit "*I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism*" (v. 34). This is not just change for the sake of change. Peter's call to go to Cornelius is all about the grace of God. Cornelius is a God-fearing man, but still outside of Christianity. **Peter is sent by God to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to Cornelius, and as a result the Holy Spirit comes upon all who hear and the entire group is baptized** (10:48).

In Jesus Christ God has come to us so that all who believe in him receive the forgiveness of sins and new life. This Jesus, so Peter says, is for "*every nation*" (v. 35) and has been sent to be "*Lord of all*" (v. 36). The gospel of Jesus Christ is bigger than the disciples in Jerusalem, bigger than Judea and Samaria, and bigger than anyone in the early church imagined. It is no accident that the book of Acts ends with the gospel being preached in Rome, that unbelieving city and center of ruthless Roman power. There is no stopping this gracious good news of Christ. Not one of the disciples would have planned or dreamed this while they were fearfully hiding in a locked room shortly after Jesus' resurrection. But God dreamed it; God planned it; God made it happen.

When Betty's daughter told her that she planned to bring a new friend home from college over spring break, Betty was delighted. He was apparently a Christian young man; he was bright, kind, and thoughtful. But when Betty's daughter arrived home Betty was somewhat shaken to see that her daughter's new boyfriend was African American. Betty was wise enough not to overreact and to wait and listen and learn as they ate dinner together. All sorts of thoughts entered Betty's mind over dinner; her feelings were mixed. Suddenly Betty had a lot of things to think through. When Betty's pastor conducted a study group titled, "Christian Faith and Race," Betty decided to attend. The class wasn't always comfortable, but it was always interesting and challenging. Betty's understanding grew and her faith grew. **She never planned for this, but the grace of God led her into a new way of seeing things.** She ate with her daughter's boyfriend and her eyes were opened. That's Betty's story.

But that's Peter's story too. That's the story of God's people in mission—in mission by the grace of God. I remember hearing of a young man who went to a minister in great distress about his spiritual life. He was like Cornelius—a good person, but he didn't understand that Jesus was his Savior. He said to the minister, "Sir, can you tell me what I must do to find peace?" The minister replied, "Young man, you are too late." "Oh!" said the young man, "You don't mean to say I am too late to be saved, do you?" "No, no," was the reply. "But you are too late to do anything. **Jesus did everything that needed to be done twenty centuries ago. Learn about and believe in what Jesus has done for you, and you will find peace.**" The young man was amazed.

This same good news turned a Roman Centurion's life upside down, and for the better. And it turns peoples' lives upside down today, for the better. To spend your whole life believing that being a good person is the way to heaven, but then to find out that it's not the way of salvation, but it's through the person of Jesus Christ, his life and death and resurrection—that he is the only way to heaven. **What amazing news that is!**

This whole situation turned the Apostle Peter's life upside down as well. Listen again to what Peter says in verse 34&35: "*I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.*" Peter couldn't believe what he was seeing. He was in the house of a Gentile, and God was converting Gentiles and blessing Gentiles just like God had done for Jews. This goes against everything Peter was taught to believe. Peter always thought God was for the Jews only, that Gentiles were the outsiders, the second-class citizens of the world who didn't deserve God's attention. But now, Peter sees that God loves the Gentiles just like the Jews. **Now Peter sees with his own eyes that God loves all people**, regardless of what nationality they are. **He wants all people to believe and be saved.** Now Peter sees that **God is a God for every person on the face of the earth**, not just for a select few. This blew him away. **It changed the way he thought and**

he was amazed!

Sometimes we forget that no matter what a person's nationality, no matter what a person's social or economic situation, God wants every person on the face of this earth to believe in Jesus Christ and be saved. God loves me, but he also loves the child raised in an Islamic home in Pakistan just as much. God loves you, but he loves that homeless person who's begging on the street just as much. God loves all of us, but he loves that person who has made many mistakes in his life and is now sitting in the Allegheny County jail just as much. **God is a God who loves all people, and wants all people no matter who they are, to believe in Jesus and be saved.** He does not show favoritism, as Peter reminds us. What an amazing and loving God we have! As a church, we are here to share with all people and all nations these wonderful truths from God's Word, so that God can change people for the better.

A businessman in New York City called his mother on Long Island:

“Mom, it’s me.” She said, “*Don’t worry about not calling. If I had a stroke, it probably wouldn’t be that bad.*”

“I’m sorry.” She said, “*Don’t worry about not visiting me. If I were on the floor, I could probably drag myself over to the phone and call for help.*”

“Mom, I’ve been terribly busy. I’m awfully sorry. But we’re coming this weekend, the whole family, me and Doris and the kids.” She said, “*Doris?*”

“My wife Doris.” She said, “*Your wife’s name is Hannah!*”

“Is this 555-9312?” She said, “*No. It’s 555-9313.*”

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry, madam.” She said, “*Does this mean you’re not coming?*”

Today, God is sending us to every person on the face of this earth, no matter who they are, so that they too might find the peace they are looking for in their lives and might know **that they are acceptable to God—just as they are.**

What does this mean for us? It means God’s mission is now our mission. Amen.