

Cat Goodrich
First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
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Dreams and Visions

Acts 16:8-15
John 14:23-29

Before I read from the book of Acts, I want to share a little context. I don't know about you, but every now and then I find it helpful to refresh my memory about scripture – when it was written, and by whom, and how far removed they were from the actual life and work of Jesus. You may remember, for example, that the gospels were written down maybe a generation after Jesus walked the roads of Galilee. The apostle Paul was at work spreading the gospel and planting churches all over the Mediterranean, and then writing letters to encourage and support those churches at least a decade before the earliest gospel was written – so the Epistles are the earliest texts of the New Testament. We know about Paul's travels in part because they're described in the book of Acts.

Here's how Acts tells us it happens – After Christ is crucified. After the darkness of Calvary and the grief of holy Saturday. After the surprise of the empty tomb and the joy of resurrection, after Thomas's doubts and the road to Emmaus and Jesus serving breakfast on the beach, he ascends to heaven and the disciples wait for the gift of the Spirit. On Pentecost, when the Spirit arrives with wind and fire, the good news really starts to spread. Paul is struck blind and hears God's call to preach, instead of persecute. And so he begins to travel to share the good news, and the spirit goes with him, opening hearts and changing lives. People begin to share what they have and take care of widows. The disciples heal people and cast out demons and people far and wide begin to believe the love of God made real in Christ! Rich and poor people, Romans and foreigners, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, prostitutes and eunuchs, merchants and slaves, young and old -- all worship God together, crossing all kinds of cultural boundaries and breaking rules about who could care for whom, who could eat and worship together; it is an incredible story!

The story of Acts is what ultimately leads us to a place like this, where we gather from all walks of life, and all orientations and identities and political persuasions and different cultures and sizes and ages and abilities and neighborhoods – and we come together to worship, and learn, and love one another and try to love our neighbors. The story of Acts is part of what gets us here, it's the story of what the Spirit of God makes possible through the growth of the church.

So – right before our text for this morning, Paul has been traveling around the Mediterranean and he wants to go to Asia, but Luke tells us that the Spirit stops Paul from going there. Not to be dissuaded, he tries again – and the Spirit blocks his way a second time.

But then, a way opens before Paul – a way that leads to the birth of a new, thriving church in Philippi. Listen now for a word from God... (read Acts 16:8-15)

Have you ever heard the voice of God?

Have you ever dreamed a dream that led you to make a change in your life? Have you ever seen a vision that felt like a glimpse into the future?

We're rational people. In our post-modern world, in the internet age, we've learned to question everything. We're Presbyterians. Our glimpse into the future often looks like a strategic plan, well-researched and passed by consensus. Or a carefully worded mission and vision statement.

But I believe have heard the voice of God. I know some of you have, too. The most notable time came when I was driving my little green Honda Civic down the highway through the wilds of Northeast Texas, making my way back to college sometime my senior year. God's voice came like the still, small voice within, but it felt like something wholly other than myself. It was as if something that wasn't me, within me, took me by both shoulders and shook me awake. Maybe it was my conscience speaking, but it felt wholly other. It felt like God.

Paul had a dream of a man from Macedonia, pleading with him for help. How did he know to pay attention? I have lots of dreams: some are strange, some are mundane, some fade before I'm fully awake. Science still doesn't completely understand why we dream. Sometimes, they're a way of making sense and sorting through the day's events. Sometimes, they're a way to process memories. Psychoanalysts like Freud and Jung believe dreams bring to light your hidden self; your needs, fears, or frustrations.

In her book *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, Sue Monk Kidd writes of her journey from patriarchal Christianity into an embrace of the sacred feminine. Ironically, it is a dream that helps wake her up, and inspires her to begin the journey back to herself. She writes, upon awaking from the fateful dream, "you know how some dreams are so vivid you have to spend a few moments after you wake assuring yourself it didn't really happen? That's how I felt... I felt awed, like something of import and worthy of great reverence had taken place." She writes down her dreams, she says, because "one of the purest sources of knowledge about our lives comes from the symbols and images deep within."¹

People have long believed dreams act as a window to the Spirit realm, or another world, or even the future. As early as Genesis, dreams play a significant role in the Biblical narrative – after Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, he managed to land in the pharaoh's court and rise to prominence in Egypt because he could interpret dreams.

