

May 9, 2021
The Sixth Sunday of Easter
Year B
Acts 10:44-48
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

What's going to stop God?

Years ago, in a sermon on this Sunday, the Sixth Sunday of Easter, in Year B of the lectionary cycle, when we had the same first reading that we have for today, I asked the question, "What's going to stop God?" It felt like a question that the book of Acts is just begging us to ask, especially given today's reading from Acts and last week's Acts reading as well.

Last week, our reading from Acts was about the Ethiopian eunuch who was a worshiper of the God of Israel, who had been in Jerusalem to worship and who was in his chariot, heading home by a wilderness road, back to his responsibilities as the treasurer in the court of the Candace, the ruler of Ethiopia. He was reading a scroll of the Hebrew Bible, from the prophet Isaiah, but he didn't understand what he was reading. Then the angel of the Lord sent Philip to join the eunuch and to guide him in his reading.

I talked in last week's sermon about how the eunuch, because of his physical mutilation, would have been barred from being a Jew, one of the covenant people of God. There was a law about.

But still, the Holy Spirit sent Philip to see the eunuch and to tell him the story of Jesus. After he heard the story about Jesus, the eunuch wanted to be baptized. And by some miracle there was water there for him, water for him to be baptized, water in the wilderness, water to welcome him, water so that he too, could be fully one of God's people, one of God's children.

Philip had a decision to make. The law said that the eunuch could not be a part of the covenant community, could never be one of God's people. But the movement of the Holy Spirit and the water in the wilderness said differently. So, Philip followed the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the prompting of a God who was on a mission to welcome, to gather, to embrace the broken world that Jesus had died for, so that it could be loved back to life.

The eunuch was baptized and went on his way rejoicing, and Philip went on, to continue proclaiming the good news of a God who could not be stopped.

That was in chapter 8 of Acts. Today's reading is from chapter 10, but it tells a very similar story.

You see, there was a law. A law that said that Gentiles and Jews could not meet together, could not eat together, and certainly, could never be a part of the same family, the same community. But just before the reading that we have for today, God sent Peter a vision.

Peter was praying on the roof of a house in Joffa and had a vision of a sheet, held at its four corners being lowered down from heaven. The sheet was covered with things to eat that were not kosher. Peter heard a voice from heaven saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."

But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean."

Then he heard the voice again, saying to him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

He had this vision three times and then, right after that, some messengers from a Roman centurion named Cornelius came and told Peter that Cornelius had had a vision to send for him. Peter, and some of the other Jewish believers, went with the messengers and went into Cornelius's house.

Cornelius was a Roman and a gentile. According to Jewish law, it was illegal for Peter even to set foot in Cornelius's house. But this is what Peter said, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So, when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?"

Cornelius told Peter about the vision that he had had and Peter shared the gospel with Cornelius and his household. During Peter's sermon, the Holy Spirit fell upon them and they began praising God and speaking in tongues. So, Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

The Jewish believers who had gone with Peter to Cornelius's house could have said yes. It was against the law for them to be there, how could God be welcoming these gentiles, these foreigners into God's people, into God's kingdom, into God's good news?

But, of course, they didn't try to stop Cornelius and his household from being baptized. In fact, one of them probably baptized them, since the text seems to indicate that Peter himself didn't baptize them, but rather, gave orders for them to be baptized.

"Look, here is water, what is to prevent me from being baptized?"

"Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people...?"

Step by step, believer by believer, the early church learned that the good news of Jesus Christ was for everyone, that the barriers between people, that the rules that separated people, were being broken down by a tidal wave of the Holy Spirit.

What they were finding out was that the way that things had always been was not going to be the way that things were as an unstoppable God led them into new life, into the future, with love that could not be contained.

It has been 61 Sundays since the last time we had what I would call a regular church service at Emmanuel. It was March 8, 2020, the last time we gathered in our sanctuary and sang hymns and passed the peace, and heard a sermon in person and knelt at the communion rail and took communion. 61 Sundays since the last time that we gathered in person for anything at Emmanuel without wearing masks.

Even then things were a little strange. Some people felt uncomfortable shaking hands at the peace. Some people were nervous about being there at all. Attendance was low that Sunday. Some people just stayed away because of the news that they were hearing about a new virus that sounded like it could be dangerous.

On the New England Synod clergy Facebook page that I am a part of, some people were starting to ask questions of each other about whether or not they were thinking about canceling worship for a week or even a few weeks, until the danger had passed. It was hard for me to wrap my head around the idea. I mean, we have a snow cancellation policy, which we've never had to use, but I couldn't imagine closing our church doors on a Sunday for anything other than an extreme weather emergency.

And then a week later, our Executive Committee had to make the extremely difficult decision to shut down our building for what we hoped would be a few weeks, while things calmed down and got sorted out.

I couldn't imagine what we were going to do.

On Friday we hung signs on the church doors that said that worship was cancelled "this week" because of the unfolding global pandemic.

