

Sermon: The Day Everything Changed  
Text: Acts 10:9-16  
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Context: WWPC  
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*The voice said to him again, a second time,  
'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'*

Acts 10:15

For the overwhelming majority of the time we humans have walked the earth, the natural order of the world seemed fixed and predictable.

There was no way to know that the underlying structure of the universe was in any way different from the reality we see right before our eyes. And there was never any reason to believe otherwise.

In fact, quite the opposite. If you threw a spear at a mastodon, or shot an arrow at a buffalo, you had every reason to believe that the arrow or spear would behave in an utterly predictable way.

We all know assumptions are dangerous. But you could assume that the projectile would fly on exactly the arc you intended for it to travel, until it finally hit its target, or fell harmlessly to earth.

And you would be right every single time.

Your belief that the arrow or spear would behave as predicted was not unique to you. In every culture that used arrows or spears, this belief was shared by everyone, everywhere. It was a kind of rock solid, universal faith, mainly because the tenets of this faith had proven to be 100% reliably true, based on thousands of repeated trials.

Now enter Sir Isaac Newton. Arguably the greatest mind the world had ever seen to that point, the Cambridge-trained mathematician and physicist finally codified this faith.

In 1687, Newton published his magisterial work *Principia Mathematica*, in which he described the laws of motion that govern the way all observable phenomena behave. Together, these laws are known as the principles of classical mechanics, and the field they describe bear his name: Newtonian physics.

Oh, it should also be noted that Newton invented a system of mathematics -- namely calculus -- that enabled him to describe these laws in terms that anyone smart enough to do calculus could learn.

The publication of *Principia* did not change the world. But for the next two hundred plus years its laws and principles did provide science with a comprehensive and infallible means of explaining and predicting the behavior of every physical object in the world.

But their reach didn't stop with this world. The principles of classical mechanics also described the behavior of every object in the entire universe: from spears and arrows to planets to stars to galaxies.

Until one day they didn't any more. It's not that the tenets of Newtonian physics were wrong, or that the laws of classical mechanics suddenly no longer applied to all observable phenomena.

Not at all, in fact. We've long since given up spears and arrows, of course. But to this day, every time we board an airplane or slide behind the wheel of our car we trust that the tenets of Newton physics still apply.

We believe the laws of lift will keep our airplane aloft and the laws of motion will keep our car heading in the direction we steer it. Human culture would implode if these laws were no longer valid.

Now enter Max Planck. The German physicist had no way to know that he was about to change the world. Nor did he set out to do so. He was not a scientific revolutionary, or a revolutionary of any kind for that matter.

As he himself put it, when he later described the contribution he was about to make to modern physics: *I can characterize the whole procedure as an act of desperation, since, by nature I am peaceable and opposed to doubtful adventures.* (Quoted in "A Brief History of Quantum Mechanics", by Dan Styer, Professor of Physics, Oberlin College.)

So, Max Planck did not set out to disrupt or change anything. The main goal of his research was straightforward and seemingly innocent. As I understand it, he simply wanted to figure out the answer to one question.

Why does metal glow at different colors as it gets hotter: first yellow, then white, then, when it's really, really hot, blue?

Planck published the results of his research on December 14, 1900. His theories did not cause an immediate stir.

But now, more than a hundred years later, that date -- Dec. 14, 1900 -- is widely considered to be the day a new physics was born: particle physics, quantum physics. You could argue that Dec. 14<sup>th</sup>, 1900 was the day everything changed.

From that point on, the world's top rank physicists had to concede two things. And several of the more prominent ones weren't all excited about having to do this.

One, that there was an infinitesimal world, smaller even than the ordinary sub-atomic world -- a world that was so small, no one could see it, even with the most powerful microscopes.

Believing in this world was, in effect, a matter of faith. The only way they knew it was there is because it accounted for certain experimental results for which there was no other explanation. (On this point, it's worth noting that the historical divide between physics and theology all but vanished.)

They also realized that the quarks and neutrinos and muons of particle physics -- the stuff of the world we cannot see -- all behave in radically different ways from the stuff of the world we can see.

Imagine that. Seriously. Take a moment and try to imagine what that was like for Max Planck, and for the other physicists who pioneered this new field of particle physics--for Neils Bohr and Albert Einstein.

All your life, you believe one thing is true. You believe the world works a certain way, and that all the physical objects in it are governed by infallible laws that everyone agrees are true, because they are true 100% of the time.

And then slowly you come to the realization that there is literally a deeper truth in play.

Like it or not -- and Bohr and Einstein in particular did not like this -- you are forced to confess what seems like a heresy. That the tiniest particles of all, the very smallest bits that comprise every atom in the entire universe -- these unbelievably tiny particles don't behave predictably at all.

Instead they zoom around in a festival of utter chaos. And the moment you try to zero in on them to figure out where they are, or what they might do next, they bolt off in any one of hundreds of completely unpredictable directions, like a shy wild animal.

So, you are finally forced to declare publicly, in the very best scientific journals in the world, that the laws of classical mechanics and the principles of Newtonian physics are so different from the laws of quantum mechanics and the principles of particle physics they might as well be describing two different worlds.

In effect, they are: one describes the behavior of objects we can see, and one describes objects we cannot see. It's just that the former are comprised of the later.

To put that in more accessible terms it would be like discovering that all the world's tallest skyscrapers are really made of smoke. Indeed, that everything on earth is made of smoke. It's just astonishing, really.

We have explored before from this pulpit the effect these shocking discoveries had on the wider world.

We've seen how the unsettling tenets of quantum physics changed the way artists rendered the world, giving rise to cubism and Dadaism and much of the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

And how they changed the way musicians approached their work -- how the music that traced its origins back to Bach and Beethoven, back to the music of the spheres, the music of Newtonian physics, how this gave way to the atonal symphonies of Schoenberg and Bartok and John Cage.

