I was tempted to devote this message to addressing what we all have been talking about for the last several days, and that is the results of the 2016 Presidential election. I want you to know that I have resisted that temptation, but I have responded to the election on my Facebook page, and I invite you to check that out if you are interested in what my thoughts were following the outcome of the election. This morning we will turn our attention to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as proclaimed by the Apostle Peter to Cornelius and his household, and as time allows, I will give some reflection as to how this universal gospel of Jesus Christ speaks so beautifully to the plight of our country and the choices we face as we enter back into our busy lives this week. So, please stand and let’s read together Acts 10:34-33.

Let’s remember the context of how we got here. Remember that Cornelius is a Roman centurion who, for whatever reason, has become a monotheistic worshipper of the God who is there. As a result of common grace and his desire to know God, he has become tenderhearted and generous towards the the poor; he prays regularly; and he is well thought of by the very people he has been commissioned by Rome to suppress. We read earlier in chapter 10 that an angel from heaven visits Cornelius as he is praying and expresses God’s love for Cornelius. God has heard his prayers and seen his generosity toward the poor, and now God has something new and very important for Cornelius to learn. The angel instructs Cornelius to send for Simon Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, and to bring him back to Caesarea. At the same time, in the coastal city of Joppa, God visits Simon Peter in a vision that prepares him to receive the Roman visitors and accompany them back to Caesarea. As always, I encourage you to check out the messages that covered those earlier passages on our website if you happened to be away those Sundays. Now we are picking up the story when Peter, along with six other believers from Joppa, arrives at the home of Cornelius. Luke reports that many people including family, invited friends, servants, and staff are gathered around to hear what Peter has been sent by God to tell them.

Beginning with vs. 34 we read: So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

Note once again how Luke writes that Peter “opens his mouth.” This expression is used to demonstrate that Peter is trusting the Holy Spirit to give him the words necessary to communicate the gospel to his audience. The expression hails from the prophets who would open their mouths and begin their speech with “Thus says the Lord.” Peter is God’s messenger in this setting, and we should assume that the words he speaks are those given to him by God through the Holy Spirit. Again, remember that Jesus promised in Luke 12:11 that we would not have to
worry about what we would say in such a situation…we can trust that the Holy Spirit will give us the words that we need.

Peter begins with his own confession that comes as a result of the vision God gave him on the roof in Joppa. He states, “I understand that God shows no partiality.” That was huge for Peter, for surely he had been taught his whole life that God was very partial towards the Jews, yet he cannot deny what God has recently revealed to him as he summarized in 10:28, “God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.”

So here in vs. 34 Peter restates what he has learned, but he adds some qualifiers. He states in vs. 35 that “in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.” Now, we know from Acts 10:2 that Cornelius was just such a man. Luke writes in vs. 2 that Cornelius feared God along with all of his household, he gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. So, according to Peter, even though Cornelius and his household are Gentiles and Romans, God finds them “acceptable.”

Now, what does it mean to be found acceptable to God? Is Peter saying that these people who fear God and do right things somehow earn a righteous standing before God? In other words, does this text tell us that “good people” who do “good things” go to heaven? No, that’s not what Peter is saying, and our text makes that very obvious. Peter is not saying that God finds acceptable those who fear Him and do right things such that they are without sin in His sight, in no need of forgiveness, and saved in some way other than the forgiveness that comes through Christ. If that were the case, it would be incredibly unnecessary for Peter to make the trip to Caesarea in the first place, right? Clearly Cornelius and his household need the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that’s why Peter has been sent by God, and the Gospel will lead to their salvation as made known by the baptism of the Holy Spirit that will ascend upon them at the end of Peter’s message.

So what does Peter mean when he states that those who fear God and do what is right are found acceptable to God? I think a better way to translate this word “dektos” would be “welcomed by God” or even “available to God.” In other words, God is looking for those who fear Him, whose hearts are softened to the degree that they are doing right things, and it doesn’t matter what nation, tribe, or tongue they come from. God is not partial. But it is precisely those people…those who fear God…who will be open to the Gospel. So how do we know those who fear God? By the way they treat the poor, by their generosity, and by their prayer life. That’s what the text just said. Remember, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” according to Proverbs 1:7…the fear of the Lord comes first. You want to know more about the mysteries of God and the truth of this life…begin with fearing God…that’s a good lesson for all of us.
Peter is essentially saying: God is looking for spiritually open people defined as those who live as though God is there even if they know very little about God. Such people can be found anywhere around the world, in any religion, in any country, and God is always looking for such people without partiality. For those who fear God, for those who live as though God is there even if they know very little about God…to those people God will send his messengers to proclaim to them the Gospel of Jesus Christ that they might repent, believe, be forgiven, and become followers of Jesus.

