

## Can White People Be Saved?

Acts 10:1-34

Second Sunday after Pentecost, (Jan. 17) 2021

Martin Luther King Sunday

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*We live in a history where whiteness as a way of being in the world has been joined to a Christianity that is also a way of being in the world. It was the fusion of these two realities that gave tragic shape to Christian faith in the new worlds at the dawn of what we now call the modern colonialist era.*

- Willie James Jennings, Yale Divinity School

*I will flatly say that the bulk of this country's white population impresses me, and has impressed me for a very long time, as being beyond any conceivable hope of moral rehabilitation. They have been white, if I may put it, too long...*

- James Baldwin, *The New York Times*, February 2, 1968

*"You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free," said an itinerant rabbi named Jesus. And the lie that many white Americans still need to be set free from is the presumed rightness of our whiteness. Whiteness is a religious idol, and idols separate us from God. Whiteness blinds our minds, binds our hearts and must be repented.*

- Jim Wallis, *Sojourners*

Colonel Cornelius was a man of privilege though he did not know it. He just assumed this was the way the world was. He was born a Roman and everyone knew, and everyone was taught in school that Rome made the world safe, brought

law and order to nations and stability to markets both at home and overseas, put an end to piracy on the high seas, and did all this with an Army that was better trained, better equipped, better manned, and more heroic than any army in the world. The Pax Romana (peace of Rome) made the world safer and better and freer than ever before. Countries that Rome now ruled were grateful for Roman rule. Even people enslaved by Rome, learned that their lives were better under Roman control. The Roman way was bringing people together and changing the world for good. That's what was taught in school and that's what everyone believed.

As a Roman officer, Colonel Cornelius, though from humble beginnings, had worked hard and made good grades, and with help from influential adults who recognized his potential (nothing like privilege), he was able to attend the best schools, and he was able to get a loan to buy his first house. He lived a moral life and gave generously to charities. He was a fine officer in the Army who treated his slaves well and loved his wife and kids. He also loved God and was a person of prayer. Professionally, he was reaching the top as a military officer, commanding the Italian Brigade, an elite and prestigious unit with an outstanding reputation, currently posted overseas at the Caesarea Army Base, on the coast about 50 miles northwest of Jerusalem and about 40 miles north on the coastal road from Joppa. If you work hard and stay committed, Colonel Cornelius believed, anyone could achieve success in life – after all, this is the Roman Empire; this is the way of the world.

According to Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, about 3:00 one afternoon, while in prayer, Colonel Cornelius received a vision from God that shook him. An angel spoke to him saying, “Cornelius, God hears your prayers and knows of your charity work. God wants you to send men to Joppa and ask for a Simon Peter who

is staying at the home of Simon the Tanner. Ask him to come here.” So, Colonel Cornelius called in his Command Sgt. Major, who also was a devout believer, telling him, “Take two of my slaves and go to Joppa and find this Simon Peter and bring him back here.”

About noon the next day, after an early start and hard ride, they approached Joppa. Meanwhile, Simon Peter was sitting on the back porch of the house of Simon the Tanner. He was staying at the house, because it was often difficult to find places to stay in segregated Judea. Someone like Peter, a Black man, had to plan ahead and through contacts in the church in Joppa, he was able to stay with Simon the Tanner. Peter had been an excellent student in the Capernaum black high school, but when he graduated, the only job he could find was fishing. He had no money, and no one intervened on his behalf or made some discreet contacts, so there was no opportunity for further education. As a result, he became a fisherman. One day, while mending his nets, a preacher named Jesus of Nazareth came by, and after listening to him, Peter dropped everything and followed him. Now, four years later, after following Jesus through death and resurrection, Jesus and the Holy Spirit had turned Peter into a preacher, too.

That morning, Peter was in prayer on the back porch and someone called from the kitchen that dinner was being prepared and would be ready soon. Peter smiled, since he was hungry, and his stomach was growling. But all of a sudden while in prayer, Peter went into a kind of trance and had a vision of a large tablecloth being lowered. In it were all kinds of Roman White folks’ food: Chicken Parmesan, Neapolitan Pork Rotolini, various casseroles with lots of noodles, cucumbers and celery with Italian dressing, and so on. Peter heard a voice saying, “Peter go and eat.” Peter protested, “Lord, I can’t eat that food. You know I only eat Soul Food – food that feeds the soul as well as the body.” And the voice

responded, “What God has made is not for you to turn your nose up over.” This same vision happened three times and three times the voice commanded him to eat of this unappetizing food, but which Peter clearly understood was prepared by God.

Peter was both shaken and puzzled over this vision. What in the world did it mean? About that time, the men Colonel Cornelius sent knocked on the front door and called out that they were looking for a Simon Peter. And the Holy Spirit spoke to Peter, “Go with those men for I have sent them.”

