

“Dreaming Dreams, Seeing Visions”

*A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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Acts 2:14-21

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.”

The Book of Joel is one of the lesser-known books of the Hebrew Bible, one of the so-called Minor Prophets, so designated because of their length, not any negative judgment of their relative worth. You may find Joel in your Bibles, right between Hosea and Amos. Now, don’t feel bad if you didn’t know this: we have but one actual reading from this book during our three-year lectionary cycle of lessons, specifically on the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost of Year C; we last read Joel in church during the fall of 2019.

What is it that Joel said that so influenced Peter, who quoted from the second chapter of this ancient work? Who was the man who delivered these prophecies that would play a role in the emergence of a religious movement hundreds of years after his passing? Why are his words the core of the lesson for this day on which the Church recalls the gift of the Holy Spirit?

Well, for starters, here’s what we know:

We know that Joel was the son of Pethuel.

We know that at the time he prophesied, an awful plague of locusts was besetting the land.

And that’s it.

Mind you, there is much else we can surmise, and all of it is important. But today’s lesson reminds us that our knowledge is limited. It should give a preacher pause before making declarative statements, and it is a reminder of the need for humility when interpreting Scripture.

So, it is with some care that I will offer some hopefully informed speculation about Joel's identity and the time when he wrote. This in turn should help us to better understand his prophecy and, by extension, Peter's sermon, which as noted earlier is reported in the Pentecost lesson from Acts.

The style of Joel and the references in his prophecy originally led scholars to offer a wide date range for the book: the ninth to second century BC, a period of seven hundred years that included the rise of Israel to prominence, to its eventual conquest, to the exile and beyond. Further investigation and study have led to the conclusion that Joel dates to around the year 400 BC, during the Persian period but after the time of exile.

So, Israel had known defeat. It had the opportunity to wonder about its God. It had also outlasted conquering powers. And there was some hope for the future. But not at the moment when Joel prophesied. For locusts were deemed to be a divinely sent plague, affirming the power of God but raising questions of the judgment being rendered on Israel.

Were the people of Israel finally doomed? Had the proverbial clock run out on them? Joel said no. He believed there would be a restoration of the people's fortunes, that someday, as we read in Joel 2:28-32, the gift of prophecy would be widespread and that old men would dream dreams and young men would have visions. He painted a picture of a glorious, God-filled future that must have seemed incredible. We know that the history of Israel continued to take its twists and turns over the centuries, and it was that story that Jesus claimed to be fulfilling. His followers, Peter and Luke included, proclaimed that their Risen Lord had done so in truly awesome fashion.

When Peter cites these verses, he is placing the story of the followers of Jesus firmly within that of the Jewish people, but like Jesus, with a novel twist. For starters, Peter, as quoted in Acts, has made a small but significant addition to the beginning of his passage: the original says nothing about "in the last days," merely "afterward." What's the difference?

The Jews of the ancient world believed in the Last Days, not as envisioned in Christianity but as a no less apocalyptic event when God would deliver judgment to the peoples and redeem Israel. Peter was suggesting that this moment, this day we now know as Pentecost, was that moment—in essence, it was the beginning of the end of the world he and his contemporaries had known.

You and I know that the world did not end in the first century.

At least it did not end in a literal sense. But something fundamental changed, and the world would never be the same.

We know from Scripture of Jesus' life, his ministry, his passion, his death on a cross, and his resurrection. Acts begins to tell the story of how people responded to these

developments. Not everyone believed that Jesus was the Christ, that he had been raised from the dead.

But some did, including Peter and the other disciples.

Peter, who was once plagued by doubt and confusion, is now convinced. He believes fully that Jesus was the Son of God, and that it was his duty and privilege to share the Good News of what that meant.

And so, Peter gave what amounts to the first recorded sermon in Christian history. We are told that some people had gathered, coming from places near and far. Scholars suggest that they numbered 120, but truly, we don't know. What we may be certain of is that they came from the four corners of the Roman world: Asia, Europe, Arabia, and Africa, Jerusalem and all those cities with historic or exotic names. They gathered, each speaking his or her own language, and then, touched by the Holy Spirit, they *understood* one another.

