

Sermon for May 15, 2022  
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I find today's first reading from the book of Acts such a fascinating text.

Imagine with me for a moment that this section of text were happening at a Trinity Annual Meeting. Imagine that for years we have only been baptizing those with church membership. But many have begun to hear rumors that one of the council leaders has gone rouge and is baptizing anyone that comes to them. In the presence of the assembly this leader is asked to justify their actions and here is how they start:

*"Well I was in a trance and I had a vision..."*

Let me stop for a minute...consider how you as an assembled member are already responding to this defense?

I am immediately struck by the idea that the justification for this new and rogue action comes from a vision that was given while in a trance. At this time there was a firm belief that God would speak and direct God's people through visions and dreams, in moments when our human faculties are not all in control. A vision - the mystery of God at work beyond our conscious logical state. Would we give credibility to a vision or dream, to God at work in a trance like state?

The leader continues.

*"I saw a sheet was coming down from heaven and as it got closer I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles and birds of the air...and I heard a voice calling me to get up, kill and eat these creatures. I refused for I have never eaten anything unclean. But I heard the voice a second time saying 'What God has made clean you must not call profane.' And this kept happening!"*

Now with the vision described, how are you as the assembly feeling? Anyone thinking this is a pretty strange dream? Anyone wondering what in the world this has to do with baptism and the actions this leader has taken?

The leader goes on:

*With this vision fresh in my mind, as I pondered what it could mean, three people were sent to me arriving from outside the church and the Spirit told me not to make a distinction between them and the church members. One of the people that came said he had seen an angel in his house telling him to come. I watched as the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had you and I, and I remembered the words of Jesus "you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." If God gave them the same gift he gave us who I am to hinder God?*

The leader has said that people were “sent” to him, the Spirit has “told” him what to do, an angel has given directions, and the Holy Spirit has been visually seen. Therefore the practice of the church should change because who are we to hinder God? What would happen next if this was at one of our Annual Meetings?

In this scripture account the assembly is silent and then begins praising God saying “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” They expand their understanding and change their ways - Gentiles will be baptized, there will be no distinction between an “us” and “them” – all will be welcomed into the family of God. What are our thoughts when we reflect on that assembly’s response?

How do we know if something is just a strange dream or if it is a vision from God which calls for action? How do we know when our stirrings, or the stirring of others that may sound strange in our ears, are God calling us to expand our understanding, to extend our reach, to follow a new way?

Peter has not only had a vision but the people know he has knowledge of God’s commands and has walked with Jesus. He is not only open to receiving the vision, but he immediately wonders if it may be the work of the Spirit and begins the work of discernment. What might this vision mean? At that time a person’s diet was a reflection of their faith. There were religious laws against eating animals considered unclean. Clean eating was an act of righteousness. Peter recognizes these unclean animals being lowered on the sheet in his vision. But the voice says they have been made clean. Peter considers the work of Christ - one’s righteousness will not be claimed through one’s own actions but only through the work of God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. When the Gentile people arrive at Peter’s door, Peter is able to interpret the dream. There will no longer be any distinction, for Christ has come for all people and righteousness is found in Christ alone. Peter says “I remembered the Word of the Lord.”

We must be open to the vision, but we also must be grounded in God’s word, walking with Christ, so that we are able to interpret, to discern. The word and works of Christ should affirm the vision.

More than just a vision, this message from God is also affirmed by Peter’s experiences in real life. It is confirmed by others, these men from Caesarea. They too have heard the voice of God carrying the same message. Together they experience the presence of the Holy Spirit. We must wonder if our dream, our vision is affirmed by our experiences of the Holy Spirit at work in the world? Is it confirmed by others sharing the same vision of God?

Fascinating – the mystery of God at work!

Have you had any dreams lately, any visions that have made you wonder what God is stirring up? Grounded in God’s word and your relationship with Christ, are you able to interpret them as the possible voice of God calling you to action? Speak them. Test them against your life

experience of the Holy Spirit. Listen and see if others are hearing the same call, affirming what you are hearing.

Has someone around you had a dream lately, a vision that has made them wonder? Listen. Ask others about what dreams God might be stirring up within them. Hold the vision alongside the Word of God and life of Jesus. Test it against your life experience of the Spirit. Wonder who else is having this dream. Are you, like those in the assembly around Peter that day, being called to affirm the vision, to respond 'who are we to hinder God', to praise God for all that God has given that leads to new life.

I invite Bill Ulvi forward to tell you about a dream, a vision they have been given. I encourage you to respond with praise.