Peter went and opened the front door. The Sgt. Major said, “I’m looking for a Simon Peter.” And Peter, suddenly became very afraid, because standing in front of him was a big White man in uniform, carrying weapons. Yet Peter remembered that the Holy Spirit had told him to go with these men, so Peter said, “I’m Simon Peter. What can I do for you?” The Sgt. Major hesitated, “But you’re, you’re a black man.”

“Yes, so what? What do you want?” The Sgt. Major said, “Colonel Cornelius ordered me to come and get you and take you back to the Caesarea Army Base.” Peter said, “Okay. It’s too far to start back today. Y’all come in and stay overnight and we’ll leave early in the morning. Come on, we’re about to eat. Come join us.” And he motioned to not only the Sgt. Major but to the two slaves, as well. As the slaves almost ran past him, Peter said to them, “You know we’re having some peas and hot water cornbread, and I don’t know what else. You fellows might like it.” One of the slaves said, “Man oh man, that sounds great. We’re tired of eating casseroles and cucumbers and celery with Italian dressing.” The Sgt. Major said, “You know I’ve never stayed in the home of a black man

before, but the Colonel wants what the Colonel wants, and my job is to obey his orders.”

The next morning some of the members of the church in Joppa where Peter was preaching a revival, showed up saying, “Peter, we’re going with you. Who knows what that White Colonel wants with you?” Peter said, “Look, I’m glad you’re going because I’m more than a little bit afraid, but remember, the Holy Spirit told me to go with them and we can trust God.”

Let’s pause in our story for a moment. Why am I doing this? Why am I telling this story from this perspective? What am I up to?

First of all, I remind you of something from Bonhoeffer I mentioned last week. Bonhoeffer said that we must learn to read the Bible over-against ourselves. We must learn to allow the Bible to interrogate us, rather than us interrogating the Bible. Well, that’s partly what is going on this morning. Retelling this story from Acts 10 allows the Bible to interrogate us, ask us questions, and perhaps speak to us in ways we’ve never heard before.

Secondly, I’m not making this up out of clean air. We know Cornelius is a Roman officer and, in those days, to be Roman meant to be a person of privilege. Hence, for us this morning, he’s White. I’m asking us to use our imagination a little and allow the Holy Spirit to work. Let’s shift our interpretation and ask, what if Cornelius was White and Simon Peter was Black?

Which raises a big question that we take for granted, but Peter, the young church, and the Bible does not take for granted: Can White people be saved? Hear me on this. Being White or participating in Whiteness is not simply about the pigment of our skin. It is a way of being in the world. It is about participating in

structures, habits, systems, customs, and ways that bring order to the world but the order it imposes, especially upon people of color is by using violence, power, and coercion. The wealth Whiteness has is derived from exploiting and extracting cheap labor (slaves and underpaid workers mostly made up of people of color) and exploiting and extracting from the Earth. When we're White, we don't really notice it. We simply assume it. It's the air we breathe.

Remember the quick illustration I've used before – a cartoon where an old fish is swimming along, and two young fish are swimming toward him. The old fish says, “Good morning! How's the water today?” And the two young fish look at one another, “What's water?” Well, water is Whiteness; it just is – when you're White.

So, this morning, the Bible is asking us can White privileged-powerful-used-to-being-in-charge-people become part of God's plan of bringing justice, peace, healing, and love to this world where people can live together in the new creation? This story is about the collision of two ways of bringing peace and justice, salvation and redemption to the world – the way of Whiteness or the Way of Jesus?

Let's see what happens.

Well, the next morning, off everyone went – Peter, the Sgt. Major, the two slaves, and the entourage from the church. As they approached the up-scale suburb where Cornelius lived, neighbors locked their doors, called the police, and some even got their guns. A bunch of Black folks walking down the street is a sure sign of trouble. Nevertheless, Colonel Cornelius had heard they were coming and was ready for them. He went out and met Peter and fell at Peter's feet. Everyone – and I mean everyone – gasped at what they were seeing. This White colonel who never

humbled himself before anyone, unless it was a general, was humbling himself, bowing at the feet of this Black man and this group of Black church folks. He was breaking every custom, every law, and every expectation anyone knew about! Here he was making a stand by bowing down. It was only a first step, but it was a big step, bowing down meant giving up White Supremacy. It meant breaking the “code” of White Supremacy. Some White people whispered, “Don’t get me wrong, I’m for being nice to Black people, and I know we’re all supposed to be equal in our hearts, but this is going too far.” Other Whites screamed, one White lady fainted, while some of the Black folks whispered, “Be careful! This White colonel is up to something.”

