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The Baptism of Our Lord

Acts 10:34-38

AN EARTHLY MINISTRY THAT EXERTS DIVINE POWER

Today's reading from Acts chapter 10 really extends the theme of Epiphany from last Sunday – how Jesus was revealed as the Messiah, the promised Savior. We see it by the very public anointing of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove at His baptism. A secondary extension of the Epiphany theme in this reading is that Jesus came to be the Savior not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles. If I preached on either of these – Jesus being anointed with the Holy Spirit or the fact that He is also the Savior of the Gentiles – it would be very Epiphany-ish and there would be plenty to say.

But today I'd like to explore a third, more subtle, truth in this reading that usually gets overlooked. It's the way Jesus has chosen to reveal or to epiphany Himself and to carry out His ministry here on earth after He ascended into heaven until this day. In Acts chapter 10 He directs Peter to do something He could easily have done Himself. And not only that, but when Peter carries out this ministerial task, Jesus backs it with power. From this portion of God's Word we see that whether it is Jesus' ministry here on earth, or the ministry of those whom Jesus calls into His service, it is an *earthly ministry that exerts divine power*.

First, we need a little background. Jesus had already ascended into heaven. The church in Jerusalem swelled as the apostles continued to preach and teach. They began extending their message to other regions and territories. On a missionary journey Peter miraculously raised a woman named Tabitha to life in the city of Joppa. He remained there in Joppa for a while at the house of a man called Simon the Tanner.

At this time, a Roman centurion, that is a commander of one hundred soldiers, named Cornelius stationed in the city of Caesarea, received a visit from an angel while he was praying. You see, Cornelius was a sincere believer but being Roman he was a Gentile. The angel told him to send for a man from the city of Joppa named Peter who would have a special message for him. Note, the angel didn't tell Cornelius why.

In the meantime, Peter in Joppa received a vision from the Lord while he was praying. In this vision, God showed Peter all kinds of animals, some of them permissible for Jews to eat, some forbidden to the Jews. God commanded Peter, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat!" Appalled, Peter replied, "Never, Lord! I have never put anything unclean into my mouth." God responded, "Don't call anything impure that God has made clean!" Three times this vision took place.

While Peter was puzzling over this vision, the doorbell rang. Well, not a doorbell, but the men whom Cornelius had sent arrived at the house in Joppa. They introduced themselves to Peter, explained why they were there and urged Peter to come with them back to Caesarea.

Now understand, this was a strange, strange thing for Peter. Jews were strictly forbidden to enter the house of a Gentile if they wanted to remain ceremonially pure and be able to participate at the temple. Jews just didn't do this – go into the house of a Gentile.

By the time they got back to Caesarea, Cornelius had gathered all his family and friends together in his house to meet Peter and hear what Peter had to say. After they all introduced themselves, Acts chapter 10 tells us, *Then Peter began to speak: "Now I really am beginning to understand that God does not show favoritism, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. He sent his word to the people of Israel, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached. 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.*

So here's the question that jumps out – why didn't the ascended Jesus appear to tell Cornelius these things directly – like the way He appeared from heaven to the Apostle Paul? Or for that matter, since Jesus already went to the trouble of sending a holy angel to Cornelius, why didn't Jesus just have the angel give this message to Cornelius? Why did the angel keep a tight lip and only tell him to send for Peter?

It seems like Jesus places all the chess pieces just so and then stands back and lets it play out the way He intended. He lets Peter go to work. This tells you something about the importance of the earthly, public ministry in God's salvation plan. All Christians have been entrusted with the gospel. All Christians have the power of the Keys. All Christians have been commissioned to go and make disciples. Even so, having publicly called ministers is not superfluous. It is not merely a matter of pragmatism. Christ instituted the public ministry to represent Him and to administer His Word and Sacraments on His behalf. He is the Good Shepherd, but He shepherds His Church through His under shepherds, public ministers. This is what we see happening in Acts chapter 10. The ascended Jesus is guiding and governing and facilitating all things for His church, but He is not working directly. He is working through human agency, through Peter.

That is why we don't hire or contract with our pastors and teachers. Christ calls them through His Church. Therefore, they cannot go on strike or climb a corporate ladder. Christ is their employer.

As your pastor sits with you in the emergency room waiting for your teenager to come out of surgery from a car wreck, at that moment, you don't really care what Luke Werre or Shaun Arndt thinks. All that matters is what does Jesus have to say to you. You are not entrusting your child merely to Kevin Proeber the 5th Grade mathematician or to Kiernan Handy the 2nd

Grade penmanship clinician. You are entrusting them to the classroom and shepherd care of Jesus.

It's an earthly ministry because Jesus works through earthly, human ministers. On the one hand, that can be the very thing that makes it difficult for us. Our called ministers are human. They are sinful, flawed, limited and even frustrating. Can Jesus really be working through them? Could he really work through a blustering, unschooled fisherman like Peter? But Jesus chose to work this way even during His own public ministry. He ministered as a human. And not even a fancy one. I'll grant you that He was sinless and flawless. But the prophet Isaiah tells us that there was no way to recognize Jesus as the divine Son of God just by looking at Him. This was a stumbling block for many people. That homeless beggar is supposed to be our Messiah?

On the other hand, the fact that it is an earthly ministry is also its beauty. In a sense, we could say that Jesus did not minister from the top down like a commander or king. He ministered from the bottom like a lowly, gentle servant. Like Peter said to Cornelius, *He went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the Devil, because God was with him.* Jesus still works through the frailty, the weakness, of human agency, through individuals who struggle like you do, who need their guilt washed away like you do, who get scared and worried and wounded like you do. In this way, Jesus makes Himself approachable, coming to us gently, not through CEOs but through servants. This is for our comfort.

Think of it, you don't need to listen for a voice from heaven or try to sense if God is speaking to you. Look at my face. Read my lips. Listen to my voice. I have been appointed from heaven to look you in the eye and tell you straight on that your sins are forgiven! You don't need to look anywhere else.

As Jesus works through His earthly ministry, Jesus also backs it with divine power. Not because His called ministers have any sort of special power, but because Jesus' Word and His Sacraments are powerful. Acts chapter 10 tells us that after Peter finished his sermon in Cornelius' house, all the people gathered there were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus personally had an earthly ministry with divine power – again, as Peter said, *healing all who were oppressed by the Devil.* Your called ministers still do that. Every time they announce that sins are forgiven, or pray, or teach, or baptize, or distribute Christ's own body and blood in the Lord's Supper, they are healing people who are oppressed by the devil. For they are administering the victory of Christ's death and resurrection.

Christ conducted an earthly ministry, but as the Son of God, His ministry exerted divine power. He still conducts an earthly ministry. He ministers through representatives who are only human. But through that ministry He still exerts divine power.