I’ve made this point before, but it needs to be repeated: God is sending us, as the church, as His witnesses, to proclaim the gospel to spiritually open people whom He has arranged for us to meet! That’s what this story tells us…that’s what the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch told us, and we’ll see that happen time and again throughout the book of Acts. If you think that our primary job is to convince hard-hearted people to change their minds and become followers of Jesus, I have to tell you that I don’t think that’s true, at least for most of us. According to the New Testament, the standard procedure is just what we’ve seen here: 1) God identifies those who fear Him and are spiritually open; 2) He then dials up a Jesus follower, or many of them, and God arranges a divine appointment for them to meet; 3) The Jesus followers are then prompted by the Holy Spirit to share the Gospel with those whom God has placed on their path.

If we took the scriptures to heart here…if we accepted that this is how it works…how would that change the way we think about the word “evangelism?” I don’t know what comes into your mind when you think of evangelism, but listen friends…this is how it works. Adrien Lewis, who delivered an excellent message last Sunday, told us a story of a man who was sent to his house to help him install his kitchen cabinets. Adrien realized after a few days that this man was sent by God at just the right time…he was spiritually open…and it was that divine appointment that led Adrien to share the gospel. Then, after Adrien was faithful with his assignment, God arranged another divine appointment with the man’s boss who then led him to the Lord that very same evening.

We were all deeply blessed by another testimony recently from a couple who developed a friendship with their waitress at a restaurant they regularly frequented. They had the opportunity to share the gospel, invite their new friend to a women’s retreat, and she gave her life to Christ. Listen: THAT’S HOW IT WORKS! God identifies those who are open to the Gospel, God arranges divine appointments, and our job is to simply share the gospel with those whom God arranges for us to meet. We may not see the results of our role in sharing the gospel, but that may not actually be any of our business. But rest assured, it is quite likely that God will place people on your path this week who are spiritually open, and we should all be prepared to share the gospel with them when prompted by the Holy Spirit. That’s what Peter is going to do now in a very awkward situation, in a very unusual environment for a man raised as a Jew, but there is little doubt that God has arranged this meeting, so he will be faithful and simply tell them what
he knows. Let’s see what he says, beginning with vs. 36: As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed…

Just a few notes and then we’ll keep going. When Peter says “As for the word God sent to Israel,” there is a ton of meaning wrapped up in the Greek term “logos” which our English version translates as “word.” One source defines logos in this way: Logos is a Greek word meaning "ground", "plea", "opinion", "expectation", "word", "speech", "account", "reason", "discourse", but it became a technical term in philosophy beginning with Heraclitus (c. 535–475 BC), who used the term for a principle of order and knowledge. Logos is the logic behind an argument. Logos tries to persuade an audience using logical arguments and supportive evidence. Logos was also thought to be a persuasive technique often used in writing and rhetoric. (Wikipedia)

Peter is using a loaded word that immediately resonates with his Hellenistic audience. They would have been exposed to Greek philosophers who regularly appealed to “logos.” It’s why the first few verses of John’s gospel so deeply affected the ancient world when John writes, “In the beginning was the word (Logos), and the word was with God, and the word was God.” I don’t have time to unpack all of that meaning this morning, but please note how significant the word choice was here for Peter.

Note also that Peter is appealing to information that the Gentile Romans already know. He states, “You yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed…”

How would these foreigners, these non-Jews/non-Christians from a pagan tradition already know about the story of Jesus Christ? Why would Peter so blatantly assume they already heard about what took place in Judea? There is only one explanation that makes any sense. The tomb was empty. The empty tomb and the resurrection of Christ is the only reasonable explanation as to why the Gentiles would have heard about Jesus of Nazareth even before Peter comes to their home. Again, I don’t have time to unpack that, but it is very significant that this Roman family was already familiar with the stories about Jesus in AD 41. I will try to circle back to that point at another time.

