When I first read the sermons in the book of Acts, I was struck by the fact that they were unlike any sermons I had ever heard. They were not divided into three sections; they offered no anecdotes, epigrams or alliterative subpoints to arrest the attention of the hearer; and aside from Paul's sermon on Mars Hill, they did not quote poetry or secular literature. Sermons in the book of Acts tended to be more like Stephen's lengthy homily before his martyrdom: i.e., a précis of the entire Old Testament from Abraham to the Babylonian captivity with a brief Christian twist at the end. Even Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost was a string of quotations from the prophets. The sermons, in short, were eccentric, judged by the homiletical standards in vogue in Protestant circles.

Candidates for the Protestant ministry were often taught a version of Harry Emerson Fosdick's dictum that worshippers do not come to Sunday services with a burning desire to hear fresh information about the Amalekites. If that approach to preaching at times produced what Halford Luccock at Yale derided as a string of nursery stories tied together with a baby ribbon, it also produced sermons that began with what was immediate and familiar to ordinary worshippers. It is hard to imagine what the congregation at Judson Baptist or Pilgrim UCC or First United Methodist would make of Stephen's homily. Even members of the congregation who complain that sermons are not sufficiently biblical might not have something this condensed and undiluted in mind. Yet these sermons are put forward by the author of Luke-Acts as representative examples of apostolic preaching at its best.

In Acts 10:32 we encounter Peter's first sermon to a Gentile audience. Peter was summoned from Joppa to Caesarea to confer with the centurion, Cornelius, a devout man who worshipped God and
was generous in his support of worthy causes. Peter was willing to go to the home of this prominent Gentile because of a vision he experienced earlier during his noontime prayers. When Peter met Cornelius and was convinced of his sincerity, he immediately preached a short homily. If Stephen's sermon was a précis of the old covenant, Peter's homily was a précis of the new.

Peter summarized the mission of Jesus to the Jews, starting with his baptism by John, his mission of preaching and healing in Galilee and Jerusalem, his execution and resurrection, his appearances, his commission to the disciples, his eschatological role as Judge of the living and the dead, and concluding with a call to faith in him for the forgiveness of sins. When Paul, in our second lesson, summarizes the gospel, he offers an abbreviated list of the same events: the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, and the appearances to Peter, to the twelve, to five hundred Christians, and to James and Paul. The emphasis shifts but the substance of the preaching is remarkably similar.

Let me make three brief comments about Peter's sermon:

1. Peter answers the question, who is Jesus, in the context of the promises and mission to Israel. He reminds Cornelius that God "sent his word to the Israelites" through "what happened lately all over the land of the Jews." While Peter does not offer a lengthy synopsis of the old covenant, which would hardly have been appropriate under the circumstances, he does root Jesus of Nazareth firmly in the tradition of God's mission to Israel.

That rootedness in Israel is important to notice because the perennial temptation of Gentiles is to answer the question, who is Jesus, by placing him in an alien context. The most exaggerated form of an unrooted gospel was the teaching of the heretic, Marcion. Marcion taught that there were two gods, the God of the Old Testament, who created the world and is responsible for all evil, pain, and suffering, including the pain of women in childbirth, and the God of the New Testament, who was utterly unknown until he was revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. The God of the Old Testament is a God of
wrath, judgment, and law; the God of the New Covenant is a God of mercy, grace, and salvation. The redemptive mission of Jesus is the task of rescuing men and women from the power of the God of the Old Testament and placing them under the protection of the God of the New. But by taking Jesus out of context, Marcion lost the Jesus of apostolic preaching and found only a Gnostic redeemer.

During the 1930's, Emanuel Hirsch, dean of the faculty of theology at the University of Goettingen and the very model of a modern Nazi intellectual, concluded that "according to all the rules of scientific probability, Jesus was of non-Jewish blood." Although Hirsch raised the question in a purely historical context and used the analytical tools of which he was master to support his arguments, his interest was not academic. He was passionately concerned to claim Jesus for the white ruling classes and free him from what he regarded as an unacceptable racial taint. But by taking Jesus out of context, Hirsch lost the Jesus of apostolic preaching and found only the Jesus of the anti-Semite and the racial bigot.

The question, who is Jesus, can only be answered in the context of God's word to the Israelites. Jesus is not the bourgeois embodiment of Kantian morality nor the televangelistic friend of conspicuous consumers nor the Marxist guerilla of revolutionary chic. Jesus is not a Platonist or an Aristotelian or a Hegelian or a Cartesian or an existentialist or a Whiteheadian or a foundationalist or an anti-foundationalist or a deconstructionist or a post-deconstructionist. The context for understanding Jesus is the covenant with Eve and Abraham, Ruth and David, Rahab and Jacob, Hannah and Simeon, Zechariah and Mary. The Old Testament is the key that unlocks the New. By taking Jesus out of this context, we lose the Jesus of apostolic preaching and find only an ersatz Jesus made over in our own confused image.

2. The center of Christian proclamation is not a series of doctrines but a series of events. I say that not to denigrate or belittle doctrine but only to put it in its proper place. Peter does not recite a
series of propositions; he catalogues a series of events. These events have so radically altered the human situation that it will not go back to what it was before.

When I first came to Durham in 1971, I drove to the spot outside town where Confederate General Joseph Johnston surrendered to Union General William T. Sherman. Sherman had cut the Confederacy in half by taking Atlanta. After occupying it for several months, he burned it to the ground and set out on the final leg of a Union campaign of attrition against the South, marching from Georgia through South Carolina to the outskirts of what is now Durham. Grant moved from the north, taking Petersburg and Richmond and forcing Jeff Davis and his cabinet to flee to Greensboro. In a matter of days the war was over.

