

“Acting on a Vision: Part 2”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
May 13, 2007
Scripture: Acts 16:9-15

We are in the middle of three weeks of looking at stories of the very early church. Over and over in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, the history of the early church, actions were taken for this simple reason - there was a vision. Throughout the early church, actions begin with a dream. And in these dreams, God gives commands to the apostles. Through these dreams, the Spirit was teaching them how to be the church. Acting on a vision, the church took hold and grew and blossomed.

Last week, we looked at a passage in which Peter had a wild dream. A dream in which a curtain was lowered from heaven, with all sorts of animals forbidden for food by the kosher laws Christians were keeping. And three times, a voice said, “get up, Peter, kill and eat.” And Peter insisted that he could not – that he had never broken the kosher diet. And finally the voice said “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 11:7). And this dream, the way Acts tells the story, is the rationale Peter used to explain why the church should reach out to the Gentiles. They were no longer unclean, unfit for the church.

The biggest conflict facing the early church – what to do with the Gentiles – was solved not by a theological argument, not solved by using the Bible, not solved by compromise or negotiation according to Acts. This conflict threatening to tear apart the early church was solved with a wild dream.

The lectionary, the suggested set of readings for each Sunday used by several denominations that we often follow, has us skip a few chapters in Acts to this story for today. Peter is off the scene, and a new leader, Paul is on the stage. A few chapters ago, Peter had his dream, this time Paul has a dream. He has a dream of a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9). And immediately, Acts tells us, Paul and his fellow missionaries tried to cross over to Macedonia, convinced, Acts says “that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them” (Acts 16:10).

Let me provide a bit of background. Paul was on a barnstorming tour, spreading the gospel everywhere he went, kind of like Johnny Appleseed making his way through the trade routes spreading his product. Just a few verses before our story, we learn that Paul was traveling through modern day Turkey. And Acts says that Paul was “forbidden by the Holy Spirit” to go south to Asia Minor, and then, when they attempted to go north to Bithynia, “the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.” So Paul, not able to go north or south, continues on west until he ends up at the seaside harbor of Troas. And he could go no more – for the road dead-ended at the water. From Troas, Paul could look across the Aegean Sea toward Europe, toward what was then called the Macedonian region, part of present-day Greece.

And there in Troas, Paul has a dream, a vision, in which a man from Macedonia stands before him pleading with him to go across to Macedonia to help. And so, Paul and his companions cross over, the first account of Christianity reaching into Europe. Once again, in the story of the early church, a major boundary is crossed on account of a dream. A dream serves as Paul's justification for a major initiative.

Now the dream counselors and the psychoanalysts among us, Freudians and Jungians alike, would use this story as an opportunity to ask us about our own dreams. What boundaries do you need permission to cross? What conflicts does our brain keep working to solve even as we sleep? What actions are needed to carry out our dreams?

There may be some folks here who don't put much stock in dream interpretation and consider it superstitious thinking. Misquoting Freud, some might argue that sometimes a dream is just a dream. There are others here who have grown tired and suspicious of the rather careless way God-talk is used in our culture to justify preexisting prejudices or cloak our desires within language about God telling us to do something.

Lots of questions we could ask Paul about his dream of a man from Macedonia asking for help. Lots of questions we could ask the author of Acts, who seems to like sharing dreams as a justification for action. Now I still get a little nervous when people do things because, they say, they heard a voice in a dream. But I have to agree with Luke that dreams, articulated visions, can spark action for the community.

I think back to the early 1960s in our country. Those working for civil rights were subject to threats and violence, lynch mobs and bombs. Marchers were beaten bloody in Selma and progress seemed slow. People outside the south had trouble understanding what was so important at stake that risked chaos and civil unrest. And then there was a dream. A dream that struck at the heart of what this country was meant to be. You know the dream I am talking about.

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, [Martin Luther King, Jr. said] I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." I have 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.¹

And with that dream, the country did take action, crossing over into the future with a voting rights act that ensured that skin color would not be a barrier to the right to cast a ballot for hope.

