

## WHO ARE WE TO HINDER GOD?

### Acts 13:1-18

*A sermon by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 15, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### SCRIPTURE

#### **Acts 11:1-18**

*Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. <sup>2</sup>So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, <sup>3</sup>saying,*

*‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’*

*<sup>4</sup>Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying,*

*<sup>5</sup>‘I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. <sup>6</sup>As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. <sup>7</sup>I also heard a voice saying to me,*

*“Get up, Peter; kill and eat.”*

*<sup>8</sup>But I replied,*

*“By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.”*

*<sup>9</sup>But a second time the voice answered from heaven,*

*“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”*

*<sup>10</sup>This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.*

*<sup>11</sup>At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. <sup>12</sup>The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. <sup>13</sup>He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying,*

*“Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; <sup>14</sup>he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.”*

*<sup>15</sup>And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup>And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said,*

*“John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”*

*<sup>17</sup>If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?’*

<sup>18</sup>*When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying,*

*‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.’*

From time to time, individuals and communities face turning points, times in which they say “yes” or “no” to a change in direction, a change in focus, a change in what they believe and do. Sometimes we enter turning points voluntarily; sometimes, they come upon us through events beyond our control. Sometimes they are prompted by tragedy; sometimes, by blessing; and often the outcome of our decision is provisional, experimental, mixed.

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The resurrection of Christ is a turning point for the band of people who had followed him for three years. It comes as an event beyond their control. And it all happens fast.

- Christ is arrested on a Thursday night, crucified on a Friday, and raised on a Sunday.<sup>1</sup>
- He begins to appear to his followers and others, most of whom do not immediately recognize him<sup>2</sup> because he is transformed into what Paul will later describe as a “spiritual body.”<sup>3</sup>
- Those to whom he appears greet him with a mixture of fear, awe, reverence, skepticism, worship, and joy.<sup>4</sup>

As the Gospels close and the Book of Acts opens, these earliest disciples and followers of Jesus share life together for another forty days,<sup>5</sup> experiences for which there is little scriptural description.

Then one day, on the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem, they begin to press the risen Jesus on when he is going to restore the kingdom to Israel, when he is going to make it the great political power it had been during the time of King David, a thousand years earlier.<sup>6</sup> It is a question they had been asking before his death. It had not disappeared from their minds upon his resurrection.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus replies (I think) sharply:

- It is not for you to know the time.
- You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes.
- You will be my witnesses starting here in Jerusalem, but then spreading out to Judea, to Samaria, then to the ends of the earth.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 26-27; Mark 14-15; 22-23; John 18-19.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 28; Mark 16, Luke 24: John 20-21.

<sup>3</sup> I Corinthians 15:35-49.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 28; Mark 16, Luke 24: John 20-21.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 1:3.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 1:6-9.

<sup>7</sup> See Matthew 24:3-44.

When Christ finishes speaking, he is immediately taken into the heavens on a thick cloud. This is called the Ascension, and it leaves his followers on their own.<sup>8</sup> It is no less a turning point than his resurrection.

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The disciples gather themselves and spring into action. They gather in Jerusalem the next day and chose Matthias to replace Judas.<sup>9</sup>

Nine days later they attend the Jewish Festival of Pentecost, to which pilgrims come from all over the world.

Suddenly, the gift of Holy Spirit descends upon these pilgrims in the form of tongues as of fire. It is a colorful, dramatic event; and the pilgrims begin to speak in tongues not their own.<sup>10</sup>

The movement catches fire.

- 3000 people are baptized that day.<sup>11</sup>
- An idea arises among these early Christians to hold all their possessions in common.<sup>12</sup> Many sell their worldly goods and pool the proceeds, but one couple secretly hold back proceeds from the sale and when found they die in their deceit.<sup>13</sup>
- Disciples, now called Apostles begin to heal people, just like Jesus had.<sup>14</sup>
- Opposition mounts from Jewish authorities.<sup>15</sup>
- Some are required to appear before the Council.<sup>16</sup>
- A young Apostle named Stephen is stoned by an angry mob.<sup>17</sup>

It is clear Jerusalem is not safe.

