

## **Old Plan, New Interruption**

*A sermon preached on Acts 10:44-48 by Emily Hull McGee  
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on May 6, 2018*

Somehow without even realizing it, I have developed a habit — a quirk, if you will — that even my nearest and dearest like to laugh about. Unlike some other quirks I have, I know where I got this one! It comes by way of my friend and former colleague Kathy, from whom I also picked up a love of a freshly-sharpened pencil behind my ear at all times! During meetings in which Kathy and I both participated, I would often notice that as the conversation unfolded, at times Kathy would take a sharp intake of air and quickly cross two fingers. Once the speaker finished his or her point, up and unfolded went Kathy's fingers as she told us whatever thought or response had dawned upon her while the other was speaking. It was her way to avoid being rude and interrupting another, while still not forgetting her thought, a skill probably honed from decades of being a creative musician married to a lawyer!

We're talking about interruptions today, about God's stubborn refusal to cross the Divine fingers and simply wait until we humans have finished our thought, figured it out, and stated our case before breaking in and entering. Rather, God is always on the move, perpetually challenging our assumptions for the sake of greater love and deeper welcome. And thus we God's people are given a choice — will we resist such interruptions, holding firm instead to what we already know and profess, or will we welcome the interruptions, suspecting that they have the capacity to utterly change everything?

## II.

Today's passage from the Book of Acts is a snapshot into a larger narrative of God's work in the world in these early post-resurrection days. Story after story in Acts reminds us of the active power of the Holy Spirit to upend even the deepest-held convictions of the faithful.

Following that day of Pentecost where the Spirit rushed like a mighty wind, there were the first converts who repented and were baptized, whose natural outgrowth of discipleship was a mutual sharing of goods and possessions, and a common routine of study, fellowship, and worship.

There were the adventures of Peter and John, healing the sick and proclaiming – right there in the heart of Jerusalem to the keepers of the religious institution – that Jesus Christ was crucified and resurrected 'because they could not keep from speaking about what they had seen and heard.'

There were the prayers of the disciples for God through the power of the Holy Spirit to infuse them great boldness, even amidst trials and persecution and imprisonment and death.

There were the surprises of those first days, utter astonishment that the reach of the gospel could move from Jerusalem to Samaria and Ethiopia, to unlikely bearers like wealthy eunuchs and a zealot named Saul who was wholly transformed on that road to Damascus.

Again and again, God interrupted and moved a people toward greater love and deeper welcome, like the interruptions of these disciples' best-laid plans and presumptions from the story in which we find ourselves today.

Disciple Peter has come from Joppa to Caesarea, right smack dab in the midst of Gentile country, to a man named Cornelius, a Roman soldier and outsider to Peter but a devout man of God nonetheless. Visions from God had come to both Cornelius and Peter. Cornelius had seen a clear directive to find Peter, and sent his men to do so. Meanwhile Peter had gotten hungry while praying, and in his yearning, had a vision of a white sheet coming down from heaven. The sheet billowed with all sorts of animals, ones that were commonly killed for food, but not from observant Jews who knew them to be off-limits for matters of cleanliness and purity. Then Peter heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." Ever the devout follower, Peter protested, "no way; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean!" And as if to launch a reckoning within the life of faith that would persist through all of human history, the voice responded three times over: "what God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Confused by such a dream that seemed so clearly against what he knew to be true, Peter heard again from the Spirit that the men he would soon encounter were ones he should trust. So as he was greeted by Cornelius and his men, Peter easily welcomed them in with hospitality, and traveled with them the next day to find Cornelius waiting. Together in conversation, they tried to discern why God had brought them together, for as Peter said, 'you know it's unlawful for a Jew to associate with a Gentile, but God has shown me that I shouldn't call anyone profane or unclean.' That profession seemed to open the door for greater understanding, and Cornelius with many other friends and relatives waited expectantly for what Peter would reveal to them about God.

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality,” Peter begins, his words bearing witness to God’s transformative Spirit, “but in every nation, anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.” And in the midst of such a proclamation, the Holy Spirit interrupted Peter and fell upon all who heard in what scholars call ‘the Gentile Pentecost.’<sup>1</sup> In such an interruption, the fellow Jews were astounded that Gentiles who had neither been baptized nor circumcised could receive such a gift. Never before had such a thing occurred, when those they saw as profane or unclean could reap such a reward for their faithfulness. So when Peter asked, “can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit like we have,” you could almost see between the verses an image of Peter closing his eyes, crossing his fingers, and wishing with all the hope he could muster that he was accurately capturing the movement of God by ordering them to be baptized in the name of Jesus, as outsiders become insiders in the shared experience of the risen Christ.

