

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Stephen R. Haynes
Sunday, April 22, 2022

Acts 16: 1-24

Timothy Joins Paul and Silas

Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers and sisters in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.

Paul's Vision of the Man of Macedonia

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

The Conversion of Lydia

We therefore set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

Paul and Silas in Prison

One day as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a female slave who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

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But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men, these Jews, are disturbing our city and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us, being Romans, to adopt or observe.” The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

I doubt if any of you is surprised that at the center of today’s lectionary text there is a dream, or what the author of Acts calls a night vision. After all, dreams, visions, apparitions, and epiphanies are everywhere in the Bible. And they’re always significant, because they offer such clear guidance for God’s people. One of the most significant Bible dreams involves the patriarch Jacob, who is on a long journey and stops to spend the night in the wilderness; sleeping outdoors, with his head resting on a stone, he dreams of a stairway to heaven.

Not *that* stairway to heaven. This one has no guitar solo; it’s a lot shorter, and has a much clearer message: God is looking down from the top, saying to Jacob: “*I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying*” and they “*will be as numerous as the dust of the earth.*” So, Jacob falls asleep in a strange place, and wakes up with assurance from God that “*all peoples on earth will be blessed through him and his offspring.*” What happens when I fall asleep?

I have a dream. I’m wandering through a parking lot in the dark looking for my car. I walk up and down the rows, holding up my right arm, and furiously pressing the button on my key fob. I strain for any hint of the tell-tale “beep

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beep.” *But there’s only silence.* If you recognize a message from God in there, please share it with me afterwards.

Jacob passes on this penchant for dreaming to his youngest son Joseph, *who dreams that while he and his brothers are binding sheaves in the field, suddenly his sheaf (or bundle of dried grain stalks) rises up and their sheaves gather around and bow down.* Coming from the son they know is Jacob’s favorite, this dream makes his brothers understandably furious. They are tired of Joseph flaunting his favored status, so the first chance they get, they take him to the wilderness, strip him and leave him for dead in an empty cistern. Now that’s a dream with consequences.

Compare it with one of mine:

I have a dream. I’m rushing to make an overseas flight. At check-in I’m told I have too much luggage, and I’m going to have to leave some of it behind. But I’m paralyzed by indecision—should I jettison my guitar? My computer? My books? My clothes? Unable to decide, I miss my flight. If there’s any message there, it would seem to be “leave early for the airport.”

But that’s not the end of Joseph the dreamer. Unbeknownst to his brothers, he is sold into slavery in Egypt. And just as his own dreams nearly get him killed, his ability to interpret others’ dreams gets him released from an Egyptian prison. Pharaoh, it turns out, has a recurrent and troubling dream in which he is standing by the Nile when seven fat cows walk out of the water, only to be devoured by seven gaunt cows. Familiar as Joseph is with the vicissitudes of sustenance

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farming, he immediately understands that Pharaoh's dream is God's way of warning him that Egypt is about to be hit by seven years of famine. Impressed, Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of the kingdom's food policy, from which position he is able to save not only Egypt, but his own extended family as well.

Like other biblical dreams, Pharaoh's is quite literally a matter of life and death, not only for thousands of Egyptians, but for Joseph and the rest of Jacob's descendants. Compare it to one of my recent dreams:

I have a dream. I'm in a panic because I need to get hold of Alyce and I can't get my cell phone to work. Specifically, I can't remember how to access my list of "favorite" phone numbers. And, of course, I can't remember her number. When I do finally figure it out, my fingers aren't nimble enough to enter the right digits.

Not exactly the sort of dream on which the fate of a nation rides.

In the New Testament, dreams and visions are again a common vehicle for communicating God's will to humans. This is particularly true in Acts, which has been the focus of our lectionary passages during this season of Easter. In Acts 2, Peter tells the crowd at Pentecost that the people they hear speaking in strange tongues are not babbling drunks, but living embodiments of Joel's prophecy that "In the last days...your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams."

Indeed, these words are a fair introduction to what happens in the rest of Acts. In chapter 7, as Stephen is being stoned to death, he looks up and has a vision of Jesus standing at the right

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hand of God. In chapter 9, while Paul is traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus, he sees a light from heaven flash around him hears the voice of Jesus call him by name. In chapter 10, a Roman centurion named Cornelius has an afternoon vision in which an angel tells him to send for a man named Peter. And before Cornelius's messengers can find him, Peter himself falls into a trance, and is instructed to eat a collection of unclean animals, since, he is told, "*What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*"

Taken together, these fateful dreams and visions clear the way for the apostles' decision to welcome Gentiles into the Jesus movement, a decision that changes the course of history; where would we be, after all, if only Jews could be Christians? Compare these history-making dreams in Acts with another one of mine:

I have a dream. Somehow, it's come to light that I never graduated from college, which is sort of a problem given my profession. The upshot is that I either need to go back to Vanderbilt for another semester at my current age, or take a bunch of exams for which I am not prepared. And, of course, I can't track any one down to explain what happened.