Thirty years earlier, in March of 1933, on the eve of the first inauguration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt as President, America's financial system was on the edge of collapse. The New York Stock Exchange had suspended trading the day before and the Chicago Board of Trade had bolted its doors. Just a few hours before the inauguration, the governors of New York, Pennsylvania and Illinois signed orders closing their banks indefinitely, to bring the total to

thirty-four of the forty-eight states with banks closed.² And their, in the face of a grim reality, an optimistic vision was articulated for the country. “The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself.” And people began to take action. Banks reopened and people began to deposit their money back in the banks and optimism returned to the country.

Dreams can spark action. Going to sleep that night in Troas, Paul had a dream of a man from Macedonia, standing in front of him, pleading with him to come and help. And they crossed over.

It makes me wonder who our Macedonian man is today. Where does today’s Macedonian woman reside? It makes me wonder who on this day is standing up in our dreams, pleading with us to cross over and come and help.

Paul’s crossing into Macedonia symbolized and initiated the church’s spread into Europe – going to people in need of the gospel. And so on this day, I think about our Macedonia, I think about some of the people this church ought to cross over to and reach out to with the good news.

I think of our neighbors across Cedar Street. Every day students of McNally Smith College of Music go to their classes and work part-time jobs and study about their passion in pursuit of careers in the music business. I think this church ought to cross over and reach out to those students.

I think of our neighbors across the street who live at Central Towers. Back in the 1950s, this church was responsible for creating that apartment building for affordable housing for older adults. That was then. Now Central Towers is run by Presbyterian homes and though we have some members who live there now I could see us crossing over to reach out to more of those residents.

One door down from Central Towers is the stage door to the Fitzgerald Theater, and the entrance for actors and musicians who bring the make-believe land of Lake Wobegon to life on Saturday nights. Can you see the church crossing over to reach out to those people?

And then there are the people who live in the all too real world served by Union Gospel Mission and who live in the temporary housing provided by Naomi Place behind our parking lot. They live in the real world with the real world challenges of raising children and trying to find jobs and get back on their feet. Can you envision the church crossing over our parking lot to reach out?

We have a lot of long-time members who are not as mobile as they once were. Some are now home-bound, unable to join us physically here in worship. We remember them in our prayers and bring flowers to them on Easter and at Christmas. But can you dream of a church that finds ways to visit and stay in touch as a regular part of a caring community? Can we make that crossing?

And there are so many people moving into downtown. Young adults in their first apartment. People right now at the Farmers’ Market. Artists living at the Rossmoor. Empty

nesters downsizing and excited to explore the city. Can we reach out to people new to downtown? Can we make that crossing?

On this Mother's Day, a lot of us will be in contact with our mothers and with those who have served to nurture us along the way. I hope also that we remember the founding purpose of this holiday – it wasn't originally intended to simply be what I call a "Hallmark holiday." In the aftermath of the Civil War that had split families apart, and set brother against brother, Mother's Day was created to mobilize mothers to speak out for peace, knowing that mothers are some of the first people to empathize with the pain of children everywhere. Maybe this story of a Macedonian man from a far-off shore pleading with Paul to come and help will inspire us to reach across the boundaries marking our world and get involved in peacemaking efforts.

Maybe you have had someone in mind recently. Someone with whom you had a disagreement that was never quite resolved. Or a close friend who moved away and you find it harder and harder to stay in touch. Maybe this story is meant to make you remember that person and take the initiative and cross over and reconnect again. Why don't you take this opportunity today to reach out and make contact?

As the church was just beginning to grow, Paul had a dream. A dream of a man across the sea, a man from Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And immediately, Acts tells us, Paul and his fellow missionaries tried to cross over to Macedonia, convinced, Acts says "that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them" (Acts 16:9-10). Maybe God is calling us to cross over to a new Macedonia today. Amen.

¹ James Washington, ed. A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986) 219.

² Jonathan Alter sets the scene for a new book on FDR's leadership, The Defining Moment (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006) 1-2.