

“The Power of a Vision”
Acts 11:1-18
© Stacey Steck
Preached June 29, 2008 at San José, Costa Rica

If a vision passes by a rooftop, and there is no one there to see it, do its images still move? What happens to a vision if the audience has already gone home? If you are God, do you put it out there even if no one is watching, like projecting a film in an empty movie theatre, hoping someone will show up late? Does a vision get handed on to someone else if the original audience misses it? Or does it just go away? If first Cornelius, and later Peter, had not been situated where they were to hear and see God’s messages and messengers, and had not responded appropriately, would God have chosen some other, more cooperative fellows to convince the larger church to accept Gentiles, or would all we non-Jews have simply been left out of the divine equation? Have you had enough rhetorical questions for one evening?

Thankfully, Cornelius and Peter were in the right place at the right time, and in the right posture and right disposition to both receive and act on the visions God sent them. But the story does beg the question of what if, as in what if lunch had been served on time, and he had not been up on that rooftop praying? How much cooperation does God really need from us to get a message across? Will all our efforts at vision discernment be in vain if we forget to pray on the day God plans to reveal something?

Perhaps these questions will get answered in the course of taking a look at what happened in Jerusalem that day. Tonight's passage is the conclusion of a longer story. As we heard, Peter has just had an amazing experience, in which God reveals to him that what was formerly profane, off limits, and "other," was now sacred, acceptable, and welcome. The core of the faithful, "the apostles and the believers who were in Judea," get wind of Peter's experience with Cornelius, a Roman centurion, a Gentile described as "a devout man who feared God with all his household," whom God decides should meet with Peter. And so they summon Peter before them so that he may defend himself and his sacrilegious actions. "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" they accuse, fearing perhaps that Peter's behavior might bring down upon them the wrath of God. After all, God has been known to demand the purity of the community, and here is Peter, a leader in the community, transgressing some pretty clear boundaries.

And so Peter relates his story, "step by step" it says, and tells them of the vision he has had, in which God shows Peter that the salvation of the Gentiles is part of the plan, a fact which Peter tells Cornelius when he says, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." And as Peter goes on to preach the word of God, a quite amazing thing happens and the gift of the Holy Spirit falls upon all who heard Peter that day, and Peter knows it is the Holy Spirit on this Pentecost of the Gentiles, because these Gentiles exhibit the same behavior as

Peter and his crew did on the Pentecost of Acts, chapter 2, with speaking in tongues and extolling God, and all those other Pentecostal things which scare the hell out of mainline denominationalists. And so Peter orders that these Gentiles be taken to the river and plunged into the water, not to drown them but to baptize them in the name of Jesus Christ. This is the story Peter brings to his suspicious companions back in Jerusalem. And “when they heard this, they were silenced,” what we might call dumbfounded and ashamed, yet they praise God, saying, ‘God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.’ ” The stage is now set for the Apostle Paul’s mission to the Gentiles, which is accounted in the rest of the Book of Acts, for God has made it abundantly clear that Jesus Christ was sent for *all* people, not just those of the house of Israel.

Of course, the significance of the Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit simply cannot be overemphasized, not only because it empowered these Gentiles for a life of faith in Jesus Christ, but also because it was a clear confirmation of Peter’s interpretation of the vision he saw while in his trance and because it was an undeniable manifestation of God’s presence on a people who had been kept at arm’s distance. With this knowledge, the leaders of the church had no more justification for demanding separation, and to their credit, readily embraced those whom God had declared clean. One wonders, however, if they would have believed Peter’s interpretation of the vision, without the tangible proof. But like those other rhetorical questions I offered earlier, perhaps that is a question better

left unasked, lest its answer remind us too much of our own inability to believe without proof what God is trying to tell us.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that God revealed a certain truth to Peter in a vision and Peter was able to discern what God was telling him. In Peter's vision was God's vision. In Peter's mind's eye was the mind of God. In Peter's mental picture was God's bigger picture. It is important not to confuse these two uses of the word "vision." On the rooftop in the city of Joppa, Peter "saw" something, as prophet, seers, and dreamers see things. What God has in mind for the world, the culmination of the master plan, if you will, is what we can call God's vision.