Given the dreamscape that is the first half of Acts, it should come as no surprise that when we get to chapter 16, Paul, too, is having a dream. He's in Asia Minor busily preaching, teaching, and founding churches. Now that the other apostles have endorsed his mission to the Gentiles, he is pouring himself into the work. So many Gentiles, so little time before Jesus returns. Then one night he has a vision: a man across the ocean in Macedonia is pleading with

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him to “*Come over and help us.*” Even compared to other dreams in the Bible, this one stands out for its directness: Paul is to drop what he’s doing in Troas and sail to Macedonia to preach the gospel there.

In retrospect, we know this dream too will change history, as it resulted in the spread of Christianity into Europe, and from there to the rest of the world. If only our dreams were so easy to understand and act upon. Consider this one:

I have a dream. I’m working at a fast-food restaurant. One day I’m working the drive-thru lane and I notice that the cars are filled with my friends from high school. Puzzled, I ask someone what’s going on, and they respond “didn’t anyone tell you about the reunion?”

Thankfully, Paul’s dream doesn’t invite psychoanalysis, only faithful action; he trusts that God is guiding him, and he wastes no time in self-scrutiny. But I suspect his traveling partners—Timothy, Silas and Luke—were a bit more circumspect. Perhaps they wanted to do some research on oceanic crossings; perhaps they remembered the story of Odysseus, whose own trip from Troas to Greece had taken ten years and been full of peril. But they had all seen what God could do through Paul, and so they quickly got on board, literally and figuratively. “*If God wants the gospel spread in the Greek world,*” they must have thought, “*who are we to ask questions?*”

So, it must have been a shock when, shortly after arriving in Philippi, they were seized by a lynch mob, dragged before the authorities, stripped naked and flogged, and thrown in prison. Who knew how long they’d be there? Or how they’d be treated by the guards and other

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prisoners? Or whether they'd be sent into the arena to fight wild animals, as had happened to Paul in Ephesus? I've had fun imagining the conversation between Paul and Silas that first night in captivity, which might have gone something like this:

Silas: Paul?

Paul: Yeah?

Silas: You still awake?

Paul: Yeah.

Silas: Remember the Macedonian guy in your dream?

Paul: Yeah.

Silas: Did he mention how long we'd be in prison?

Paul: No.

Silas. OK. Good night.

Thankfully, our fearless evangelists weren't there very long—that very night an earthquake sprung open the prison doors and broke their shackles, the jailer and his family were baptized, and the local authorities decided to release them. So, in the end Paul's decision to go to Macedonia was vindicated, and his faith in dreams as a reliable way of discerning God's will was confirmed.

I don't know about you, but the way these biblical dreams burst with world-changing meaning fills me with envy, because they highlight just how cluttered my own dreams are by insecurity and fear; in fact, if there's any consistent message in my dream life, it's probably:

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don't quit therapy! So how are you and I ever to receive a clear message from God when there is so much static on our end of the connection?

Of course, there are those who claim to have a clear line of communication with God, but they only confirm the difficulty we have in distinguishing God's voice from self-interest, projection and, frankly, mental illness. Remember Son of Sam, the 1970s serial killer who said God spoke to him through neighbor's Labrador? Or Oral Roberts, who claimed that a 900-foot Jesus had instructed him to build a medical center? Or Deanna Laney, the Texas woman who said God told her to stone her children to death?

We Presbyterians have long been wary of such abuses. In fact, one of the things that distinguishes us is a healthy skepticism toward anyone who claims to have heard directly from God, even another Presbyterian. Our approach to discerning God's will might be described this way:

- two people will always have a clearer picture of God's will than one person
- a committee will always have a clearer picture than any individual
- a presbytery will always have a clearer picture than a congregation, and so on

It's why in our tradition decisions are made by sessions, not pastors. It's why we don't ordain everyone who claims God has called them to the ministry. All this means that even if your dreams and visions were as transparent as those we read about in the Bible, you'd be hard-pressed to get anyone to pay attention.

But in lamenting that we don't have access to God in the direct, intimate and transparent ways we read about in Scripture, it's easy to lose sight of what we do have. It's easy to forget

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that Paul, as a founder of multiple churches, didn't have the experience we have of watching the Spirit build up a church community over time. And while God spoke directly to him from time to time, he didn't have the Gospels or the rest of the New Testament that are at the center of our life of faith. He didn't have a place he could go to hear the Word of God proclaimed from the pulpit each Sunday; he didn't have a community to amplify his joy and diminish his disappointments. He never experienced the reality Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously called "*Christ existing as community.*"

Which is exactly what is on offer here at Idlewild, whether we are together in one place as now, or spread out over the city. God may not speak to us privately in dreams and visions, but God speaks communally when the Word is read and preached, when we share in the Lord's Supper, when we undergo Christian formation together.

Now that you've sampled a few of my dreams, you'll understand why I'm so thankful I don't have to rely on them for clues to God's will. And why I have so much gratitude for this place, where I hear God in the voices, see God in the faces, and feel the movement of the Spirit.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to whom be all glory and honor forever. Amen.