

“Visions, Dreams, and the Promise of the Spirit”

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... ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷‘In the last days it will be, 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. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ ²²“You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— ²³this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. ²⁴But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. ...

³²This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. ³³Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out [what you now] see and hear. ...

³⁶Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”
(Acts 2.14-24, 32-33, 36)

Pentecost, I have to admit, has always had its fair share of skeptics. That was apparent right from the beginning, when even eyewitnesses of the original event felt the need to “explain” what was really happening:

Yes, we heard the loud wind, but it gets blustery here in Jerusalem from time to time.

Yes, we saw something that might have looked a little like flames over people’s heads, but we think those were just refractions of early morning sunlight. Tongues of fire? I don’t think so.

And yes, we did hear the babble of everyone speaking at once in all kinds of languages, but we know what that was all about. This was a big get together, people coming in from out of town who hadn’t seen each other in a while. It was a festive occasion and they overdid it a bit. They went a little overboard on the wine and, after a while, everyone started babbling incoherently.

And that was way back then. What do we think today about this account of swirling winds and tongues of fire and people suddenly understanding languages they never even knew existed? If someone today actually dared to believe that these things could really happen, what would we think about them? That they are ignorant... naïve... delusional? It is



certainly more comfortable for us modern, educated types to dismiss these accounts, or explain them away.

Interesting that the Apostle Peter, in his big debut as a preacher of the Gospel, chooses to go another way. Instead of backing away from these mysteries, he doubles down on them. “You think what you saw this morning was wild?” Peter preached. “You haven’t seen anything yet. You say we were drunk, but what really happened was a fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy. The prophet Joel wrote that, on that day when the Messiah finally comes, the living God will pour the Holy Spirit out upon all people, and *‘your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.’*”

“These prophecies, visions, and dreams are now a reality,” Peter continued, “because the Messiah has indeed come. We saw with our own eyes the deeds of power, wonders, and miraculous signs that God accomplished through Jesus of Nazareth. And, as you yourselves know that, even though this Jesus was wrongly accused and killed on a cross, God freed him from death and raised him up. What you have seen today from the Holy Spirit is just the beginning, because God’s life-giving power has been unleashed on the world, a new era of visions and dreams has begun.”

Visions and dreams – these are not every day occurrences. They are at the very least unusual. We might even say fantastical. And we might want to dismiss these things as ecstatic, charismatic episodes that are produced more by human imagination than divine revelation. But for the moment, let’s suspend our powerful reflex to doubt and disbelieve. And let’s open the terms up in ways that make them more accessible.

Let’s take **visions** first. A vision is essentially a moment of seeing, an insight, a moment of clarity that cuts through the haze and distraction of life and allows us to see things from a new perspective. As people of faith, we associate these momentary revelations with God. Across the centuries, people of faith have described times when they feel like the veil that usually clouds our human capacity to see is somehow lifted by God, allowing us to see things clearly with fresh eyes.

For example, when he was first called as a prophet, Isaiah was given a glimpse into heaven. The same was true for John of Patmos. Peter received a vision that helped him understand that the Jewish covenant laws about unclean foods were no longer important. These are all biblical examples of something that many of us have experienced ourselves – moments of clarity and understanding that feel like they have been given to us by God. It is exactly what Paul described in his letter to the Corinthians, when he observed that, in our everyday lives, *“a veil lies over [our] minds; but when [we turn] to the Lord, the veil is removed.. [and] for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit..”*¹

Turning to **dreams**, I find it interesting that the scripture says that visions will be given to young people, but the mature people – or more specifically, to quote the text, the *“old men”* – will be given dreams. One commentator from the 19th century suggested that this is because young people have “more lively minds” that are more suitable to visions, while older people get dreams, which are gentler, easier, and “more in accordance with their years.”² I see it very differently. I think the kind of dream Joel was talking about is a vision that has lived and survived for a long time... through ups and downs... times of peace and

¹ 2 Corinthians 3:15-18.

² <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/jfb/joel/2.htm>

times of struggle... but has never faded away. A dream is a vision that has endured. It is weathered but strong. Martin Luther King, Jr. didn't have a vision; he had a dream – a dream that, as he so memorably said in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," had been waiting and waiting for 340 years... 340 years of suffering and hoping, enduring and longing.

I don't know if Rosa Parks had a vision or a dream. What we do know is that when the 42-year-old Parks got on that bus in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 1, 1955, she wasn't planning on making a grand statement about Civil Rights. She was just going home after a long, tiring day. But when she came to that moment, she came carrying a vision of a better world. Through her work with the NAACP, she had come to share in a longstanding dream of justice, fairness, and equity for her town, her state, and her nation. So when a white man stepped on that bus, and the driver told her whole row to move to the back of the bus, the other three people in her row moved. Rosa Parks did not. I think in that moment, God lifted the veil for Rosa Parks, and all of the sudden she could see what she needed to do. Later, she would look back on that moment and quote the book of Proverbs. "Without vision, the people will perish," she said. "[And] without courage dreams die."³

If the story of Pentecost seems inaccessibly fantastical to you, I encourage you to think in terms of visions that you have for a better world. I encourage you to remember dreams that you have had for yourself, for people you love, for your community, for your nation. Think of things that once were nothing but a dream, but over time, with effort, became real.

Think also about this congregation, your church. Are there visions for what we can do... what we can be... to take things to a new level as a community of faith. I think there are.

Are we hoping that God will lift the veil for us so we can see more clearly what needs to be done? I think we are.

Do we have dreams for the future? Yes we do.

And do we need God's help to accomplish these things? We absolutely do.

So here is my big question for us on Pentecost. What did we expect when we came here this morning? Did we come here hoping for vision? Did we come here in search of a dream? When we walked in these doors, did we expect to encounter the power and presence of the Holy Spirit? Do we believe – do we really believe -- that God is not only active in the world, but active right here, right now, in our own lives? Not just in theory, but in truth, and in power.

I'll never forget the image that the author Annie Dillard used to describe what I am talking about. "*Does anyone have the foggiest idea,*" she wrote,

*"of what sort of power we so blithely invoke [when we come to church]? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? Churches are [like] children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."*⁴

³ <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/rosa-parks;>

https://www.google.com/search?q=rosa+parks+without+vision+people+perish&rlz=1C1CAFA_enUS997US997&oq=rosa+parks+without+vision+people+perish&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOdIBCDkxMjVqMGo0qAIAAsAIB&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

⁴ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/170797-on-the-whole-i-do-not-find-christians-outside-of>

I will tell you, that was not a problem at the first Pentecost. The people who experienced the prophecies, visions, and dreams of that day used one Greek word over and over to describe what they felt. That Greek word was *dynamis*, which translates as might, strength, energy, POWER. They saw it in tongues of fire. They heard it in the wind and the voices of their friends and family. And they felt it in the bond they felt with one another. That morning, they knew that what they were dealing with was *dynamis* -- spiritual dynamite.

So, again, my question for us on this Pentecost Sunday: did we come here this morning ready to grab hold of spiritual dynamite? Are we ready to believe -- really believe -- that God is active in truth and in power right here and right now? If so, will you join me in asking the Holy Spirit to bring the fire... bring the wind... bring us together... so the young people here can lead us with their visions, and even us old folks might dream some new dreams.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. ***Amen.***