

“Dreams and Visions”
Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds
First Congregational Church, UCC, Cadillac, MI

Ezekiel 37:1-14, Acts 2:1-21 Sermon
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It has been said that every Sunday worship service should be like Pentecost: new life being breathed into our tired old bones; passion, understanding, dreams, and visions spreading like wildfire across the diverse faces sitting in our pews to renew, energize, and unite us as one church with an overwhelmingly compelling mission. In fact, according to author Annie Dillard, whenever we enter the sanctuary to worship as a community of faith, we should firmly strap helmets to our heads and lash ourselves to the pews, ready for a wild ride, ready for virtually anything, because worship, according to at least one theologian, is an adventure of the spirit. Because here we claim great things about the grace, love, and mercy of a living, breathing, still speaking God. Because here we worship and pray to a God who calls us to expect great things, a God who has been surprising and turning people’s expectations on their heads more or less since the beginning of time...

But, let’s face it, on the worship spectrum, we Congregationalists probably tend to fall a lot closer to our dignified, orderly Presbyterian cousins than we do to our charismatic kin. Here, in this sanctuary, we don’t tend to let loose and dance or even tap our toes too much. That might fall outside our comfort zones, at least in this particular context. We don’t often speak out of turn or shout “Alleluia” or even “Amen;” unless it happens to be part of the day’s liturgy. Although it’s not a word we typically associate with ourselves, we’re fairly traditional, maybe even conservative, when it comes to worship. We know what we like, it works for us, and we’re stickin’ to it!

Not that there's anything wrong with that. In fact, I imagine that's what the disciples were doing that day, as they gathered together under one roof to observe the Jewish harvest festival of Pentecost. They had recently witnessed Jesus' ascent into heaven and now returned to Jerusalem to find a replacement for Judas. There were two worthy candidates, and so they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." Then they cast lots, and the lot fell on Matthias...

Shortly before his departure, Jesus had shared with the original eleven disciples that, in just a few days, they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit, receiving power when the Spirit came upon them. And then they would become his witnesses: in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Well, they'd journeyed with Jesus for several years. He'd taught and mentored them and exposed them to some incredible miracles. Throughout their formation, they'd often been clueless or put their feet in their mouths. But Jesus had stuck with them and ultimately entrusted them with his earthly ministry. So probably the witness portion of Jesus' parting words to them wasn't overly surprising or unexpected. Though perhaps the idea of testifying without Jesus at their sides was a little daunting, they knew what to do. And traveling to the ends of the earth, well, they'd really just kept it in the neighborhood up until now, but sure, okay. But the bit about being baptized and empowered by the Holy Spirit? Now that was entirely new. The Spirit of God they knew was a participant in creation. It had moved upon the waters as God called the world into being.

Jesus hadn't told them exactly when it would arrive, but hopefully they'd strapped themselves in when they arrived at the house ...

Or not.

Because when the Spirit came to Jerusalem that day, it became clear almost immediately that its presence was not merely for the disciples' benefit. Sure, it was very cool--an awesome miracle, in fact—that suddenly a band of illiterate, country bumpkin Galileans could praise God in a whole bunch of foreign languages. But, probably more significant, was the fact that these foreign tongues corresponded to the many languages spoken by the pilgrims who had descended upon Jerusalem for the Pentecost festivities. People who just happened to be walking by, overheard the ruckus in that house, and gleaned much more than incoherent babble...

The overarching Pentecost miracle was that God was able to transcend all their cultural and linguistic differences, so that, through the Holy Spirit, they could hear and comprehend the same testimony at the exact same moment, without having to sacrifice their individuality in the process. And directly, without having to hear the words filtered through a secondhand report or interpreter.

Understandably, all of these visitors were amazed, but also perplexed by what they had experienced. Of course, not everyone was willing to stay with that amazement or even with confusion for very long. No, they had to intellectualize and make sense of it. Either that or they were so frightened by what they had just witnessed that they felt compelled to disparage and discredit it almost immediately: “Are you kidding me? These guys are just drunk on new wine!” At 9 o'clock in the morning no less, Jesus' disciples were accused of drunken antics.

Before we're tempted to automatically sneer back at the "sneerers," I'd like to pause for a moment and ask you to consider where you would fall in this scenario: Amazed? Bewildered? Frightened? Cynical?

