

“Dreams and Visions”
Numbers 24:10-19, Acts 2:17-18, Mark 1:14-28
October 27, 2019

Scripture, as we all know, is fairly ancient. So it shouldn't be too surprising that the experiences of the Bible sometimes seem other-worldly to us today, as if the “rules” of daily life that disciples and prophets and apostles were subjected to are no longer valid in the 21st century. God called Abraham, the Patriarch of the Children of Israel, in a dream. John the Divine had a vision of the Holy City, Jerusalem, descending from the heavens in the age to come. In this morning's Old Testament lesson, Balaam falls into a trance, and has a vision of a Star that would rise out of Jacob, to announce the coming of the Messiah.

But who in this day and age has visions? How many of us find ourselves in the grip of a trance, in which we catch a glimpse of all holiness? Do we dream dreams? Dare we dream dreams?

I have mentioned on occasion that one definition of what it means to be a Christian is to recognize that we are a people who tell stories - about our forebears, ourselves, and about the age to come. Well, another part of being a Christian means that we are part of a people who have dreamed. The problem is, I'm not sure that enough of us do so anymore. I certainly do not have dreams about the Almighty. And of those of us who do dream dreams, how many of us are ready to act upon the vision, the dream, that has been granted to us?

Jesus saw the vision clearly. And thus, as we heard at the beginning of our Gospel lesson this morning, He was able to proclaim to anyone who would listen, “Repent! The Kingdom of God is at hand!” He was able to reach out to others in no uncertain terms, calling them to share in the effort to make certain dreams come true: dreams of righteousness, of justice, of forgiveness, and of peace. Why else would such practical, everyday people like Andrew and Simon, James and John, drop their fishing nets and follow? Jesus not only saw what could be, but then was willing to do whatever it would

take to bring those dreams into reality. And as He found at Calvary, that could be dangerous - very dangerous.

How many of us are as dedicated? How many of us can even begin to envision what God has in mind for our world? For our nation? For our congregation? For our own personal lives?

I guess part of it depends not only on what you see, but on how you interpret the scene. There's the story of a shoe manufacturer here in New England - do you remember when that was a major industry in this part of our country? The manufacturer was looking to expand his business. As part of his effort, he sent two salesmen to (of all places) the Congo, in Africa, to report on prospects. One sent back a cable that read "Prospects here are nil. No one wears shoes." The other salesman reported enthusiastically "Market potential terrific! Everyone is barefooted." Do we have the abilities needed to correctly interpret what a dream or a vision is trying to get across?

You have no doubt heard it said that nothing was ever accomplished without at least a little bit of enthusiasm. Jesus had it. How else could He get anyone else to go along with Him, unless he could communicate His dreams, His vision, His devotion, His fervent wish, that all God's people might turn, once again, to their Creator? What kind of enthusiasm do we bring to the table?

Well, Martin Luther had enthusiasm. How else could he have set Europe ablaze with the passion for a religion of the spirit rather than acceptance of the rules of latter-day Pharisees and Sadducees? After all, the Pharisees and Sadducees didn't die out in the time of Jesus. They are still living with us, today. They still insist that everything must be done just so, according to their rules. They leave little room for spontaneity, even less place for spirit, virtually no allowance for grace. They champion the law. And while law can be good, there is also a type of law that stifles, that chokes off feeling, that suppresses emotion and denies inspiration. And so the Pharisees were the one who gasped in horror when Jesus wanted to bring extortionists (like tax collectors) and low-lives (like

prostitutes) into God's kingdom. It hadn't been done that way before. Those, by the way, are known as The Seven Last Words of the Church. And yet, who was in more need of God's grace, mediated through the community of believers?

And then when it came to people like the poor soul possessed of a frenzied, unclean spirit whom we heard about in Mark's Gospel this morning, nobody even bothered to minister to such a "lost cause." Nobody - except Jesus. For Jesus - only Jesus - saw that the troubled soul was not beyond redemption. So just a few words from a Man whom we now recognize as the Son of God were enough to change an individual's entire life for the better. This reminds me of an ancient saying: if you save just one life, it is as though an entire world has been rescued. Jesus could behold the vision, and dream the dream that healing could become a reality, while a world steeped in superstition and fear stood aside, refusing to care for its neediest.

Question is, could the Kingdom that Jesus preached become a living reality today? It was almost 2000 years ago that Jesus said the Kingdom of God was at hand, that it was not far off. What has happened to His vision in the last 2000 years?

In some ways, parts of what Christ preached have indeed become a reality. So many of the advances in civilization have been inspired by the Kingdom which Christ foresaw and proclaimed. Why are so many hospitals and medical facilities named for people like Saint Luke and Saint Jude? Is it any surprise that one of the most famous healers of our era was a Sister Religious by the name of Mother Theresa? And while we have been a bit better, in some cases, at preventing blindness rather than actually restoring sight to the blind, we're still working on it - just as we are still working on bringing hearing to the deaf. We haven't brought in the Kingdom - not yet. But we have not given up - for God is still a light unto our feet, and a lamp unto our path. Indeed, inspired by memories of service, of Christlike character, and of sacrifices made by those who have gone before us, at our best we have been able to set aside discord, confusion, pride, and anything that would threaten to separate us from our task of continuing in the

footsteps of Christ to bring abundant life to all of God's creation. While the Kingdom is not yet fully among us, in some ways it is already here. Already - though not yet.

But there are still far too many who do not see the Star prophesied by Balaam thousands of years ago. There are far too many who have lost the sense that there is more to life than this world.

And even within the ranks of those who call themselves followers of Christ, there are far too many who have traded youthful enthusiasm for feebleness or inertia. Too many can no longer communicate the love of God, the joy of faith, the hope of our pilgrimage as a people together. For loving means taking a risk. Joy means baring your soul. And pilgrimage means change. Yet that is what God is calling us to - the perils of commitment, the risk of open hearts, and a change to a new way of life. What is needed is to replace fear with grace, cowardice with fresh courage, weakness with divine power, sinfulness with forgiveness, so that our own souls might be renewed and restored.

Some soldiers were driving down a road when they ran into an ambush. They couldn't drive on ahead, but the road was too narrow to swing the vehicle around. They were trapped. Facing death, they scrambled out of the jeep, each grabbing a corner of their vehicle, lifted it up, turned it around, and went speeding back to camp.

Nobody back at the base could believe that even four strapping young lads could have lifted that jeep, under fire, and turned it around. So, the four soldiers tried to prove it by doing it again. *But they failed.* Why? They lacked the motivation. They lacked the fire. They lacked the incentive that only urgency - and the instinct to survive - could give.

Are we like that, too? Do we cry all too often, "It can't be done!" Well, how can we be so sure? If it is God's will, wonderful deeds can be accomplished. Just ask that man possessed by the frenzied, unclean spirit. But first, we'll have to get out of the jeep, put our backs into it, and lift.

Let us pray: