

Who Will We Let Prophesy?

What is a vision? What distinguishes a vision from a dream? People wrestle with dreams, don't they. People like spiritualists, scientists and any of us who wake up sweaty after having the recurring dream of losing our teeth. Have you had that dream?

Visions, sometimes come about in certain spiritual traditions. Those can come to us while we are awake.

Now the difference may be semantic, but it matters for the purposes of our scripture for this morning. You could say that a vision is a new cosmic experience that enters the mind of the beholder. For example, you may say, "A vision came to me, and I feel the need to visit the beach and sit with the sounds of the water."

But a dream, in its most technical sense, is this gooey, mushy amalgamation of things you have already witnessed.

For example, "for some reason after eating pizza at 11 PM, I had a dream that I was the 5th Destiny's child member in 1998. We were on tour and my shoe broke during "Say My Name."

I keep having this dream that I can't find my sermon and I am in some tunnel trying to get to my office to print off another copy but church has already started. I thought I was the only one who had this dream, but I found out recently at annual conference celebrating retirees that there are other pastors who have that same dream!

So let's say it this way. Visions are things we've never seen before, like nearly all of the Book of Revelation and parts of the prophetic texts like Isaiah and Ezekiel), and dreams are some variation of things we have seen before.

Dreams are strangely put together in ways we wouldn't imagine during the day time. Certainly, there are times when dreams behave like visions and visions behave like dreams. The words, at least in English, are interchangeable enough that we do use them in each other's place sometimes.

Why do you think, then, that the writer, Joel which eventually gets Quote tweeted in Acts, used this idea? Why might the young see visions and the old dream dreams?

Here is one idea. Maybe it is the young that are said to “see visions” because the Holy Spirit grants them an imagination of things that have not yet happened. Maybe the elders are said to “dream dreams” because they can remember stories over their lives and dance with them in new ways.

Both visions and dreams are exercises of imagination, but the semantic nuance invites us to think about time in a non-linear way.

For example, consider various youth movements for justice. March for Our Lives began as a response to the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas in Parkland, Florida. Their work is to create safe communities and cultures in which gun violence is no longer a leading cause of death for young people. They are envisioning futures that never existed.

Think about SAGE, Services and Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Elders. This organization supports the rights and dignities of LGBTQ elders. In their own words, they are a movement of “loving, caring activists dedicated to providing advocacy, services and support to elder member of the LGBTQ + community.” This is an effort to hold memories and wisdom of elders who are often forgotten in the mainstream LGBTQ+ movement. They are dreaming dreams of worlds they’ve been to and taking us along as well.

But young people are not just the future and elders are not just memories of the past. A healthy community like Joel and Acts describe requires both in harmony.

What I want to focus on is the part of scripture where people start to judge what is happening in their midst. They don’t know how to define it. They don’t understand it. So let’s just go negative first and say “These people are drunk! You are making us really uncomfortable so we need to label it. Cuz if we label it, we can control it.

“All were amazed and disturbed. They asked each other “What does this mean?” But others said mockingly, “They’ve drunk too much new wine.”

Earlier this month, Jordan Neely was attacked by a fellow train passenger in New York City. Upon boarding the F train, Neely shouted that “he was fed up, that he didn’t care if he went to prison and that he was ready to die.” After taking off his jacket and throwing it on the floor, a white ex-Marine, Daniel Penny put Neely in a headlock for fifteen minutes.

Jordan Neely was intentional about curating joy and delight as a dancer and Michael Jackson impersonator. He lived a difficult life. These are truths that do not balance each other out, but rather, they run concurrently.

In 2011, Neely testified at the murder trial of his mother. He recounted the traumatic story, saying he “realized something was wrong when his mother did not wake him for school as she usually did and when her boyfriend blocked him from entering their bedroom.” In so many ways, Neely was shouldering more than the humane among of heartbreak. He chose to lament that heartbreak on the subway car but had no clue that would be the end of his life.

Neely and so many others in similar situations are prophesying to us.

Peter said to the crowd, “Fellow Jews, and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o clock in the morning. No. This is what was spoken through the prophet Joel.”

In the days following the lynching of Jordan Neely, New Yorkers and others took to social media to play Devil’s Advocate.

“Well, have any of you been trapped on a train with someone who is drunk or high? I have been in danger.”

“My condolences, but trains are public spaces. That that’s what happens when you are being weird in public. “

The city has been such a dangerous place since the pandemic, there are crazy people everywhere. This is my commute.

The world is always ready to label those who disrupt their comfort. “Crazy”, weird, drunk, some homeless guy, somebody on drugs.

But if we take Peter's eternal warning seriously, those who are visited by the Holy Spirit are "not drunk" but are instead speaking the words of our most beloved prophets.