Colorful texts like this one can be pretty challenging for churches like ours; that is, churches that may take the bible seriously, if not necessarily always literally. I mean, come on! The sound of violent wind suddenly filling the entire house? Tongues of fire resting upon each of the disciple's heads? Fluently speaking languages they'd never even heard of? Just how likely is all of that?!

I personally am open to the mystery. At the moment, I'm not willing to rule one way or another on this event's factuality or lack thereof. I was a college English major, after all, so I've grown somewhat accustomed to suspending my disbelief. But I understand and respect that, for many of us, accounts like this one fall pretty far outside the bounds of believability. Fortunately, the bible can accommodate that, too, for it is as much a piece of great literature as it is the historical document of a particular people. And so it makes liberal and masterful use of metaphor... How else are we--or anyone--to describe the incredible, the indescribable? All we can do to convey such experiences is to say, "It was like this." Or, "It was as amazing as if that were to happen." And it gets the point across, doesn't it?

I wonder, though, how many of us can personally relate to this Pentecostal account on whatever level? Some of us here may have first- or secondhand experience with the Pentecostal phenomenon of speaking in tongues. But I suspect that many of us have managed to steer clear of such things. Yet that doesn't mean that we haven't experienced the Holy Spirit's presence in our midst. For, whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, whatever your style, the Holy Spirit speaks your language. In fact, in one of my seminary preaching classes, we studied a

text that broke down peoples' spiritual orientations into several categories, including contemplative, emotional, intellectual, and social justice. As unique individuals, we don't all experience the presence of God in the exact same way. For some of us there's nothing more invigorating than studying, analyzing, and debating our beliefs. For others, experiencing the presence of God through our senses or our emotions is key. And for still others, God is never more fully present than when we are taking a stand and acting upon our beliefs in the public sphere. Ideally, we will find a balance between the various styles. But that takes concerted effort.

Do you see yourself in any of these styles? I will tell you that I fall into the sensory, emotional category. For me, the height of religious experience is to well up with tears. Yes, you heard me right, tears. Whether I'm surrounded by the incense, choral music, and echo-ey acoustics of a Gothic cathedral or taking in a gorgeous sunrise, listening to a painfully beautiful piece of music or reading an exquisite piece of poetry; when I begin to cry, I know without a doubt that the Holy Spirit has touched me, that God is near...

Of course, we know that the Spirit resides within each one of us and that God is always present. Pentecost for the early church and religious tears for me, these are the mountaintop experiences, where our awareness of God is heightened, as when Moses spied God in a burning bush. They don't happen every day. Occasionally at best. And probably that's be design, for, if they did, we might never leave the sanctuary. We might never venture outside our front door or come in from the woods. We might never stop gazing at our navels. And, frankly, were that to happen, it would defeat the whole purpose.

You may recall that a little earlier in this sermon I said that the Pentecost experience was not only for the disciples, that it was also for the many diverse peoples who were visiting Jerusalem

that fateful day. But, the thing is, it wasn't just for them either. Peter knew this, and, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he preached it, saying: "...God declares, that 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. Even upon my slaves, both men and women,... I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below... Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'" Everyone. All Flesh. Everyone.

First of all, whether Pentecost happened just like this or not, the Early Church grew by leaps and bounds. And we are here today to talk about it. A number of pilgrims and disciples must have left the sidewalk and, indeed, even Jerusalem, to spill the beans. Second of all, I wonder whether Peter's sermon rings any bells with you. To me it is eerily reminiscent of the beginnings of our vision statement, the core belief that binds us all together in this particular congregation: That God is Universal Love. Not love for a select few, but love for women and men, love for the poor, the middle class, and, yes, even the wealthy; love for old and young, love for gay and straight, love for Muslim, Jew, Christian, agnostic, and atheist.

Today *we* are the disciples and pilgrims, and so it falls to us to allow the Spirit to fill us up and lean into her passion and energy and allow those forces to unite and inspire us. To dream dreams and see visions and co-create them into existence with God and one another. To venture out of this place on Sunday afternoons prepared to live and spread the good news that God is Universal Love. With so many prejudices rearing their ugly heads of late, perhaps the time has never been more ripe for these first fruits of Pentecost 2012.

Mind you, we may need to learn some new styles and languages in order to touch and communicate with the pilgrims who venture into our house, as well as those we meet outside on the street. We may even need to raise a little ruckus in here from time to time. So put on your crash helmets and prepare to be surprised, perplexed, and even amazed by the evidence of the Holy Spirit's power, made manifest in this small but mighty little church.

May it be said that we, too, are drunk with new wine.

Amen.