

“Visions and Dreams”

Happy Pentecost! Pentecost is a great holiday: a reminder that we in the church did not create ourselves, but were called into being through the creative power of God’s Holy Spirit. Pentecost is one of the big three, along with Easter and Christmas. But it has refreshingly little commercial potential. We don’t decorate the house for it or hear special songs on the radio or put expectantly unlit candles around the house or give each other gifts of Bic lighters or Rosetta Stone programs. We just come to church and we rejoice.

The Pentecost passage from Acts is notorious, the dread of every neophyte reader of scripture with its encyclopedic listing of exotic places and peoples. Matt, grizzled veteran that he is, enthusiastically volunteered for it on Tuesday. I’ve probably preached on this text thirty times. I love the line about the people not really being drunk because it’s only 9:00 in the morning... but better check them again at 9:30. It’s a wonderful passage and an amazing day.

But on this particular Pentecost I find myself captivated by the promise that Peter cites from the prophet Joel: “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young [people] shall see visions, and your old [people] shall dream dreams.” Visions and dreams... the people of God are sustained by visions and dreams: startling new insights into the way things are and will be; and mind-blowing reshufflings of memory that imbue the past and present with new depths of meaning. We need visions and dreams.

Our family room at home features a chronicle of our family’s past, from a framed portrait of Priscilla and me BC (before children) taken in a corn field that just happens to have been our yard in Omaha... to photos of our kids when they were very small (countertop cookie dough mixing, wading pools and chicken pox)... moving through Paul’s first day of Kindergarten (his older brother’s protective arm around his shoulders)... and on around the room, including various dogs and frogs and culminating at about middle school when getting them to hold still for pictures elicited so sullen a countenance that it clearly was not worth the effort.

But the thing I've discovered is that these old pictures are still alive for us and in us. Those moments of time are almost completely accessible to Priscilla and me. We love the men our boys have become; but we still miss the little guys who would totter up to us and give us a hug around the knee. In my dreams, sometimes they still do. And so whenever I hug them, I'm hugging all of them at once. In our dreams, the past is alive, but in a new way, all contemporaneous. Parts of the past talk to one another and to the present as though they belonged together; and in a sense they do. Dreams blur lines, telescope time.

Visions are different. A vision is a brilliant and startling insight into how things will be. It carries with it the sense that we are glimpsing our destiny, and an urgency summoning us to re-vision ourselves into that future. I've had visions at certain hinges of my personal history: a sudden awareness that this or that will change; this is now my role; we must learn to think very differently... these are vision-driven sorts of insights.

Either visions or dreams can happen to us at any age, but generally what the prophet Joel said rings true. The young see visions and the old dream dreams. As we get older our imagination gets cluttered with the artifacts of memory; clutter that we sometimes mistake for wisdom. It's as though we have too many programs open and running at the same time to imagine the future whole with dazzling clarity. And the young are working with less to remember but a whole world ahead to envision.

There is a tendency, I think, for each to devalue the other. The visionary sees the dreamer as groggy with nostalgia, adrift in the past and captive to tradition. The dreamer sees the visionary as shallow and detached, rootless and reckless, naïve about the cost of starting from nothing. But the community that is the people of God needs both, visions and dreams together. And they come to us as the gift of God's Spirit.

This is one of the messages of the Pentecost story. The followers of Jesus are gathered in obedience and in expectation—they were told to wait for God knows what and, by God, they're waiting. They have been promised power. But when it comes it isn't the cinematic, zap-you-dead, Stephen Spielberg and the lost ark sort of power so much as it is a faith-summoning power that comes from a place deep within. It is the power of the passion they knew when they first fell in love with Jesus. It is the YES within them that leapt up and cried, "This is what my life is for!" And it is the blazing, unquenchable, incendiary need to share it. In a moment of time they can see that the world needs this gospel more than it needs anything else; and the

vision is the gift they need to get over themselves and do it. It is the gift to meet other people where they are, to speak their language, to Facebook or text or twitter; to preach, cry and sigh the timeless truth of a love that will not let us go and will no longer let us see the world through the eyes of despair.

Visions and dreams are gifts of Pentecost that come from within: dreams made of memories of Jesus, visions of a world at peace in his love; gifts to respond to the promise that this dreamscape future belongs to God. This is Pentecost.

And this is also part of the genius of how our consultant Susan Beaumont had us go about our strategic planning here at Plymouth. At our Leadership Retreat last November we first spent time exploring our collective memory, immersing ourselves in the 150+ year history of this wonderful church. We figuratively dragged out all the family photos. From this rich past we identified our five core values over all that time, dreaming the dream that in every era has been Plymouth Church. We were and always are a church engaged with the community. We value education in all its forms—from public school systems to colleges to Plymouth Nursery School to the Center for Spiritual Growth to the Transition into Ministry program. We strive to do worship really well and value stirring music and preaching. We are a welcoming congregation embracing diversity. We value our rich tradition of progressive theology and challenge members to think for themselves. When we dream God’s dream that is Plymouth Church, it includes all these elements embodied in faces and stories from our past and present.

But then as a part of this same Leadership Retreat we dared to ask what a new vision might be for this church: a future in which the very best of the past finds a whole new life among us. First we did our level best to face who we are: through our congregational survey and Listening Circles and membership and financial data. And we asked “Who is our neighbor?” by looking at demographic information on our region and interviewing community leaders outside the church. Then we dared to imagine together what God might be calling us to do and be—in the prayerful hope that a vision would emerge. It did.

We envision a church aflame with faithfulness, in which we have grown closer to one another and to God through participation in small groups that help us relate the Christian story to our own stories. In the Plymouth we envision we really know—and are known by—others in this

community of faith; and when we're together we truly feel the presence of God in ways we can identify and describe. We are excited about sharing with one another and with the community and the world around us the good news of God's love for all people. We are joyfully generous in demonstrating what that love looks like in the world. And when we gather as one great community of worship, all ages and peoples, we are unabashedly aflame with what God is doing in and through our lives for the healing of the world. Church isn't just a building; it's a family of faith: not all closed in on itself but with its arms open to the world in welcome.

This is a vision born of our dreams. It is the prophecy of Joel brought to life not just in first century Jerusalem but in twenty-first century Des Moines.

And although perhaps initially we come here to Plymouth mostly with a sense of our own need—for meaning or comfort or community or just for some place to be on a June Sunday—in dreams and visions we discover and rediscover that our being here was never about us in the first place, but about something that, by the grace of God, might happen through us and so connect us to our deepest reason for being. We are here that God might transform us... into who we truly are.

So many words to say something so simple, so close to the heart! And so we move beyond words to the table, to celebrate that the God who calls us into being sustains and renews us not just with bread but with God's own self, through visions and dreams.

Amen

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