

What About Dreams and Visions?

Text: Matthew 17:1-9

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Last week, in an Introduction to Preaching class at Candler School of Theology, I had the opportunity to hear fifteen first year seminary students respond to the question, “what is a preacher?” Since I am serving as a teaching assistant for the class, I hurriedly grabbed a pen and paper to see how my students would respond to such a question. The first, a bold young man with no sign of first-day-of-class nervousness, answered. The preacher is a robot—predictable, mechanical, programmed, and boring. Tough crowd, I thought to myself. From there, the responses became somewhat more sympathetic: fellow traveler, mirror, storyteller, guide. Perhaps most timely, quarterback. Maybe we should call Joanna the Tom Brady of preaching! The final response to the question, however, was the one that gave me the most pause. The preacher is the answer-giver, the woman answered. It is the job of the preacher to find answers to theological and practical questions by studying the word of God. The preacher is the answer-giver. I must admit that I am more than a little uneasy about this conception of the preacher. First of all, I do not necessarily believe that the Bible is a book of answers so much as it is an invitation to ask deeper and more complex questions. But I also disagree with the idea that the preacher’s job is to answer questions. The best sermons I have heard do not answer my theological and practical questions—instead they open my mind to consider new possibilities and to hear God’s voice more clearly. They help me ask new questions. It is in this spirit that we begin our Sermon Series for Lent, which we have titled “People Want to Know”. For the next six Sundays, our sermons will be based on questions that we have heard from members and friends within this congregation or in the larger community. My hope is that through exploring these questions during the season of Lent, we will all be led into deeper relationship with God and with one another. My prayer is that these sermons will be conversation starters for us as a community of faith.

This morning we take up the question: What about Dreams and Visions? And we turn to the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus, surely one of the most cryptic and mysterious in the Bible.

Thomas Jefferson was a strong devotee of the ethic and teachings of Jesus, but his rational, 18th Century enlightened mind simply could not tolerate miracles, healings, and other supernatural events. And so Jefferson simply cut these supernatural portions out of the gospels with scissors and pasted the remaining parts together, resulting in what we now call the Jefferson Bible. This is the kind of story that wound up as a scrap of paper on Jefferson's floor.

And yet, throughout the scriptures of the Old and New Testament, we find stories in which God speaks and is revealed through the dreams and visions of human beings. The dreams of Joseph are the cause of his demise and his ascent to power in Egypt. Moses, atop Mt. Sinai, watches in awe and fear as God appears, just as Elijah hides in the cleft of the rock while God passes by with the sound of sheer silence. Samuel hears God's voice calling to him in the middle of the night as he sleeps. Each Christmas we are reminded of how God's messengers come to Mary, Joseph, and the Wise Men in the form of dreams and vision. The Bible clearly tells of a God who speaks and summons through dreams and visions.

Nowhere in the gospels is this more clear than in the transfiguration account. Jesus has gone up on a mountain along with three of his closest friends, the same three disciples who will pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his arrest.

Perhaps they've climbed up on a mountain to escape the crowds of needy people that followed them, to get away from it all, a kind of mountain retreat. But before they can even catch their breath or begin to unwind, the disciples are bombarded, their senses overwhelmed by a fury of visions. Jesus is transformed before their eyes, his face shining like the sun, his clothes dazzling. What happens next is even more surreal. Two of the heroes of Jewish faith, Elijah the great prophet and Moses the liberator of the people, appear out of thin air, and begin to speak with Jesus.

At this point, Peter, always the most resourceful of disciples, has an idea. Intent on remaining in this dreamlike world, where the glory of God is so palpable, Peter switches from fisherman to tent-maker. He plans to set up camp for a while. But before he can even finish his thought, a bright cloud appears and a voice booms out, "This is my beloved son. With him I am well pleased. Listen to him." Immediately, Peter and the other two disciples fall to the ground, heads in the dust overcome by fear.

Suddenly, all is silent. The cloud disappears. Moses and Elijah are gone. The blinding light and booming voice die out. Only Jesus remains. He walks over to his terrified disciples, touches them and reassures them, calms their fears.

But it is what Jesus does next that is most intriguing to me. He leads them back down the mountain. The vision is over and the disciples cannot remain in the clouds. So they dust themselves off and, still bleary-eyed, return home; where there are sick people to be healed and there are mourners to be comforted and there are oppressed and poor people who have great needs, and there is work to be done.