Peter says, “Get up, get up. Don’t worship me.” Cornelius replies, “Come in. All of you. Come in for God has sent you.” People are mumbling, some White people leave, Black folks hesitate, and Peter speaks up, “You know our being together like this is against Jim Crow laws and the customs of the Roman White way of life. I’m here because God sent me. Why did you send for me?”

Cornelius spoke, “God has told me that we need to listen to you. Not tell you, or organize you, or lead you to do your work better. But to listen. We White folks of this household are to humble ourselves and listen. So here we are. We’re listening.”

Peter was a preacher worth his salt, and he knew a congregation when he saw one, so he began to preach. The White people sat down and listened politely, quietly. But with the help of the slaves and the Black church folks from Joppa, Peter really began to preach. “I know now what God has been trying to tell me. God’s plan is that all of us are meant to belong to God and belong to each other in just and loving relationship and deep communion. Now, I don’t know what all of

this means, but I do know that God is doing something new here today. It's revolutionary and scary but it is also liberating and healing, and we'll probably all get in good trouble because of it." Peter went on, "And it is all because of this fellow Jesus, a Black man from Nazareth who is the Lord of all. He is God's ordained Chosen One, who went around preaching God's good news, bringing healing and setting folks free from the Devil of domination, sin and injustice, and soul-killing racism. What happened, and some of us are witnesses to it, is that those in the power structure, along with everyone who just went along (including me), grabbed Jesus and took him outside of Jerusalem and tortured him and lynched him on a tree. But get this: after three days, God raised him from the dead and sent him back among us! I'm here to tell you, he is the Lord and the Savior of the world who shows us the Way of true belonging and the healing of our personal lives, the healing of our society, and the healing of God's creation. And anyone who believes in him, who gives their life to this Black man who was lynched on a tree and raised after three days, will be saved. Instead of participating in the way of Whiteness we are called to participate in the Way of the lynched Black man Jesus."

A lot of the White people in the room swallowed hard over this. They were open to a spiritual experience in their hearts, but Peter was calling them to repent and change the way they actually lived. To give up the way of being White and to participate and join the Way of this lynched Black man Jesus was more than they could do.

All of a sudden, the Holy Spirit fell upon everyone, and I mean everyone! White folks, Black folks, powerful White Men and Black slaves, White women and Black women, were speaking and listening in each other's languages, praising God just like Pentecost. The Black church members from Joppa were astounded. And the White people suddenly realized that by the power of the Holy Spirit, they



could join, participate in the Way of the lynched Black man Jesus. They could get saved if they started giving up being White, and the Holy Spirit was there to help them.

I said earlier, this story in the Book of Acts is about the collision of two ways: the way of Whiteness and the Way of the lynched Black Man Jesus. It's still a collision these two thousand years later.

Last week we saw the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. There were lots of Confederate flags and Nazi symbols, symbols of White Supremacy, mixed in with signs about Jesus being our savior. Someone even built gallows with a noose. Let there be no mistake, the noose means the same that it has long meant – the lynching of people of color, and the message is the same as it has meant for at least two thousand years: We'll lynch anyone who threatens our White American way of life just like the cross was about protecting the Roman way of life.

The American White church has a reckoning to face. It is a reckoning with Almighty God who asks are we going to follow Jesus, who was lynched on a tree or are we going to keep on following the way of Whiteness and power and guns? Lots of White folks think they can have Jesus and not give up being White. But that's not the Way of Jesus and not the Way of the New Testament. White people can be saved – if we repent, turn from being White and turn to Jesus. The Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to be saved.

One of the earliest church documents after the close of the New Testament is *The Didache*, which begins with these words: “There are two ways, one of life and one of death; and there is a great difference between the two ways.”

Colonel Cornelius and his household had to choose that day in Acts 10 between the two ways. And they chose the Way of the lynched black man Jesus. It was the Way of Life. It was not easy. It never is. But the Way of Life in Christ calls to us, the living Holy Spirit empowers us, and the water of baptism beckons us.

Peter said to Cornelius, “Heh, do you have a swimming pool in the backyard?” Cornelius said, “I sure do!” Peter shouted, “Okay everyone, we’re going to have a big-time baptism. Everyone head to the backyard and the swimming pool. Leave your guns and remove your body armor. You can’t tote firearms and wear body armor in the baptismal waters. Make your choice but if you choose the Way of the lynched Jesus that means no guns and no armor.”

Cornelius hollered, “And afterwards, everyone plan on staying for a while. We have much more to learn! This movement of the lynched black man Jesus is just getting started! I’ve got slaves who are being baptized alongside me, today. What does that mean? And what about women who are baptized? Besides those, I’ve more questions. But first, after this baptism we’re all going to eat together! I hope you’re hungry! We’re having cucumbers and celery with Italian dressing!”

Peter walked over to Cornelius and put his arm around his neck, “Cornelius, have you ever heard of hot-water cornbread?”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.