

Pentecostal Dreamin'
Sermon on Acts 2:1-21 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, May 15, 2005

On August 28, 1963, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said he had a dream. His dream was “a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed,” “a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood,” “a dream that [his] four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Although King said his was “a dream deeply rooted in the American dream,” it is clear that that dream was also deeply rooted in scripture, for at the height of the speech he quotes the prophet Isaiah, saying, “I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; ‘and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.’” (Isaiah 40:4-5)

I like to think that Dr. King’s vision of an America full of peace and justice and brotherhood is but a glimpse of God’s dream for all humanity. We tend to think of dreams as belonging properly to us, not to God. It is we who dream. And when we speak of dreams, we think of shadow and illusion and fantasy. Indeed, our dreams, like Prospero’s revels, are an “insubstantial pageant faded” (*The Tempest*, IV, I, 155). Dare we then to say that God dreams?

I’d like to say that God does dream, and that God shares his dream with us. The dream of God is a very old dream; it goes back to the very beginning. In the beginning, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31a). The earth was full of the plants and animals and birds and sea creatures that God had made, and men and women lived

at peace with God and themselves and all creation. Unfortunately, that peace was not to last for long. Through disobedience, sin entered the world, and the world has never been the same.

Sin built walls: walls of distrust and jealousy, walls of hatred and violence, walls of discord and oppression. These walls separated men and women from God, from themselves, and from all creation. But as Robert Frost has said, “Something there is that does not love a wall, / That wants it down.” (from “Mending Wall”) And that “something” is the dream of God that wants the walls of division and rivalry and hatred to come tumbling down. That something, again to borrow from Frost, is what “sends the frozen-ground-swell under it / And spills the upper boulders in the sun, / And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.”

The dream of God is of that day when, as on the first day, all of God’s creation is at peace, reconciled to God and one another. This dream of peace and justice and brotherhood is a burst of radiant sunlight breaking through the storm clouds of rebellion and war, the dark clouds of prejudice and injustice, the swelling clouds of violence and destruction that periodically overshadow the human landscape. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5, English Standard Version).

The dream came to Noah in the shape of an ark “in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water” (1 Pet. 3:20). The dream lived in Abraham and Sarah, who moved to the land God showed them, trusting God’s promise that “in [them] all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). The dream appeared to Jacob who saw visions of angels ascending and descending upon the earth (Gen. 28:12), opening avenues of approach to God. The dream spoke to Moses in the desert, charging him to lead his people from slavery and oppression in Egypt to freedom and safety in the promised land (Ex. 3:1ff.). The dream spurred the prophets to speak of that day “when justice roll[s] down like waters, and righteousness like

an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). The dream finally “became flesh, and lived among us” (John 1:14) and announced that the time had come when he would save God’s people.

In Jesus, God’s dream of peace, justice, brotherhood, and reconciliation becomes a reality. He “preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near” (Eph. 2:17, NIV). He was the servant whom God chose, who with the Spirit upon him “proclaim[ed] justice to the Gentiles” and “brought justice to victory” (Mt. 12:18, 20). He was pleased to call us brothers and sisters, if we did the will of God (Mk. 3:35). Through him, God has reconciled us to himself (2 Cor. 5:18). In Jesus, God tore down the walls that divide us from one another and from God. As the Letter to the Ephesians puts it, Jesus “is our peace; in his flesh he has ... broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law ... so that he might create in himself one new humanity ... and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross” (2:14-16).

Bringing peace, establishing justice, creating a new family, reconciling us to God—these are “God’s deeds of power” the disciples were talking about on that first Pentecost (Acts 2:11). But no one understood what they were talking about. The people of Jerusalem recognized the words; they were even astonished that they heard the words in their own native language (2:8). They asked each other, “‘What does this mean?’ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’” (2:12-13). Surely this must be a dream, a fantasy, an illusion.

What the crowds experience as “only disruptive inebriation and scandalous irrationality” the Church knows to be the fulfillment of prophecy.¹ And so Peter stands and says it’s too early in the morning to be drunk! What is happening is what the prophet Joel said would happen: That “In the last days ... [God] will pour out [his] 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

¹ William H. Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988) 35.

dreams” (2:17). While pouring out the Spirit on a handful of disciples who have just learned to speak in Phrygian and Pamphylian hardly amounts to ‘all flesh,’ Pentecost nevertheless marks the beginning of the fulfillment of Joel’s prophetic words.

And so, as Gerhard Krodel has noted, Pentecost is about continuity: the historical continuity between Israel and the church as well as the theological continuity of God’s acts in history to save his people.² Or, as Ben Witherington puts it, “The working of the Spirit is seen as the sign ... that the promises of the OT era are being fulfilled in the lives of those who follow Jesus.”³ The Spirit that previously spoke only through certain individuals like the prophets and who had descended upon Jesus and empowered his ministry has now been granted to the church and to each and every member of it. It is no longer only one person or a select few who have the Spirit, but many: “Pentecost marks the democratic outpouring of the Spirit on all of God’s true people. All believers and only believers receive the Holy Spirit.”⁴

The Holy Spirit is given—then as it is today—to equip God’s true people for ministry. And the ministries for which the Spirit equips us are the ministries so near to God’s heart: peacemaking, speaking out for justice, creating brotherhood within the family of God’s children, and working to reconcile peoples divided by race and class and gender and economic status and sexual orientation and theological commitments. Peace, justice, brotherhood, reconciliation: the dream of God, the vision of young people, and the hopes of the old. Call it Pentecostal dreamin’, and carry its message to the world in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

² Gerhard A. Krodel, *Acts*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986) 80.

³ Ben Witherington, III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998) 140.

⁴ Krodel, 80-81.