- Philip begins to preach in Samaria, a region away from Jerusalem. He preaches to people of mixed ethnic heritage, who are not accepted by either Jews or Gentiles,<sup>18</sup> despite a Parable of Jesus named after one of their number.
- An Ethiopian, a foreigner, converts and is baptized.<sup>19</sup> He is a high ranking official, Treasurer to the Queen of Ethiopia.

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 1:1-11.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 1:12-26.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 2:1-13.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 2:41.

<sup>12</sup> Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-37.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 5:1-11.

<sup>14</sup> Acts 5:12-17.

<sup>15</sup> Acts 5:17-21.

<sup>16</sup> Acts 5:21b-42.

<sup>17</sup> Acts 6:8-8:1.

<sup>18</sup> Acts 8:4-25.

<sup>19</sup> Acts 8:26-40.

- A rising young star within Judaism, named Saul, on his way to round up Christians for arrest, has a vision on the Road to Damascus that turns him from prosecutor of Christians to missionary for Christ to the Greco-Roman world.<sup>20</sup> He spends fourteen years preparing for his work, and is given the name Paul.<sup>21</sup> Some of the letters he wrote constitute the most voluminous part of the New Testament.
- Meanwhile, a Roman soldier named Cornelius has a vision in which God tells him to go to Joppa and find a man named Peter,<sup>22</sup> who at the same time has a vision in which God declares previously prohibited food clean. “Rise, Peter, kill and eat.”<sup>23</sup>
- When Cornelius and Peter rendezvous, Peter baptizes Cornelius and his household. “Can anyone withhold the water of baptism?”<sup>24</sup> This event marks two conversions: Cornelius from the worship of Roman gods; Peter, from a belief that when one follows Jesus as Jewish Messiah, one adheres to the Jewish Law.

Our text picks up with Peter explaining his vision to leaders of the Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem. “Who was I to hinder God?” he says. And they agree.<sup>25</sup> Their agreement is ratified a few chapters later at the Council of Jerusalem,<sup>26</sup> which paves the way for the later missionary work of Paul travelling to villages and cities across the Greco-Roman world, leading Christianity to become the world religion it is today.

And here we are. 2100 years later. Heirs of this turning point on the part of Peter. Heirs of Paul. Doing our best not to hinder God. Falling back at times, but always trying to catch ourselves and stay on track. “Who are we to hinder God?” “Who on earth are we to hinder God?”

## II.

What strikes me about this particular narrative portion of the Bible we have just reviewed are two things:

### (a)

First, while the *primary action* in the early church is conversion – the three thousand at Pentecost, the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul, Cornelius, even Peter himself and the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem – the *primary actor* is God.

- Sometimes God acts in the form of a voice
- Sometimes a vision or dream
- Sometimes an angel
- Sometimes directly through the Holy Spirit.

In the eighteen verses of the passage, ten times the subject of the verb is God: It is God who leads the conversion to be enacted, the decision to be made, the change of heart to occur, the turning point to happen.

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<sup>20</sup> Acts 9:1-31.

<sup>21</sup> Galatians 1:11-2:10.

<sup>22</sup> Acts 10:1-8.

<sup>23</sup> Acts 10:9-33.

<sup>24</sup> Acts 10:34-48.

<sup>25</sup> Acts 11:1-18.

<sup>26</sup> Acts 15.

*God acts. God speaks. God appears through trance, through angel, through vision, through voice, through dream, through Spirit.*

- The book of Acts is not the story of human beings searching for God and turning their lives over to Jesus Christ.
- It is not the story of their answering altar calls at tent revivals, finding God in nature, getting in touch with their true identity, embarking on a journey of faith – all these things which simply show our longing for God but which in and of themselves only point us to God.
- Rather, Acts is the story of *God calling* human beings – through a variety of means – and human beings *responding*.

The chief actor in the spread of Christianity, the chief agent in the growth of the church, is God. Always and forever God. “Who are we to hinder God?”

(b)

Second, this passage – with its single-minded focus on God – leads me to say that I may be preaching this sermon to myself. But that’s okay; I need to hear a sermon as much as you do, at least once a week!