The Civil War was not an experiment in thought; it was a complex series of events that set in motion even longer chains of further consequences. Many of those events could have been avoided at the time or their consequences at least muted. But once they took place and were firmly cemented in the mortar of history, they could not be undone. Young men died; young women were widowed; families lost homes and possessions; blacks were released from slavery, if not yet freed from oppression; an entire region was impoverished. People who never heard of Judah Benjamin or William Seward, of Dan Sheridan or Jeb Stewart, of Mary Todd or Clara Barton, of Corporal George Barleon or Private Henry Steinmetz nevertheless had their lives decisively altered by events in which those persons were actors.

History is not an idea like the Ptolemaic cosmology that maintains its force only so long as men and women believe in it. Events change human life at an altogether different level from the level of theory. Birth, illness, marriage, graduation, divorce, retirement, inflation, death of a relative or friend—all of these are events that change human life and leave it irreversibly different from what it was before.

I still remember when my wife and I drove down Wilson Avenue to the intersection of Frebis and waved goodbye to my parents. It had not struck me until that moment that my marriage had
forever closed the door on my childhood. While I would return with my family over the years to see my parents, a chapter had ended, never to be revised or reopened.

The Christian gospel is about events and not merely about ideas. While there are better and worse ways to understand what took place in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the apostolic preaching is first about what happened and then about what it meant. Peter announces that God acted for the salvation of the world in such a way that human history is no longer the same. What took place through Jesus in Galilee and Judea marked every human life with the sign of the cross. An old era passed away. A door opened that can never be closed.

That does not mean that every human being is a believer or a beneficiary of the liberating power of the gospel. Peter is no universalist. The gospel centers particularly on Jesus of Nazareth as "the one who has been designated by God as judge of the living and the dead. It is to him that all the prophets testify, declaring that everyone who trusts in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." (Acts 10:42-42).

But it does mean that you have never met a human being untouched by what took place in "the Jewish country-side and Jerusalem." When God changed the course of the world in Jesus of Nazareth, he took us all with him. There is no way to find my true self, to find my neighbor, or to find my God except through the Jesus Peter proclaims to Cornelius. Peter is not suggesting stimulating ideas or offering an interesting point of view. He is confronting Cornelius with a spare recital of history-altering deeds.

3. Luke-Acts tells us about the remarkable response to this sermon. Cornelius and the other Gentiles present began to speak in tongues and erupted in ecstatic praise of God. The response of the new group to the preaching of the gospel disrupts the settled program of the Jewish disciples of Jesus and forces a re-thinking of their mission. No one could deny baptism to people who had received the
Holy Spirit. The boundaries of the Church had to be redefined to include a group that did not fit the old, comfortable pattern.

Christian history is full of stories of the inclusion of new groups in the Church, from the Germanic tribes with their aversion to public displays of penitence to West African slaves, who taught their oppressors how to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. The old message is absorbed by each succeeding group, who respond in familiar ways but in unfamiliar accents. The gospel is embraced by outsiders, whose unavoidable inclusion redefines the meaning of what it is to be inside.

I remember years ago hearing the then Father, later Cardinal, Jean Danielou, whose work in Patristics laid important foundations for the Second Vatican Council, tell of a speech he had given in the Vatican in 1946. During the Second World War and immediately after, Danielou had had repeated contacts with Protestant Christians, particularly Lutherans, whose faith and piety had impressed him deeply. Building on this experience he lectured before curial officials in Rome on "The Holy Spirit among Protestants." Several of the bishops were outraged. "The Holy Spirit is not present among the Protestants at all," they objected. Danielou conceded that, while their theory was orthodox, it unfortunately did not conform to the realities of his experience. The Protestants, like Cornelius before them, were showing theoretically inconvenient but nevertheless undeniable manifestations of the lively energies of the Spirit. It was no longer possible for Danielou to call profane what God counts clean.

While sorting through my papers in an attempt to put some order in my life, I ran across a copy of a directory from my senior year in seminary. The directory listed 22 women students at Drew Theological Seminary in a student body of 282, or 8% of the total. Of those, 14 were studying for the MRE and 2 were special students. That left 6 women, of whom at least 2 to my certain knowledge were planning to study for the Ph.D. At the very most 4 women, and possibly fewer, were planning to seek ordination. By a generous estimate no more than 1% of the student body were women ordinands. While
I have no current figures at hand, it does not take a conference statistician to observe that those numbers have risen sharply over the course of the last four decades.

There were, of course, itinerating women ministers in some of the Methodist connections in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They were known, rather poignantly, as the Female Brethren. But Victorian Methodists got ecclesiastical cold feet and phased out the ordination of women. It was not until the twentieth century that Wesleyans regained the courage of their Primitive Methodist origins and honored once again the vocation of women to the ministry of Word and sacrament. Like their ancestors they refused to call profane what God had called clean.

These, then, are some of the points we need to keep in mind as we reflect on Peter’s sermon: (1) that Jesus cannot properly be understood except in the context of the covenants and promises to Israel; (2) that the center of apostolic preaching is a series of history-transforming events; and (3) that when the gospel is preached and heard, it disrupts our settled patterns and forces a rethinking of our mission. As Peter found out, it is a very dangerous thing to preach the gospel to outsiders. God may include them in and transform the insiders in the process.