It has been said that on Pentecost, Babel was reversed. But that's not true—each person still spoke his or her own tongue. No, what happened was that Babel was not erased from history; it was transcended!

On that day, a wondrous thing happened. Barriers were overcome in stunning fashion, and people were united in the Spirit's power. And then Peter gave his talk, quoting from Joel, showing that the story of Jesus was the culmination of an old promise renewed. Yes, God was doing something new, but he was also keeping his word from long ago, even if it was in a new way.

Those first Christians may not have been combating a swarm of locusts, those voracious insects that would destroy their crops and livelihood in the proverbial blink of an eye. But the faithful lived in a hostile world, one that could seem bleak and hopeless. Peter offered a vision of the future rooted in hope, declaring in verses 17 and 18, “[Y]our sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

It's a lovely, inspirational vision, one that has echoed down throughout the ages. The idea of dreaming the incredible was put by George Bernard Shaw this way, in his play *Back to Methuselah*: “You see things; and you say, ‘Why?’ But I dream things that never were; and I say, ‘Why not?’” The same idea was later paraphrased by John F. Kennedy, then Robert F. Kennedy, and finally Ted Kennedy, who at RFK's funeral quoted his brother as saying, “Some men see things as they are, and ask why. I dream of things that never were, and ask why not.”

This hour calls for us in the church not to bemoan the present reality but to embrace the future in all its infinite wonder and variability. Circumstances are unquestionably trying at the moment; COVID-19 feels as if it's our generation's version of locusts. We wonder and worry about what is to come. And that is why now we need to invest in our hopes and dreams for tomorrow.

In the 1930s, the United States endured the Dust Bowl. Families were driven off the land in the Midwest in search of something, anything better. Of those that picked up and moved to California, there was a spirit, a hope, a resolute strength to go forward.

As we consider what form the church might take going forward, we must ask ourselves what it is that we hold dear about our community of faith, and about the wider fellowship that gathers in the name of Christ and that is blessed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Once we have identified those things, we can begin to build the church anew, with purpose and joy and confidence.

Pentecost is a day of transcendence. It is not a day on which we simply obliterate the past; try as we might, that is beyond our power. Instead, on this day we remember when the Spirit helped the people overcome their past and breach their divisions, something we need to do today.

I believe this is a moment to look to Peter and his example, to focus on what is truly important, to ground ourselves in the witness of our forebears—and then to move forward. We need to talk about our faith in Christ and how this changes everything for us.

In recent days, the wider church has yet again found itself a pawn in our nation's endless culture wars. A pointless and diversionary argument has taken place about the First Amendment and coronavirus stay-at-home orders and who is or is not an "essential" worker. I honestly think Jesus couldn't care less about these things. Our Lord isn't interested in how we exercise our rights. He cares instead whether we are living like citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, meeting our responsibilities to God, and caring for one another.

How might I be a better Christian? How might I help to share the Spirit? How might I help to build God's church? These are the questions that we should be asking ourselves.

Donald Trump, in his press conference concerning when churches and other faith communities might reopen, said one indisputable thing: American needs more prayer. Now, neither he nor any other politician probably thinks of prayer in the way Jesus did or practices it in the way the Disciples did. It isn't to be something transactional, subject to a calculus of gain or loss. Prayer is meant to be a means by which we may connect with God, transcend our mundane reality, and ready ourselves for the great work that God has in mind for each and for all of us.

Today we pray to God for the ability to dream of things that never were, to stretch our imaginations in his service, to ask that all women and men might be included in building the Kingdom here on earth.

Let us, over the coming weeks, heed the words of Joel and Peter. Let us dream dreams and have visions, let's articulate a vision of a church that is ready to serve God and God's people, no matter how troubled the moment, no matter how challenging the times.

On this Pentecost Sunday we celebrate the gathering of the church. We are reminded that this was not a one-and-done event. It is something happening all the time, including now, in this place, guided by the Spirit, embraced by Jesus, responding to the will and love of God.