### III.

“When it comes down to it,” one theologian says, “faith is our often breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, ‘What is God doing, where on earth is God going now?’”<sup>2</sup> And I will tell you: the older I get, the deeper into the study of scripture I tread, the wider my lens through which to view the movement of God in this world I see, the longer and more complex petitions to God I pray, the broader my experience of people and their needs I hear... the more I feel convicted

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<sup>1</sup> Noel Leo Erskine, “Acts 10:44-48,” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p482.

<sup>2</sup> Will Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts*, p99.

that the arc of scripture, the bend of Christian history and tradition, and the ongoing unfolding of God's activity in this world are inviting us all to embrace the holy interruptions of God as no less than sacred and redemptive and transformative, rather than that which should be feared or avoided.

And so I invite you wonder along with me: where might the Spirit of God be at work in your life interrupting your best-laid plans? What are the rigid edges of your faithfulness (we all have them!) that God might be inviting you to examine?

Perhaps for you the 'plans' are those of resources — your time, your schedule, your next steps, your money, your energy — resources that you have already thoughtfully allocated and mapped out. Might the Spirit of God invite you to consider what would happen if they were put to use another way? What would it take for God's big dream for all that you have to become your own?

Or maybe for you the 'plans' are those of your deeply-held beliefs — your worldview, your politics, your principles, even your Christian faith — beliefs that you have already worked hard to discover, develop, and defend. Might the Spirit of God spark your imagination to honest curiosity about what you don't yet know, instead of hard indifference for what you haven't yet figured out, or fear that it all might come crashing down around you? What would it ask of you to hold these matters loosely, eagerly inviting God to reveal something new?

Or possibly the 'plans' are flesh-and-blood ones — real, live people that you have determined are simply too different or too disappointing that they must exist beyond the bounds of your full love. Might the Spirit of God

nurture within you a divine spirit of love and inclusion that has the power to soften even the hardest corner of your heart? What expectations or assumptions might you need to prune away in order for God in Christ to enable you to bear new fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?

I can't help but wonder what might happen if we became a people who *celebrate* God's interruptions of these best-laid plans — not just tolerate the interruptions or accept them or endure them. What might such a holy break in our regular patterns do to the very shape of our lives? Like the Jewish followers of Jesus who were astounded that the Holy Spirit would fall upon Gentiles before *either* circumcision or baptism, where might *we* be astounded to see the Spirit moving in the world in ways we couldn't possibly ask or imagine? How might such astonishment reform and transform us from the inside out?

And I wonder too: what might happen within and among our church if we trusted the movement of the Spirit in our midst, even — and especially — when it asks us to reconsider what we've long known or professed to be true? Even in the midst of major, disorienting change in our facilities, our programs, and the shape of how we are the church, what might happen if we invited God to interrupt our carefully-constructed plans? How might we welcome God's realignment of our resources, our money, our time, our energies, our beliefs, our attachment to the way things are? What would it ask of us to be a people so firmly attuned to what the Holy Spirit is up to, that our posture remains one of astonishment at what God is doing among and around us, a posture that prompts us to lean in and hunger to be a part?

#### IV.

Not only my handy reminder of a thought instead of an interruption, nor simply the wishful sign of luck or even the sly behind-the-back gesture for telling a white lie, the sign of crossed fingers is one with roots as deep as these stories of the earliest Christians. Our tradition tells us that these early followers of Jesus would make the sign of the cross to reveal themselves to one another simply by crossing their fingers. Others used crossed fingers to accompany their prayers to God for mercy upon another. And in painting after painting, we see Jesus lifting his crossed fingers in blessing for those around him, particularly those who fill his table.<sup>3</sup>

So we come now to the table of the Lord, hungering for greater love and deeper welcome, as we ask ourselves: will we resist these holy interruptions of the Spirit, holding firm instead to what we already know and profess, or will we welcome them, knowing they have the capacity to utterly change everything? As we prepare to feast, might we glimpse in the midst of the bread and the cup and the hungry souls who come to the table, the blessing of God who shows no partiality? For then and only then might we be sent us forth to make a sign of love to the world for all to see. Amen!

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<sup>3</sup> In both my theological and musical studies, I've long learned about the symbolism of the crossed fingers. A quick reference to it can simply be found on Wikipedia! [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crossed\\_fingers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crossed_fingers)