

"Dreams and Visions"

A sermon preached by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC
10:55 a.m. Sunday, August 27, 2006

Text: Isaiah 43:14-21 Acts 2:14-21 NRSV

Opening prayer: O God, through the words of Scripture and my words, help us to hear your Word for us today. Amen.

PENTECOSTAL POWER

During the last half of the 19th century, Bishop Milton Wright paid a visit to a small, midwestern religious college. He stayed at the home of the college president, who also served as professor of physics and chemistry. After dinner, the bishop declared that Jesus' return couldn't be far off, because just about everything about nature had been discovered and all inventions conceived.

The young college president politely disagreed. He said that he felt that there would be many more discoveries. When the angered bishop challenged the president to name just one such invention, the president replied that he was certain that within 50 years, men would be able to fly.

"Nonsense!" sputtered the outraged bishop. "Only angels are intended to fly." Bishop Wright had two sons at home who would prove to have greater vision than their father. Does anybody have an ideas what their names were? Their names were Orville and Wilbur. When they grew up, they went out to Kill Devil Hills on the Outer Banks of North Carolina and flew

the first heavier-than-air airplane.

Dreams and visions are a part of God's plan for his people. The Holy Spirit empowers us to dream dreams and to fulfill God's vision for His Church.

Our God is a God of good news, of wonderful possibilities. We read in Isaiah that something exciting is about to happen. This is not the same, old, tired news. This is not what we read in the newspaper. God doesn't say, "You should, you ought to, you must . . ." God says, "I am doing a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?" (43:19) God is moving in our world.

In Isaiah's time, God was about to redeem Israel from the Babylonian captivity and restore the Hebrew people to Palestine. In our time, God's Spirit is also moving. God speaks to the Hebrews through Isaiah, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old." (43:18) Can you hear the Hebrew people saying, "We've never done that before. We can't do that!" God is telling them – and us – to not let the past limit us. God is doing a new thing.

On the day of Pentecost, God was moving. The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples of Jesus with the sound of a rushing wind and with tongues of fire. They began to speak in other languages. The Jews in Jerusalem didn't understand what was happening. Peter stood before them and explained, "This is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my 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 dreams.'" (Acts 2:16-17)

Peter later declared that life in Christ is God's will for his people and all creation. It is God's desire that all people have a relationship of faith with his Son, Jesus Christ. That is the way to eternal life.

The Holy Spirit empowered the Church on Pentecost, and what a difference it made! Before there were 120 obedient people, waiting and praying in an upper room in Jerusalem. By the end of that day, 3,000 people -- gathered in Jerusalem from all over the known world -- were converted to faith in Christ.

CLAIMING GOD'S VISION

They were following God's vision. Believers in the early Church were seeing visions and dreaming dreams. For 2,000 years, Christians have been seeing visions and dreaming dreams. It continues today.

A vision of what can happen starts with a dream. In 1954 the Rev. C. Ralph Arthur was appointed to be the President of Ferrum Junior College in Ferrum, Virginia. The Annual Conference told him to bury Ferrum College or to resurrect it. At that time the college consisted of 6 dilapidated academic buildings, a few faculty houses, several hundred acres of beautiful land in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and approximately 100 students.

Ralph Arthur was a man with a vision. He never gave a moment's thought to burying that struggling college.

In 1958 C. P. Minnick was appointed to serve as Chaplain and Professor of Bible at Ferrum College. One evening during his first week there, President Arthur invited him and his wife to dinner at the president's home. After supper the President invited him to walk with him outside in order that he might share with him his dreams for the future of Ferrum College.

As they stood in front of the president's home, he pointed to his left where a little private road intersected Highway 40. He said, "There will be the main entrance to the new campus. Right here at the entrance there will be a new chapel and bell tower. Standing here at the main entrance, this building will say to all who pass by that Ferrum College is an institution of

Christian higher education." He turned slightly to his right and pointed across a narrow valley to the hill beyond, where cows were grazing in a pasture. He said, "On that hill will be two dormitories, one for men and one for women. Between us and those dormitories in the valley there will be a beautiful reflecting lake."

He turned a bit further to the right and said, "There will be the student union building. Behind the student union building will be another dormitory complex. Between where we are now standing and the student union will be the new library and a new science/agriculture building." Continuing to the right, "Over there will be our new physical education building. On that hillside, where you see those cows now grazing, will be 40 to 50 new faculty homes."

Minnick stood quietly and listened as Arthur spoke, but he thought to himself, "This man is a foolish dreamer. Never will all of this happen here. The people of the Virginia Annual Conference will not give enough money and other support for him to make this dream a reality."