On Sunday morning I went into the silent church building and, around the time that we normally would have met for worship, I sent out the sermon that I had prepared and then rewritten for those unusual circumstances, and the prayers for that week, over email and Facebook, spent some time in the Sanctuary, and then I went back home. I felt so distanced, so alone, separated from my congregation, in a world turned upside down.

Do you remember how silent the world felt in those early days of this pandemic?

Honestly, once I got over the shock, I wondered how our church was going to survive, if we couldn't meet together in person. If we couldn't touch, if we couldn't serve together, sing together, if our building had to stay closed and silent, would our ministry, would God's work to us and through us, just stall, stagnate? Would our church community become a museum, just as it felt like our church building had?

Frozen, a relic of another time, choir chairs set up for a choir practice that never happened, finished quilts hanging in the sanctuary and quilts needing to be finished hanging in Kask Hall, games and materials set out for First Communion classes in a church that wasn't having communion services anymore, bread in the freezer for Lenten Soup and Bread suppers that wouldn't happen either.

But then, after one strange and silent Sunday, we started to develop a plan. People knew about things that I didn't, digital conferencing, something called Zoom, that would enable us to meet together, be together, worship together.

Rebecca taught me how to use it and set me up with a headset and a camera for my computer. Gabby knew how to create music for digital worship, painstakingly and beautifully. Alice knew how to create beautiful PowerPoints for worship.

We couldn't touch, not yet, we couldn't be in the same physical space, but we still could be together, hear each other's voices, see each other's faces, worship with each other, and share this strange time with each other.

I have said it many different times in many different settings, but I don't think I've ever said it here in worship, I don't think I've ever told you how grateful I am for and how impressed I am by this congregation's resilience and flexibility, this congregation's compassion and care for each other and for the wider community.

I love how so many of you who, like me, had never used Zoom before figured it out so that you could be here, so that we could worship together and share this journey together. I love how so many people are sharing their gifts for our Zoom worship, sharing artwork and music and videos and serving as worship assistants.

I love how we figured out how to care for people who are especially alone during this time, delivering flowers, making phone calls, sending notes, and then, once we could commune together again, delivering communion to people's homes.

I love how the building came to life again, how Kask Hall and the kitchen got a face lift, how we never stopped improving the building, trusting in and investing in this congregation's future.

I love how last year's quilts and personal care kits were completed and sent to Lutheran World Relief and then to people around the world who so desperately need them.

I love how the Confirmation class prayed their way through the summer.

I love how the First Communion class met outside, in the summer sunshine, and learned about God's great love for them and God's gift to them in Holy Communion, and then had a First Communion day like no other.

I love how the Friday Night Live youth continued to meet, online and in person, sometimes shivering in the courtyard writing notes to the homebound, sometimes playing games in the park, sometimes making each other laugh till our faces hurt with online games like Quiplash and the Rap game and so many others.

I love how we've been able to welcome people into fellowship and worship from all over the country and some Sundays all over the world during this time. I love how families have been able to worship together even when they had to go months without seeing each other in person.

I love all of the ways, all of the times we figured how to be there for each other and for our neighbors.

And in all of those ways that we found to tell the story of our faith, to tell the story of the way that God has been there, has shown up for people in times of crisis across biblical history and across the ages, we also told the story of how God has been there for us, in this time of stress and pain and grief and crisis.

I admit, I thought for a few days that this pandemic, which, I never believed could actually stop God, might be the thing that stopped our ministry together. I couldn't imagine a church continuing to thrive in a situation where we couldn't meet together in person, couldn't sing together, couldn't touch each other.

There have been many, many times, during this pandemic when I have had to confess to you a failure of imagine. I never imagined we would have one Easter on Zoom, let alone two. I never imagined it would be 61 Sundays since we sang hymns together in our Sanctuary. I never imagined how hard and tragic this would be.

But I also never imagined how God would equip us for the ministry needed for this time. I never imagined some of the things that we have done over the course of those 61 Sundays to continue to worship, to keep the church year, to tell the stories, to mark time, to celebrate milestones, to grieve together, and to remember together. I never imagined the gifts we would share, the things that we would get good at, the ways that God would teach us to keep loving one another and to keep laying down what we wanted life to be like for the sake of our neighbors and friends. I never imagined the ways that God would assure us that God was still with us and would give us the oil of gladness instead of mourning. I never imagined the way that the Psalmist's words would be lived in our experience, that weeping would spend the night, that joy would come in the morning.

Maybe I had forgotten the book of Acts. Because, the Book of Acts tells us the answer to the question. Who's going to stop God; the God who welcomes, the God who seeks, the God

who comforts, the God who challenges, the God of resurrection, the God who creates, the God who lives and moves and breathes new life into bones we thought were dead and dry and could never live again?

The book of Acts and even our own experiences, through this time of trial, tell us the answer to the question. Who's going to stop God? What's going to stop God?

Nothing. We are living proof. Thanks be to God! Amen.