It's not an exaggeration to say these discoveries changed the foundational belief upon which the world was built. The main tenets of Newtonian physics, of Newtonian faith: that what you see is what you get, and the behavior of what you see is entirely predictable. These were "simply" no longer true.

Still with me? Good. Because we're about to round third and head for home.

Now enter Simon Peter. Clearly, Peter's role in history predated that of Max Planck and his colleagues by many centuries.

But of all the characters in the Bible, Peter might know better than anyone what this feeling is like, when your foundational beliefs about the world change right before your eyes.

It must be said that for Peter, this shift started the moment he dropped his nets and began to follow Jesus.

For him, that was the day everything changed. New laws and new truths began to supersede the old ones that had always governed Peter's life: the law of love; the truth that when you're following Jesus your time-honored beliefs about what's possible with a loaf bread and a couple of fish are no longer sufficient to explain the miracle of abundance that has just played out right before your eyes.

So, Peter's world had already changed to a very large degree. But it had not changed completely.

For example, we know from the story that he still observed the Jewish dietary laws. That is, he still kept kosher. We also know that like Max Planck, Peter was not actively trying to change the world when the events of this story took place. He was just hungry.

So he went up on the roof to pray right before the mid-day meal and by the time he came down, the world had changed. Or at least it was about to. And he had a role to play in effecting that change.

As he waited for his food to be prepared, he fell into a trance. That's when he saw the net coming down, bearing many kinds of food that were prohibited by Torah, that were not kosher. That is, they were forbidden by the Bible's own dietary laws.

Nevertheless he heard a voice encouraging him to take and eat. This food is for you.

*I would never eat anything profane,* he replies.

*'Ah, but Peter, here's what you need to know: What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'*

Imagine you're Peter. All your life you've believed what the Bible has said about certain kinds of food: that some things are profane and unclean and not meant for human consumption.

And, now, suddenly, a voice from heaven tells you these laws no longer apply.

Obviously most Americans have long since moved beyond Old Testament dietary restrictions. We happily eat shrimp and lobster, and we're not startled when we see rabbit on the menu, and we're never happier than when a crisp strip of bacon compliments our scrambled eggs.

So, for us the truth of this story would be almost completely exhausted if it were merely about food. But it's not merely about food. It's about the whole world, in a way, and about our place in it, and our relationship to it.

We know this because this same principle has been at work almost from the first page of the book of Acts.

On the day Jesus takes his leave from his disciples, he gives them one final command. *Go into all the world: to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth to continue the work I have done.*

Wait, what now? Imagine the disciples' response. Jesus has just told them to go to countries they've never been to, not because they are hard to reach but because prior to this moment, the Gentile world has been off limits, home to the unclean masses.

*You sure about this Jesus?*

*I'm sure. Now go. Because here's the thing: In God's realm, no one is unclean.*

Later, a voice calls Phillip to baptize an Ethiopian eunuch. Not a Jew, mind you. A gentile from Africa, a man whose race is radically different, whose religion is profane and whose ambiguous sexuality is an abomination.

*Um, you sure about this, God?*

*Yes, I'm sure. Because here's the thing: I don't make these same silly distinctions around race and religion and gender that you do. Baptize him. Welcome him to this inclusive family into which you've been welcomed.*

A voice calls Ananias to lay his hands on Saul of Tarsus, so that Saul might be healed. Saul, a man who violently, ruthlessly, persecuted members of this new Way, as it was called then, this new community of Love and Peace, this new community of Jesus.

*Are you sure God? You want me to lay my hands on this guy and pray for him? You're aware of his past, right? His sketchy history?*

*Yes, I'm sure. Do it anyway. Because here's the thing: no one is beyond the range of my love and mercy, the range of my welcome, the range of my grace.*

All summer we've been exploring the stories in Acts of how the disciples suddenly had to institute the teachings of Jesus. How they had to operationalize the love he taught, the love he embodied.

And it's clear from the start that, even after their three year internship with their master and teacher, the Realm of God was bigger they expected. The Reign of God was more welcoming and inclusive than they imagined or were prepared for.

Now enter you. And me. And all of us together.

If we were suddenly to hear this same voice, what would it say to us? What's our version of Newtonian physics, of the bible's dietary laws?

That is to say, what are the truths we're holding on to whose time may finally be past, the truths that God may be calling us to transcend?

I don't know what it is for you. Maybe it's a belief that our congregation's glory days were back when the church and the college were one institution, back when students had to come to worship and the world in general made more sense.

If that's true, I do understand why you would feel that way. But if that's the case, then I would suggest it's also time to revise that belief. And to start believing instead that our best days may still be ahead of us, not behind us. That our future is that way (ahead), not that way (behind).

I don't know what these truths might be for you, but I do know what they are for me. After watching the news this week, I spent some engaged in a thought experiment. I imagined that I'd taken a quick trip to West Virginia to join some old friends for a few days of kayaking on the New River.

One day, in this experiment, after we finished paddling, we were just loading our boats on our cars when we encountered a man sitting by a campfire all by himself. He looked a little rough, and he smelled a little rough. But he told us he had just come from a big political rally.

We all knew right away that it was one of these ugly gatherings we've seen happening lately, filled with race baiting and false claims about last year's election, all designed to whip the crowd into a frenzy. And sure enough, the man was glowing with joy. He said that at these rallies he felt heard and seen and respected.

And suddenly, as happened to Saul on the road to Damascus, a voice audible only to me told me something I didn't want to hear: "Baptize him."

Do I do it? I honestly don't know. Here's what I do know:

*But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.'*

*The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'*

Amen