Abundant life, the year of the Lord's favor, the reign of God, the fulfillment of prophecies that the lion will lie down with the lamb, that mountains will be leveled and valleys filled in, that there will be no more suffering, no more hunger, no more war, this is the stuff of God's vision. Both kinds of vision have power, and one helps reveal the other, but they are not the same thing. That is why it is important not to get stuck on the one and lose sight of the other.

The power of a vision such as Peter had is that it stirs the imagination and upsets our spiritual applecart. Peter's vision caused him to question a great deal of what he had been taught and what he believed. What do you mean eat non-kosher food? What do you mean enter a Gentile's house? What do you mean, give over the keys to the kingdom to these johnny-come-lately Gentiles? Such visions help us to see truths which are clearly not self-evident. They also get us in trouble if

we're not careful. Even though many a recipient of a vision has wound up in a state hospital for the criminally insane for sharing their visions out loud, I'm still inclined to believe that visions are God's gifts to us, helping us to see more clearly God's vision for the world. Such was the case for Peter.

The power of a vision such as God has for the world is that it gives us our identity and our calling, something to work toward, something to rally around. That's because God calls us to participate in realizing the vision, as Peter did when he went to the house of Cornelius as shared the gospel story with those assembled there. Peter's faithfulness to God's call and claim on him made strangers friends, brought enemies together, released the Holy Spirit on still more of God's children. The power of God's vision overcomes the fear of God's people. The power of God's vision allows us to be open to God even when God asks us to do something that seems completely contrary to what God seems to have been telling us all along. That's what we see in today's story.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, today's story is one whose relevance is not limited to the first century. Indeed, the church has always faced the power of God's vision of obliterating boundaries between us and them, between same and other. God has always challenged the church to open its doors and arms and hearts to those who are new to God's word, even when the church wants to keep its doors shut, its arms folded, and its heart hardened. The truth is that the church does not belong to us, it belongs to God, and we would do well to reflect on Peter's sage

words, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” You see, there will always be the “other,” whom God’s vision includes even if they are not on *our* radar. The “other” will be new people moving into the community who do not look or act like us, they will be people who have never heard the story of Jesus Christ and don’t have the same vocabulary of faith, they will be people whose motivations for involvement and giving will not be the same as ours and whose taste in music may not be the same as ours, and yet, and yet, as God has always done, I suspect God will lead these people to the doors of this very church and pose the question Christ asked of Peter, “Do you love me?” And we will reply, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” “Feed my sheep.” And when we don’t leap into action, when we don’t get it, Christ will ask us again and again, and maybe by the third time, we will be able to “truly understand that God shows no partiality,” and that neither should we.

But even more specifically, this passage is timely for us because we need to discern God’s vision for this church, in this community, in this generation. Without a vision the people will perish, it says in Proverbs. The vision given to Peter was powerful enough that it overcame the skepticism of the apostles and allowed them to embrace the rest of the world. But the even more powerful vision is the vision God has of what the world should be, a portion of which God gave to Peter in his trance, and a portion of which God is in the process of giving to this church. The

vision we will receive will be consistent with God's vision, but it will be the part that is unique to us, it will be the special calling of this particular body of the people of God. Our mission is clear: to be the heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ in Costa Rica's English-speaking community, but our vision is still murky. For what purpose, to what destination, are our energies to be focused? What part of realizing God's vision is God calling us to undertake and what shape will it take? What is God's vision for the use of our gifts and strengths?

Going back to the very beginning of this story, we find Peter on the rooftop of the house of Simon the tanner in the city of Joppa. And what is Peter doing there? Well, he's praying. You see, he had become hungry and the microwave was broken so the food was taking a little longer to prepare, so long in fact that as he was praying he fell into a trance, and during that trance, he received the vision which we are still discussing today. Let me suggest to you God is calling us to the rooftop for a season of prayer, to adopt the same posture from which Peter received his vision, the posture of prayer, yea, even prayer unto a trance. Friends, I urge you to spend time praying that God will reveal to this congregation just where God wants us to go, and for that matter what God wants each of us to do in our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. Pray hard, pray urgently, pray on the rooftop, pray in your cubicle, pray before you fall asleep, and pray the first thing in the morning. But just pray, pray that the power of God's vision will be put to work in the hearts, hands, and voices of this humble church. Amen.