Let’s pick up where we left off in vs. 37. Peter states: you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging
him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

Here Peter summarizes the narrative of Jesus Christ: his life, his death, and his resurrection. Peter begins by pointing to the signs and wonders that demonstrated God’s power working through Jesus. In so doing, Peter also shares his biblical worldview with his listeners…that Jesus is Lord of all, that Jesus was anointed by God with power to heal and set free those who were oppressed by the devil, because God was with Jesus. Do you see how this testimony unapologetically addresses the source of our existence (God); the problem in our existence (the oppression of Satan); and the solution to our problem (Jesus who was appointed by God and given power to defeat the work of Satan). Remember, any worldview has to account for our origin, the problem of evil, and the hope for our human dilemma. Peter presents all of that very succinctly as he shares the good news of the gospel.

Peter then bears witness to the living Jesus who rose from the dead and even ate and drank with them upon his resurrection. So…Peter shares the Gospel first by recounting the history as understood within a biblical worldview, and then secondly he gives his personal testimony. That’s a pretty good model for us all to follow.

When we share the gospel with people, we share the history and give an account for our faith within the context of a biblical worldview. These things happened, and we believe the history that Jesus lived, Jesus died, and Jesus rose again. That means Jesus is Lord of all, Satan is our Enemy, and Jesus is our only hope. And then we give our personal testimony, our personal witness as to how the power of Christ is bringing transformation about in our own lives But it doesn’t stop there…we must also present a challenge for our listeners to respond.

Peter gets to the challenge for his audience in vss. 42-43 “And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Did you hear why we share the gospel with people? Why we dare bring up the subject and talk about our faith with people? Why we risk their condemnation or alienation by challenging them to call upon the name of Jesus to them? Here’s why: because our Lord commanded us to preach to the people and to testify!

And what are we to testify about? That Jesus is our genie who makes us happy and comfortable? That we generally agree with doctrine? No. We are to preach the good news of peace through
Jesus Christ…the shalom of God that is available for all in His name. That comes in two parts: judgment and forgiveness.

Our challenge must include that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be JUDGE of the living and the dead.

Now it just got awkward, right? I know what you’re thinking: “Our kids, our friends, and our culture is not open to a conversation about judgment,” right? I mean…if we talk about Jesus as being the “judge” of the living and the dead, we may as well hang it up because people in our culture won’t listen, right?

Wrong. And here’s why: there is no one left in our country, particularly following this recent election, who does not know to the very core of their being that things are really, really, really messed up. The election season made it clear for all of us that we are at each other’s throats, we are adrift without a sail, we are becoming self-devouring and there would appear to be no means of finding common ground. Everyone claims to be right, but we can’t all be right, right?

If ever there was a time in our nation’s history when people, whether they know it or not, are actually longing for a JUDGE, it’s now. We need a judge to help us understand the LAW. We need a JUDGE to help us discern right from wrong. We need a judge to discern who is guilty and who is innocent. And we don’t need just any judge…we need a RIGHTEOUS JUDGE.

Jesus is the Righteous Judge. He is the One appointed by God, and we know this because He lived a life that is known around the world; He died a death that is known around the world; and He rose again…which is the only reasonable explanation as to why people know about his life and his death. Jesus is the judge…He said so himself in Matthew 25. Jesus is the judge…for all people, in all times and places and nations and cultures. Jesus is the judge regardless of your religion or your sexuality or your political party. Jesus is the judge…and His judgment is clear: all have sinned and fallen short of God’s standards (Romans 3:23). But here is the good news! As the righteous judge, Jesus also has the authority to forgive sins. His authority was given to Him by God, because, according to Philippians 2, Jesus, who was in every respect God, laid down his life to satisfy God’s justice and to atone for human sin, such that all who repent and call upon his name might receive forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

This is the universal gospel…the good news of Jesus Christ for all people in all nations without partiality, and the universal gospel is always a message of judgment and forgiveness. Judgment and forgiveness…it is both. And note that salvation through the forgiveness of sins is available to all, but it comes through one name and one name only: HIS NAME! That is the Gospel…it is good news, and it is for all the people.
We’ll pick up here next week, but before we go, let me remind you of a few things. 1) fear God…fear nothing else; 2) be ready to share the gospel with people who God arranges for you to meet…look for those who are spiritually open and be ready to give an account of your faith; 3) when the moment comes, trust God…open your mouth and know that the Holy Spirit will give you the words that you need; and 4) tell the whole truth…the world needs to know the Judge and the Lamb…they need to know Jesus, for there is no other name under heaven by which we MUST be saved. Amen. Let’s pray.