Paul had a dream that was like a summons from God: a Macedonian man crying out for help. Paul paid attention, and went to Macedonia – which is the area we know as the

¹ Kidd, Sue Monk, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine*.

Balkan peninsula, to a major city called Philippi. There are several details that point to the work of the Spirit in this story. Ordinarily Paul and his entourage would begin teaching in the synagogue, but here they go to a place apart, a place of prayer by a river. And there they find Lydia.

Lydia is not a native Macedonian, she is from Thyatira – where Paul had wanted to travel to but couldn't. We don't know much about Lydia but we know enough: she is wealthy, a businesswoman who sold purple cloth – a luxury which could only be afforded by the very rich. She seems to be the head of her own household, which was very unusual at that time. The Spirit opens her heart to the good news and she is baptized, and immediately offers hospitality to Paul and his friends. She is remembered as the first European convert to Christianity, and is the mother and host of the church in Philippi.

When we dare to dream, to pay attention to the deepest yearnings of our hearts and leave ourselves open to the movement of the Spirit, incredible things can happen! Barriers are torn down – the divide between a Jewish man and a Gentile woman is overcome. The social gap between a poor peripatetic preacher and a wealthy merchant is bridged by the Spirit and not just a new believer, but a whole new church is born.

In the reading we heard from the gospel of John, Jesus is preparing the disciples for his death and what will come after. He promises them peace and the gift of God's Spirit, who will encourage and enable their ministry after he is gone. Next Sunday we'll remember the ascension, and the week after we'll celebrate Pentecost, when the Spirit arrives. So here at the end of the Easter season, we are in a bit of an in-between time... a threshold between the resurrection and the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Times like these can be scary. We might look around or read the news and wonder what the heck is going on... with some of the disciples, we may begin to doubt if Christ really was who he said he was. If peace will ever be possible. If it was all just a dream.

Our first close friends to have children were Ian and Leah – they had a daughter named Rose. Rose, like many kids, often had a hard time falling asleep. It can be hard to relax, to let go, and to lose consciousness and control. I remember Ian going to sit by her bed, to hold her hand in the dark, keeping her company in the scary in-between time between being awake and going to sleep. He would wait with her, while her breathing slowed and her body grew still and she was finally, fully asleep.

At the end of life, too, families keep vigil at the bedside of their loved ones, watching and waiting through the slow, sometimes difficult work of dying. There's not much to do but tell stories, and hold hands, to pray and cry and sometimes sing while breathing slows, and the body grows still, and the soul lets go.

The space between here and there can be hard to navigate alone. The space between dreaming and wakefulness, between life and death, between the visions of day and the dreams of night is liminal space – a threshold between the known and the unknown.

Invariably, the Spirit shows up in these places to guide us through, accompanying us from here to there, from what is into what could be, from what is known into the unknown future.

Nine months ago, at the beginning of September, we held our kickoff Sunday. We asked our neighbors their dreams for Birmingham. The Girouards built and hung boards on the side of the chapel. Others of us painted them with chalkboard paint, and the Ahnerts and a few others helped spray paint the phrase- *My dream for Birmingham is...* over and over. And then we waited and watched what happened. Our sexton Kandi was the resident FCC, monitoring the boards and erasing anything that didn't belong on the church. But here are a few things we heard:

My dream for Birmingham is:

- good jobs
- more affordable housing
- to become a melting pot
- equal opportunities for all
- reliable public transit
- help for the homeless
- an end to gun violence
- enough for everyone.

What is your dream? What is your dream for yourself? For your family? For our city? For our church? What might happen if we had the faith of Paul, and the courage of the disciples to seek to follow the leading of our dreams? To live out our vision, to create not only a church but also a city where all are welcomed and valued? Where children are cherished, and women are trusted? The Spirit beckons from just beyond – let's have the courage to follow.