



"They knew as well as we did what it meant to be strangers in a strange land."

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to be gathered in at all. Following the Pentecostal eruption of the Spirit among the people Israel, the newly minted apostles witness and work miracles in and around Jerusalem. Despite the challenges they face, they're pretty comfortable on their home turf of Judea. They're not much inclined to move outward.

So, the Spirit takes advantage of the persecution after the stoning of Stephen to nudge them on to Act Two. Philip, father to four remarkable daughters and himself one of the seven deacons appointed to "serve tables," apparently defects from waiter duty to go slummin' in Samaria. Wonder of wonders, those part-time Jews, full-time-heretics believe the good news about Jesus. Peter and John check it out; it's the real deal. Then an almost-Jew — a proselyte eunuch from Ethiopia — begs for baptism. These cases, marginal though they may be, are somehow still within the blurry borderlands of Israel. Their inclusion causes anxiety but not crisis in the mother church of Jerusalem.

Peter's dream of a picnic of unclean viands, preparing him for a visit to the unclean Roman centurion Cornelius, advances the drama to Act Three. Peter doesn't even get to finish telling his very Hebrew-centric tale ("in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem" he says in 10:39, as if emphasizing the story's irrelevance to Gentiles) before Cornelius and company are blasted with the Holy Spirit and start praising God in tongues. Even old Rockhead himself can't avoid drawing the inevitable conclusion: these guys have gotten the Holy Spirit just like we did, so I'd better baptize them, and quick.

At ground zero in Jerusalem, though, there's no joy over

the new audience for Peter's preaching. Peter gets called out for his dalliance with Cornelius and ends up having to argue for a second Pentecost, this time for Gentiles instead of Jews, to justify his behavior. The brethren concede, a bit reluctantly. The matter blows up again a few chapters later

when some folks go around teaching that you can't be saved without circumcision. The Church's very first council hashes it out and concludes: Gentiles are saved not by the keeping of the law but by the grace of Jesus Christ — and so are we Jews (15:10–11). How did a Lutheran like me miss *that* the first time around? From then on, all kinds of Gentiles are drawn into the salvation of Jesus. There's Lydia the purple merchant and her household, the Philippian jailer and his household, and Gentiles lurking about synagogues all over the eastern Mediterranean. Truly, in every nation God finds people who are acceptable to him, no works-righteousness about it!

The ingathering tale draws to a close in Act Four with the baptism of the Ephesian disciples — who had not yet heard of the upgrade from John the Baptist — in Jesus' name. With this event, every estranged community has been reconciled to the God of Israel through his Son, Jesus, if not yet every individual member of those communities. From chapter 19 onward, the locus of the action shifts to Paul's ever-tenser confrontations with the Roman authorities.

Reading and rereading Acts with this narrative arc in mind made what was so long opaque to me luminous — helped enormously by weekly worship at St. Alban's. Acts is not about a victorious stomp over outdated reli-

A mixed
community is not
a natural thing,
nor is it easy. But
that's just it: a
church is *not* a
natural gathering.