Neely's story is sadly not the only in which prophetic utterance is coded as "having an episode." It is a common strategy for those in authority to label the people who point out its violence as "undesirables."

Think about the stale of the Emperor's New Clothes. A vain emperor insists on special clothes made by very sneaky tailors. The tailors do not actually dress the Emperor in new clothes. They lie and tell them he is dressed in fine clothes, but instead, he's naked. He goes on a parade throughout the town, and no one has the courage to say that his new fancy clothes are a farce.

There are many versions of this classic tale, but in nearly all of them, it is the child who interrupts and says, "he's naked!" The adults, embarrassed by what the child's integrity exposes, try to shush any dissent. They cover the child's mouth and hope no one in the royal court can hear the truth from the parade.

What does it take to name that the Emperor has no clothes? What risks do we incur when we name that the government is full of violent contradictions?

In our scripture lesson for today, Peter stands up and raises his voice. He directly addresses the crowd saying, "They are not drunk" but instead this is evidence of what the prophet Joel told us about. Young ones seeing visions, older ones dreaming dreams!

Jordan Neely had visions and dreams too. These visions and dreams were cut too short because someone chose to end his life rather than take his pain seriously. He was hungry, he was thirsty, he was exhausted and he was heartbroken.

Sadly, even calling on the name of God does not save us all. Those of us who remain need to remember those whose last words were for mercy.

We can take our cue from Peter. Intervene. Refuse to let folks be labeled or categorized against their consent. Hold sacred the dignity and courage in the witness of those around us.

Despite our attempts to be kind and empathetic, there are just some personalities that we don't vibe with. Perky people irritate us; mopey people bring us down. Quiet people concern us, loud people overstimulate us.

Ultimately, there is no such thing as a perfect person. All of us are, at the very basic level, annoying to someone else. And each of us is annoyed by others at some point. That's human! Humans are messy and sometimes chaotic creatures.

Because we live in a world where those in power teach us to be cruel to those who don't fit the norm, we have to work to build community. But we don't do that work alone. The amazing thing about Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit does the things we often cannot.

What is most significant about our scripture is that the people did not have to speak new languages to be understood. The Holy Spirit did the bulk of that work. The people could show up the way they were and trust that they'd be understood. That's a miracle in itself.

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

There were all kinds of people in the place. They began to wonder how this was possible, because "are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language!"

The miracle is in the first sentence of this passage.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. AS we make the third full year of living in a world of COVID, this phrase in itself is a miracle. What does it take to put everyone in one room safely? It's a miracle that all of these people were in the same place to begin with. In an interview with Eve Ewing, Mariame Kaba reflected, "I believe that when we are in relationship with each other, we influence each other. What matters to me, as the unit of interest is relationships."

The Holy Spirit did the initial work of translating what human minds could not. But human beings have to do the work of building relationships. The Holy Spirit did part of the work at Pentecost. What do you think the people involved in that

outpouring did coming home? How might they have been changed by that experience? It would be a shame if they had such a magical experience together, only to return home to the same preconceived notions about the Other. And yet this happens every day for us.

Meaningful relationships may have you looking silly to those who are not knowledgeable about them. Even in this passage, people sneered and said “they are filled with new wine.”

The simple gathering of different people in one room is not necessarily radical or powerful though. What makes this passage countercultural is that people showed up **and** so did the Holy Spirit. We have to avoid those superficial attempts at throwing people together and hoping something special happens. So we don't need to have conferences, meetings, committees, task forces just to have them.

We need the Holy Spirit to show up. So, today is Pentecost. And here we are; all together in one place. What is our objective? What do we hope to accomplish in this moment together.

In my morning readings, I recently came across this Poem for Pentecost by Lo Alaman. I apologize for the Male language in advance.

He said be

And everything became so

And in the amount of time it took for breath to pass through lips

A universe boomed and stars sparked, and worlds began to exist

and all became His.

He said breathe

And we became lungs

And we became bodies filled to life.

Animated by spirit and instruction

And suddenly this dust had a Father
So we became daughters and sons
And love became both our names and our heritage.

He said taste and see
He said faith and believe
He said inhale love's promises.
And exhale whatever lies lead our hearts to lonely..

We went astray
Smoke filled our lungs
Sin cut off our airways
Like a knee to the neck
We cried,I can't breathe
There was no justice, there was no peace.

Could He speak again?
Could His Spirit whistle through the caverns of our chests?
Could he send a savior to resuscitate?
They whip His skin.
He gasps in pain.
He breathes his last.

He lay in the grave.

The Spirit comes.

He rises to reign!

He breathes on the church

We rise the same.

He says breathe

And we come alive.

He says receive

and let Spirit guide

The world needs life

The breath of Christ

is in our lungs.

Say Spirit come!

Say Spirit come!

Spirit come!

We pray...Holy Spirit come! Amen