No matter how long I live, or how many words crowd my memory, I will never forget those of a mission worker in Nicaragua as I boarded the plane to return to the United States: “now your work begins”

The moment on top of the mountain will become a sustaining presence for the disciples in the difficult weeks ahead, when the Mountaintop of Transfiguration will become a Mount called Calvary and the booming voice from heaven will be replaced by the jeers and taunts of Roman soldiers. The mountaintop experience will be crucial to their lives as disciples, but only if they return to the harshness of the real world.

What about dreams and visions? What are we to make of them? How are we to respond to those moments, so few and far between, when the thin veneer of ordinary human existence is peeled back and we can see God face to face. We give thanks to God, just as our ancestors in the faith did. Our dreams and our visions remind us that God has not stopped speaking, and so we give thanks to God for such moments.

After giving thanks, and this is the very difficult part, we wrap that moment up as tightly and safely as we can and we carry it with us through the ordinariness of our lives. Jesus and his disciples could not remain atop the mountain. Neither can we, but we can (and we must) hold on to our dreams and our visions and let them inspire us to holy and just lives.

When I was a sophomore in college, I participated in a semester-long Interfaith Dialogue Project with students and professors of diverse religious backgrounds. The purpose of the project was to seek common ground and

develop respectful relationships across religious divides. Late in the semester, we invited a columnist from the student newspaper who was an avowed atheist to join in our dialogue. Prior to joining us, the student had written an op-ed titled, “Intolerable Cruelties” that had traced the devastating human history of violence war, and abuse and then stated, in no uncertain language, that God was either dead or cruel. He outlined his arguments for us, and then turned to the group and said harshly, “I mean, who among you can make an argument for the existence of God, knowing all of this?” It was the president of the Hillel Jewish student group that answered the question for us all: “I do not have rational arguments and logical conclusions. What I have is the memory of my grandmother rising early to pray and giving thanks to the creator for another day. What I have is the tangible feeling of holiness when I read scripture or share a meal with other people of faith. What I have is a tradition of thousands of years of faithful ancestors who have believed when it was nearly impossible to do so. What I have is a vision of a world without hatred and prejudice and violence and cruelty. It is my religion that gives me this vision. Without my religion, without my God, I have no hope.” We all sat in silence, because he had said it all.

There is no rational explanation for our faith, there is no logic behind the visions and dreams of the people of God. There is only the vision itself. And it is enough. Enough to ensure us that God is still speaking, still acting, still present in our world. God is still dreaming big dreams for humanity—dreams of justice and peace and compassion and love in a world so desperately needs them all.

It was late one night at the men’s shelter of Clifton Sanctuary Ministries when I heard a knock at my door. The man who on the other side was whispering loudly, trying to wake me without disturbing other guests. “Will you pray with me”, he asked and went on to explain how his daughter had called him that evening with the news that she had gotten into college, the first person in her family to accomplish that feat. We prayed that she would continue to do well in school, and that her family would find ways to pay her for her books so that she could go. When we were finished, the man breathed deeply—“it was my dream to go to college, but I messed that up early in life. When she called today, my dream came true.”

Transfiguration Sunday stands for us as a reminder that there is more to our lives than what we see and hear and touch. There is more to our world than the headlines in our newspapers and the facts in our books. Surely Hamlet

was right in reminding his good friend Horatio, “There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”ⁱ

Do you remember the prophet Joel’s vision of the day when God would pour out holy spirit on all flesh. Sons and daughters would prophesy together, old men would dream again and the young would see visions. God’s spirit would be let loose on all creation.

This is the great democratization of dreaming. No longer will the work of envisioning the people belong only to the elite and the powerful or those grounded in reality. Dreams and visions will be widespread. And all flesh will see them together.

Peter, James, and John those disciples present at Jesus’ transfiguration, would live to see another vision, the enactment of Joel’s prophecy at Pentecost in Jerusalem. At Pentecost, we are told that persons were present from all over the world, and the old dreamed dreams and the young saw visions. And the church was born.

My first favorite theologian, before I knew of Calvin or Luther or Barth, was Shel Silverstein, the author of children’s books. His words echoed in my ear as I prepared this sermon: “If you are a dreamer, come in. If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar, a hopper, a prayer, a magic-bean-buyer. If you're a pretender, come sit by my fire, for we have some flax-golden tales to spin. Come in! Come in!”ⁱⁱ

As we come to this table spread before us as a vision of kingdom of God we will dream dreams and we will see visions. We will dream of a world in which all people are welcome to the feast of life. We will envision peace and justice that are both true and lasting. We will dream dreams and we will see visions. And then we will get to work, putting this vision into action in our lives, in the life of the church, and in the life of the world, so that no one, no one, is denied a place at the table.

ⁱ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5, lines 166-167.

ⁱⁱ Shel Silverstein, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, HarperCollins, 1974, p. 9.