

“Visions and Dreams”

This is a wonderful day of celebration in the Church. In a sense it's our birthday: a reminder that we did not create ourselves, but were called into being through the creative power of God's Holy Spirit. At the center of who we are is the mission to which we are called: sharing the Good News of God's love with all the world in word and deed, and inviting others into the lifelong journey of discipleship. It's a thrilling calling, and an overwhelming task. We can't possibly do it alone, and we don't have to. God bestows spiritual gifts for the doing of the work, creating and renewing the Church of Jesus Christ. The gifts suit the mission. That's why the disciples are given flaming tongues of speech: for their apostolic mission of proclaiming the love of Christ to the whole world.

Pentecost is a great holiday. It's 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. We get all empowered for the church's mission... and then we stretch out in a hammock for the summer.

The Pentecost passage from Acts is notorious, the dread of every neophyte reader of scripture with its encyclopedic listing of exotic places and peoples. Angie, reliable veteran that she is, sailed right through it. 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 you should see them at 11:00. I recall the importance of this passage relative to the structure of the Book of Acts: in chapter 1 the disciples are commissioned and promised: commissioned to be witnesses in “Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,” and promised that they will “receive power from the Holy Spirit.” So they wait. And the Spirit comes on them like a tornado. And they begin in Jerusalem, spread out to Judea and Samaria, and eventually reach the limits of the known world. I love that. Everybody receives gifts. Everybody is astounded. Peter preaches and five thousand people become believers... a pretty good day, I would say.

But today, for some reason, I find myself captivated by the fulfillment of 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 [men] shall see visions, and your old [men] shall dream dreams.” Visions and dreams... hmmm. 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.

When I was in about fifth grade I visited my father's office at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. And there on his desk he had a picture of me when I was *much* younger... maybe first grade. This was embarrassing and inexplicable to me. “Why keep that old thing around? I'm much bigger now! I hardly even look like that any more. That was a long time ago.” I don't recall his reply.

My own office is now filled with pictures of the past. And our family room at home features a chronicle of our life together, 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 a sullen countenance—clearly 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, as I've come to think of them, are a bit different. A vision is a brilliant and startling insight into how things will be. They carry with them an air of inevitability and the necessity for us to re-vision ourselves into that future. I've had visions like that at certain hinges of time in my life. A handful of them stand out. (Maybe we forget the ones that fail to materialize.) Visions can be highly motivating, an imagining that calls us into the future: 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 Pentecost. The young church is gathered in obedience and in expectation—they were told to wait for God knows what and, by God, they're waiting—all together in the upper room that we identify with the last supper. They are waiting for 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 in the vision is the gift for them to get over themselves and do it. It is the gift to meet other people where they are, to speak their language, to blog 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 the 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 although we all came here mostly with a sense of our own need—for meaning or comfort or community or just for some place to be on the last day of May—in dreams and visions we discover and rediscover that our being here was never about us in the first place, but only about something that, by the grace of God, might happen through us and so connect us to our deepest reason for being.

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. Come to rejoice in the power God gives us to be who we truly are.

Amen

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