

Acts 2:1-21
May 31, 2009

South Plains
Pentecost

Dreams and Visions

Two things happen when I worship in another church. In St. Andrews Kirk in Grenada, the order of worship made me feel at home, especially when the opening hymn was "Morning Has Broken." The words of the prayers were different, but they were tied nicely to the scripture readings. I found it easy to enter into that fellowship of believers. My first impression was to be confirmed in our common manner of worshipping God as Presbyterians. The second thing that almost always happens in that circumstance is that I begin to dream of doing worship differently. The mask of propriety that usually covers my biases and prejudices can be ripped off in a different setting. I found myself starting to dream what Youth Sunday would be like if we incorporated some of our youth and their ideas in worship as they did that Sunday in Grenada. And, it wasn't even youth Sunday in Grenada.

This is Pentecost Sunday, a day for celebrating dreams and visions, a day celebrating the energizing Holy Spirit among us, a day to recognize the havoc that can result when the Spirit of the living God erupts in worship. When the Apostle Peter tried to interpret Pentecost to his fellow Jews, he reminded them that God had said, "Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall

dream dreams (Acts 2:17)." That's the Old Testament prophecy of Joel.

Presbyterians are not always interested in prophecy, perhaps because we confuse prophecy with predictions that we don't like.

When Bill Gates dropped out of Harvard University, the future CEO of Microsoft predicted to his mother and father that computers were the next big thing. Furthermore, he said, someone would have to write the software for computers, and he wanted to be that someone. That's the kind of prophecy most parents hear with a heavy heart when their child is chasing a dream they cannot imagine. Of course, it turned out well for Bill Gates, but that is not the usual result when someone drops out of school.

This Pentecost Sunday we recognize some of our congregation who have stayed with schooling and learning in one form or another: two confirmands, Chris and Hunter, who stuck with the confirmation class; one high school graduate, Rachel; and a couple of previous confirmands, Jeff and Riley. In addition, we recognize our teachers in Sunday School who help make learning possible. And, finally, we recognize new officers in Presbyterian Women, leaders who incorporate learning in their regular fellowship. We cannot say it often enough that learning, especially learning from scripture, opens our lives to the Holy Spirit as nothing else.

Despite the fact that he quoted from scripture, I'm quite sure many heard Peter's words with skepticism and disbelief. Not every prophecy comes to pass before our very eyes.

But the second chapter of the Book of Acts is a powerful reminder that God does amazing things for and in and around the people of God. The power of the Holy Spirit made it possible for others to see what God can do. It happened in a manner so vivid and startling that people found themselves confronted with a terrible choice: Either they could hear and believe the gospel; or they could sneer and disregard Peter's words. The same choice confronts us today when God speaks. We will either hear and believe and get on board; or we will turn up our nose and ignore what God is doing.

Joel's prophecy tells what will happen in the last days. When scripture uses the expression "last days" it means the very last days just before the Day of the Lord, the end of time. God's people looked forward with anticipation to the Day of the Lord, despite their firm conviction that it would be a day of both blessing and judgment. For believers who worshiped the God of Israel, their faithfulness would be rewarded and it would be a day of joyful ecstasy and fulfillment. But, for the enemies of the Lord, there would be unmitigated terror as they received punishment. No matter how much the people of God suffered at the hands of their enemies, they clung to this hope: one day accounts would be squared; one day goodness would triumph over evil; one

day the Lord would set the world straight. The Day of the Lord would be Israel's day in court. All the indignities and injustice they had suffered as slaves in Egypt, as victims of the Assyrians, as exiles in Babylonia, as casualties of the Roman conquest – all would be made right when the Judge of the universe rendered his final verdict.

Among the blessings was the gift of the Spirit of God. You may remember the text Jesus chose from Isaiah 61 when he spoke at the synagogue in Nazareth:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news
to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19).

After Jesus read these words, he said they were being fulfilled right then and there. Before his death, he promised the gift of God's Spirit to his followers. On the day of Pentecost, that promise was fulfilled.

Pentecost was important to the early church not just in fulfillment of Jesus' words, but it was also important because they needed the power of the Holy Spirit. They would have to overcome hostility from other religions, suspicion and persecution from Rome. And,

they needed power to grow beyond the confines of Jerusalem.

We still face hostility and suspicion that must be overcome. But, we also need to grow and reach beyond the confines of Keswick. None of those obstacles will be overcome without the power of the Holy Spirit. That's a consistent theme of the book of Acts. There are heroic moments in the story of the early church. However, the hero is always God working through the Spirit of Christ in the lives of believers; often working in spite of Christians, but always working grace.

How can we lay hold of the power of the Holy Spirit to move ahead as a church and as individuals? Especially in these times, no one will deny that we need that power and grace. But, can it be ours?

We need to acknowledge that we don't control the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts makes it clear that the power of God is not for sale, and God will not stand for anyone to trifle with the Spirit. We cannot call up a miracle when we need it. What we can do is create the conditions where God can send his Holy Spirit. Look at the environment created by the young church in Acts.

These Christians in the book of Acts are praying Christians. They devoted themselves to prayer in Acts, chapter one and they prayed God would chose a replacement for Judas.

I've noticed something interesting about teenagers. Although they are sometimes bored by Sunday worship, they are often turned on by prayer. Some of the most heartfelt and pointed prayers I've heard are the prayers of youth. Maybe it's because they're not trying to impress other people, or they don't care to imitate adults. But, they often get to the heart of human need in their conversation with God.

The other characteristic of the church in Acts is their acquaintance with scripture. Scripture for them, of course, meant the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament. Peter quoted the prophesy of Joel before he preached about Jesus. Later in the same sermon, he interprets the life of Jesus by using Psalm 16. Scripture is not a strait jacket for the young church, but a springboard. Those believers bounce off scripture the way an acrobat leaps off a trampoline to gain altitude for the next act.

Prayer and scripture. Through every significant change, through every serious trial in the life of the church, prayer and scripture have been the trampolines for power. South Plains is a praying church. We bring our personal needs before the congregation every Sunday to ask for prayers. We need that same intensity of prayer as we face the challenges of expansion. Pray not only for healing, but for new ideas, new commitments, a new spirit of understanding among our friends, our visitors, and our neighbors. Pray with scripture that God will fulfill the promise of Christ's church.

When we begin to pray that way, we will find ourselves working in the church with an attitude of expectancy and confidence. Just as the church in the first chapter of Acts waited in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to fall upon them, we will be waiting in confident anticipation of what God will do.

I have no idea what will happen. But, when the Spirit moves us, it will be something good for South Plains and good for you and me.

I think the gifts of the Spirit will be particularly important for the youth of South Plains, for their maturity in Christ, and for their contributions to this congregation. Your sons and daughters will prophecy,
Your young men (and women) will see visions.
Amen.