

**“WHO WAS I THAT I COULD HINDER GOD?”**

**Subtitle: “Magic Carpet of Unclean Foods”**

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Acts 11:17b, Revelation 21:1-6, Job 38:1-7

Using *Low-Back, Ladder-Back, Cane-Bottom Chair*, pp 103-108, 108-111, by James S. Lowry

***“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?” –Acts 11:17***

First Reading: 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. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"

Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "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. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.'

But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'

But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 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. 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; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.'

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 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.' 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?"

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."

Second Reading: Rev. 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Reading from Hebrew Scriptures: Job 38:1-7

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Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:  
“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?  
Gird up your loins like a man,  
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.  
“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?  
Tell me, if you have understanding.  
Who determined its measurements--surely you know!  
Or who stretched the line upon it?  
On what were its bases sunk,  
or who laid its cornerstone  
when the morning stars sang together  
and all the heavenly beings [*Hebrew “Sons of God”*] shouted for joy?

**(After reading Lowry, pp. 108-111:)**

Lowry wrote: “We don’t know why people of different races sometimes call each other ugly names.  
We don’t know why Arabs and Jews in the Holy Land can’t make peace.  
nor Presbyterians and Catholics in Northern Ireland.”

Today’s reading from Acts, about Peter and what I’ve been known to call “The Magic Carpet of Unclean Foods” and his encounter with the household of Cornelius, are pivotal readings for me. Taken in context with Revelation, “I am doing a new thing” and with Job’s recognition that God is God, and we are not, this is a powerful statement in support of humility.

While the conclusion of Lowry’s biblical meditation still focuses on our ministry together – a ministry sometimes unsung, and sometimes blessed with grace overflowing – his reflection centers on this truth, that God is God. And as much as we seek to discern God’s intent, to follow as faithful disciples — it’s not always that easy.

I knew an Episcopal priest who inquired about how Presbyterian nominating committees could possibly meet without the pastor. Now first I have to say that she does not reflect the position of all Episcopal priests, but it’s important to know that she is part of a hierarchical and apostolic denomination. Because she stated that, without her presence, how could her nominating committee know the mind of Christ? And you know that good Presbyterians would never claim to have the corner on that market! We discern, as best we can, the mind of Christ in community, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Because God is God and we are not.

The reading from Acts has Peter reflecting on two life-changing experiences which absolutely reversed what his tradition had taught. He was told that there were no such things as unclean foods, if God had made them clean. And he was led to bring a Gentile into the Christian community, which had his fellow disciples up in arms.

We are not always right. We are not God. And we cannot presume to hinder God, as Peter said, or to know the mind of God without testing it. Peter’s actions were tested by the actual knowable presence of the Holy Spirit. We do not live in that age, so we must find a balance between bold prophetic ministry and the humility to know that we might be wrong.

In a few weeks our denomination’s General Assembly will meet. There are at least three controversial issues before them: the ordination of gay and lesbian persons,

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our stance with regard to Israel and Palestine, and  
an entire rewriting of the core of our Book of Order, to make it more flexible for ministry in  
the post-modern world.

Let us pray for their discernment and for our own forbearance when the decisions come to our presbyteries for ratification. God is God, and we are called to be God’s faithful servants in the world, ministering to all God’s people. It would benefit us to remember Peter’s words to Cornelius, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” (Acts 10:34b-35) Let us pray to discern what is right.

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