In 1970 Minnick returned to Ferrum College for the memorial service for Ralph Arthur, who had died at the age of 52, an untimely death from cancer. Following the memorial service, which was held in the new chapel at the entrance to the beautiful campus of Ferrum College, Minnick stood beside the bell tower in which Arthur's body had just been buried. He stood there and remembered that evening 12 years ago when President Arthur had shared his vision. It was all there, just as he had dreamed. There were the new dormitories, the beautiful reflecting lake, the science/agriculture building, the new library, the new student union, the new physical education building, and the complex of beautiful faculty houses in the former cow pasture.

There were now over 1,200 students enrolled. How did it happen? It happened because one man had a vision, and he refused to let that vision go until it became a reality.

DREAMING TODAY

Our church has had some visions in the past that have been realized. Over 50 years ago, a group of people had a vision for a weekday preschool at our church. Forty years ago the education building was constructed. Then that preschool and kindergarten could expand into the building. Duke Memorial Weekday School is now the premier program in this area. Others had a vision for an expanded Sunday School program for children, youth and adults. That vision became a reality.

35 years ago another group of people had a vision of becoming partners with the Durham Council of Senior Citizens. It was a vision of hosting an adult day care program for memory-impaired senior adults on the ground floor of this building. That dream became a reality. What a great blessing it was to countless numbers of adults and their families!

In June that group moved into a brand-new building on Rigsbee Avenue. People in our church had a dream of that space being transformed into a Soul Café and a revamped youth ministry suite. The dream is for a place where people can gather in a relaxed, coffeehouse atmosphere, a place where people can experience love and support. The dream is for it to become a community center, to become another port of entry for people to experience the ministry of our church and God's love for them.

Do you know how difficult it can be to be a Christian in middle school or high school today? Part of the dream is for a place where youth can feel loved and supported, where they can be strengthened for living as Jesus' disciples.

That vision is coming true. All summer people have worked to transform that space on the ground floor of the sanctuary.

God's people continue to dream today. Our Stephen Ministry provides care receivers with a regular visit or contact from a caring, spiritual friend. People who are going through

challenging times receive love and care and a sense of hope for their lives. They are not alone in their pain, or grief, or sadness, or whatever the need may be. I dream of a strengthened Stephen Ministry. We began to train another class of Stephen Ministers yesterday.

When Jill Newsome moved here last year, she had a dream for a Kindermusik program. It began, and now it is growing and expanding. I dream of an expanded music ministry for our church, for it to grow from strength to strength. What a great blessing it is already! Jill is dreaming and planning now for a brass and percussion instrumental ensemble, and a string and woodwind ensemble.

I dream of a prayer ministry for this church where dedicated people are praying for various needs 7 days a week. Prayer changes us. Prayer helps us overcome the challenges of life. Prayer empowers us to follow God's will.

I have a vision of a strengthened Sunday School ministry. Children, faces eager with excitement, run to the outstretched arms of their teachers. Youth, laughing and joking, catch up on the latest news, and are empowered to follow Christ. Adults affectionately greet each other. They inquire about mutual concerns. Strangers are immediately identified. They are introduced and taken to warm and welcoming classes. Can you see it?

I dream of an invitational church - a church where people intentionally invite friends, relatives, co-workers and neighbors to join them for worship.

I see people of all ages streaming into this sanctuary for worship, for a "mountaintop" experience. There is spirited singing. There is great choral and instrumental music. There are quiet moments for reflection and prayer when God seems closer than breathing, nearer than hands and feet. I feel the inspiration and revelation that come when God's Word is read and proclaimed. Can you feel it? There is a sense of identity with the needs of the entire world as

your offering is received and the plates, filled to overflowing, are lifted high before the altartable as we sing, “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow. . . .” I see new people being baptized and received into membership. People come to faith in Jesus Christ, and it blesses their lives now and for eternity.

We have many more dreams. Can you sense their power? Can you sense the joy of dreaming God's dream?

Joel Arthur Barker once said, "Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision merely passes the time. Vision with action can change the world."

Vision without action is merely a dream. You've heard people tell you before, “That’s a nice idea.” If you don’t ever do anything about it, it will never happen. Action without vision merely passes the time. It is doing a lot of work without having a plan. You’ve been there, haven’t you? It is spinning our wheels. It is digging a deeper hole. But listen: “Vision with action can change the world.”

The vision for Duke Memorial United Methodist Church is coming. We will present the proposed vision and mission for our church from the Vision Team in worship on September 10. That is a day to make every effort to come to worship.

Fulfilling God’s vision for us will also require action. The action is investing. I use that word deliberately because investing produces dividends. The dividends that I’m talking about have eternal significance. When we invest in the church, people can experience hope for their lives. People can experience a sense of community and love. Beyond that, people are saved for an eternity with the Lord.

The Holy Spirit empowers us to dream dreams and to fulfill God’s vision for our church.

You and I can be a part of that – in this church. Thanks be to God. Let us pray . . .