

Detour Through Acts: Preparing For Surprises

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FAITH STORY:

Acts 10:1-48

FAITH FOCUS:

Peter sees a vision in which a white sheet is lowered from heaven with all kinds of unclean animals in it. A voice from heaven tells him to kill and eat the animals. Peter protests because he is a faithful Jew and obeys the dietary laws. This happens three times. Then some men come to the house where Peter is staying; they are sent by Cornelius, a Roman centurion and also a good and faithful man, who had a vision in which God told him to send for a man named Peter. Upon Peter's arrival, Cornelius bows to him, but Peter refuses it, saying that they are both only mortal beings. Peter has the opportunity to preach to Cornelius and his household and they all become believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit comes upon them in the form of speaking in tongues, so Peter baptizes them with water. They are the first Gentiles to become baptized Christians—an act that Peter must later defend before the rest of the church body.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of the session, students will have:

- Acted out (or watched) the story in Acts where Peter and Cornelius each learn something new about God's will for his people.
- Discussed who in our daily lives we choose not to associate with, or who we have been told that it would be inappropriate to make friends with.
- Brainstormed ways to be prepared for God to teach us new things and ways he prepares us for that as well.
- Prayed for one another to allow the Holy Spirit to work.

MATERIALS AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Bibles
- 2 Costumes/props for story reading—an old sheet to lower in Peter's vision and stuffed animals to put in it
- 3 Random objects that have an every day use, yet can be used for something else (paper clips, spoons, old shoes, a blanket, hair comb or brush, toilet paper, etc.)

- 4 A place to write ideas during discussion and brainstorming, like a chalkboard or flip chart or newsprint, and markers

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS:

As youth come in, put them in groups of 3-5. Give each group a random object. Tell them to create something new with their objects or come up with a new use for the object. After they have made something new or thought of something to do with the object, have them demonstrate their idea to the rest of the class.

CONNECT:

Ask: Does God have creative ideas that are new to us?

Brainstorm: What creative ideas do you think God has that are new to us or might be hard for us to follow? What stories in the Bible give some examples?

Transition Statement: An experience Peter had shows us what it was like when God taught him something new about how radical God's love is.

EXPLORE THE BIBLE:

Get volunteers to act out the story of Acts 10:1-48 while the reader reads it aloud. You will need:

- a reader
- Peter
- messenger(s)
- Cornelius
- people to be part of Cornelius' household
- angel of the Lord/voice of God
- costumes/props (sheet with animals, etc)

As the reader reads the story, the actors mime and act it out. Use as many or few people in your group as you want to; it could be done with a minimum of four (Peter, Cornelius, angel/voice of God, and a messenger/member of Cornelius' household) if your group is small.

Ask some of the following questions:

- 1 What was Peter risking by hosting and visiting Gentiles?
- 2 Why do you think Peter was willing to do this?
- 3 What was the result of both Peter and Cornelius' faithfulness?

Emphasize how radical it was for Peter to be at a tanner's house, even though Simon was a Jew. Also talk about how radical it was to associate with Gentiles. Out of this, emphasize how much Peter, Cornelius and God prepared for this big step – Peter and Cornelius were praying, faithful men and God gave them visions for this first. God didn't just spring it up on them. Learning new, radical things about the Kingdom of God involves effort on both God's part AND ours.

APPLY:

Divide into small groups. Give each group some of the stuffed animals. Ask each group to come up with some "creative ideas" that God might want to share with them. These might be ideas related to people, events in their lives, plans for the future, etc. Ask them to have one idea for each stuffed animal.

Bring the large group together and go around the circle, introducing each animal and the idea it represents.

RESPOND:

Take a silent walk from the house Peter was staying at (the room you are meeting in) to Cornelius' house (the exit of your church – where the rest of the world begins). Tell students to walk quietly and to be thinking about one thing they can do this week so they can be prepared for God to give them some "creative ideas" (Such as committing to time in prayer, Bible study, reading books about God and faith, talking with friends about it, etc.) Emphasize that this is a "prayer walk" - there is no need to hurry or talk to each another.

When you have reached your destination, pray together. As a whole group or in smaller groups, have each student pray for the person on their right. (Beforehand, they can share what they have committed to if they feel comfortable doing so.) The prayer can be specific or general. Close with a petition for the power of the Holy Spirit to teach and direct each student during the coming week.

INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE:

The issue of clean/unclean was a big deal for the Jews during Biblical times and still is today. It's not that they just wanted to be legalistic about what they ate or who they could touch at certain times, but God was trying to help them stay away from things that could make them unholy. The

dietary laws and other laws concerning uncleanness were meant to keep people close to God and desiring what God desires.

Among those considered unclean were Gentiles - anyone not a Jew. This was not because God did not love them. To the contrary, God was trying to protect the Jews from syncretism (combining pagan religions with Judaism) so that they would have a pure faith to share with their neighbors. This is what the entire covenant with Abraham was all about and why God sent Jonah to Nineveh. However, the Jews believed that God had no use for Gentiles; therefore, they were not to associate with them unless the Gentile converted to Judaism, including the rite of circumcision. The Israelites thought of God as a nationalistic deity ("God Bless America" type thinking). Therefore, Jews did not associate with Gentiles at all and they most certainly would not participate in a guest/host relationship as Peter and Cornelius did.

At the time of Jesus there were people who, although not circumcised Jews, still followed God faithfully. These people were called "God-fearers." They identified with Judaism: they went to synagogue, gave alms, prayed, and did whatever else a good Jew would do. However, they were only allowed in the outer courtyard of the Temple. This is probably what Cornelius was, and if not, we know that he was a man devoted to the Israelite God. This love for Yahweh spilled over into his community as demonstrated by his giving of alms to the poor.

God was the major player in this story. He is the one who showed people the truth and sent the Holy Spirit. The acceptance of the Gentiles into the church is something that could only be the work of God. God started by working on Cornelius, giving him a vision to send for Peter. Yahweh had already been stretching Peter, as evidenced by his staying with a tanner, who is also considered unclean because of his work with dead animals. Then God gave Peter a vision about eating unclean meat and told Peter not to question what God has made clean. It was then that Peter let Cornelius' messengers into the house he was staying at, and Peter followed the messengers back to Cornelius' house, thereby totally disobeying Jewish custom.

Peter was not the only one God was working with here. God also wanted to reveal his truth about his son Jesus to Cornelius, a Gentile. This is why he sent Peter to tell him about it, which he did in his sermon to Cornelius and his household. God even sent the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is bestowed on the followers of Jesus at Pentecost and in this story God has sent his Son in Spirit form to the Gentiles as well. The spiritual gift that manifested itself here is speaking in tongues, which is only specifically told about three times in the New Testament: here, Pentecost, and in once in Ephesus (Acts 19) to emphasize how all people are baptized into the Spirit, not individual human leaders. Scripturally, it seemed to be a sign from God when he wants to prove a point. However, Paul admonished that the greatest gift is love.

Cornelius and his household were the first Gentiles baptized into the body of Jesus without becoming Jews first. The church accepted this act in Acts 15 at the Jerusalem Conference, but only after much deliberation. However, after they saw how God was working through visions and the sending of the Holy Spirit, they realized that it really was God's will for all people to be part of the church.

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