A few weeks ago, I was asked at a Therefore Presentation whether I am an optimist or a pessimist about race in America. I think I answered: “I don’t know.” But I know I added: “That’s really a statement about my outlook on the state of the world. Some days I’m optimistic. Some days I’m pessimistic. But I’m always concerned.”

Patrick and Jacob and Ben and Olivia know from our weekly meetings that I ponder what the impact of COVID will have on Christianity in America. Not just on Westminster but on Christianity. What kind of turning point will COVID turn out to be?

A member told me this week that after he and his wife were able to find a seat on Easter Sunday, they looked at one another and said: “Westminster is risen!”

As tragic as the deaths of six million people are, some aspects of COVID have been beneficial to the church.

- At Westminster, COVID has led us to use the gift of technology more quickly and at a more sophisticated level than we otherwise might have done.
- It has brought new people to us who realize how much they need community.
- It has forced us to think about what is really important in Christianity, what our role as a congregation in the larger Christian world is and should be, what we have to offer and what we don’t have to offer. Those thought processes should become more systematic and clearer over the next year or so.

But I am also worried about Christianity and the part of it we love as Westminster.

- I am concerned that for many of us, worship will become simply one more option on the screen, something we do while lounging in bed on Sunday morning, or while folding the laundry, sitting at the soccer field, grading this week's papers
- I am concerned that we will increasingly forgo the effort of making the trip to Cameron Mills to experience community in person, to touch someone we know on the shoulder at a committee meeting, to inquire about their new job, their retirement, their adult child who just moved away.
- The secular word for these interactions is "in person"; our theological nomenclature is "incarnate."

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I'm also concerned – like many of you – that our culture is headed – perhaps for another decade or so – for even more intense acrimony than we have known the several years.

- I am concerned that there will remain fewer churches – and citizens for that matter – in which people recognize that "there are *truths and forms with respect to which people of good character and principles may differ*" and that sometimes in church and in community we are called to *mutual forbearance*.
- And I'm worried that that both in the public mind and in reality the words "Christian" and "nationalism" have become irreversibly interchangeable when in fact they rarely belong in the same sentence, let alone the same phrase.
- And I'm worried that being a member of a church will increasingly resemble – on either the left or the right – being a member of a political party.

### III.

Yet while not always optimistic, I am *hopeful*.

I am hopeful because of the narrative arc of this text: The main actor is God. Always and forever God.

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Earlier this month I listened to several lectures – via the gift of technology – delivered at Virginia Theological Seminary a few weeks ago.<sup>27</sup>

They were given by Kathryn Tanner, a theologian at Yale. I close with some of her words:

*We change...as we constantly receive more of God – in an unending stream that keeps[growing], building on itself.*

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<sup>27</sup> These are available at (Lecture 1) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZPkDxYFtSg>; (Lecture 2) <https://m.facebook.com/VirginiaTheologicalSeminary/videos/2022-costan-lectures-featuring-kathryn-tanner-phd/502894607957762/>; (Lecture 3) [https://www.facebook.com/VirginiaTheologicalSeminary/videos/2022-costan-lectures-featuring-kathryn-tanner-phd-wednesday/486961183040683/?\\_rdr](https://www.facebook.com/VirginiaTheologicalSeminary/videos/2022-costan-lectures-featuring-kathryn-tanner-phd-wednesday/486961183040683/?_rdr). These are the 2222 Costan Lectures, given March 1-2, 2022, at Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, Virginia. The above quotes are from the third lecture.

*The God in which we participate is unbounded perfection — there is no natural limit to the good or the beauty of God that would contain [God's perfection], [or] bring it to an end.*

*And therefore God, without needing to do anything more than be Godself, can continue, without ever stopping, to fill up the human creature...*

*However much [we have] already received, there is always more...of an infinite God yet to be enjoyed.*

*...God intends for us all eventually to receive the whole of God in exactly the same fulsome way; God, if necessary, will therefore... through the operations of God's grace, [expand] our created capacities to receive in ways that make that a real possibility for everyone.*

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*For all God's respect for created differences, [for all] God's impartial love for creatures—God's desire to benefit them all in the highest way possible—cannot be ultimately impeded by those created differences.*

Who are we to hinder God? That's what gives me hope.

Amen.