

A Dream or a Nightmare?
A Sermon on Acts 2:1-21
Pentecost Sunday
May 31, 2020

Introduction

Luke describes his dream to us in this story. Jesus has ascended to heaven. He is sitting at the right hand of God. Today's text is the story of how the power that animated Jesus during his ministry was given to the church. It is also the story of how in the last days there will be universal salvation: all people will be prophets, all people will be vessels through whom God speaks.

I will take you through the Pentecost story. Then CeCe Jones-Davis and I will enter into dialogue and discuss whether this is a dream that people still believe in today. I want to thank CeCe for coming today to share her thoughts. This is her first public appearance since her thyroid surgery in March. She is particularly vulnerable to the virus, and she took some risk by coming here today. Thank you, CeCe.

First Move: Luke's Dream

The story is set in Jerusalem during a religious festival. Luke is emphasizing that the audience is Jewish and that it represents all the people of the city.

The Jews observe the Festival of Weeks immediately after Passover. It lasts for seven weeks. Greek-speaking Jews called it Pentecost, which means 50 days. It is rooted in the cycles of nature. It begins with the harvesting of barley and it ends seven weeks later with the harvesting of wheat. It is a time of gladness. The people give thanks to God for bringing the rainy season and causing the crops to grow. The first fruits of the crops are offered to God. The people keep the rest for themselves.

Luke uses eschatological language. He says, "When the day of Pentecost is fulfilled." This means that the Festival is coming to its conclusion; it is about to reach its climax.

The miracle of Pentecost is described in the first four verses. The disciples are all together in one place. They are praying for God to send them the Spirit. Then God makes a dramatic appearance.

Luke strains for metaphors to describe the presence of God. Suddenly out of the heaven a sound *like* a strong wind fills the whole house where they were sitting. It is the sound that fills the house not wind. Then there appeared to them divided

tongues *as if* fire, and a tongue rested on each of them. Fire was a way of purifying things. The prophet Isaiah said that he was a man of unclean lips, so an angel touched a coal to his lips to purify them. The fire purifies what the disciples will say. Fire also is a symbol of judgment. It shows that the disciples will have the power to bind and loose sins. The tongues of fire signify that the disciples have been appointed as prophets to tell about Christ and his deeds of power and to forgive sins of those who repent and turn to Christ.

The Spirit gives the disciples the gift of bold speech. The tongues filled each of the disciples with the Holy Spirit and caused them to speak out boldly in different languages.

Then the focus of the story shifts to the crowd's reaction to the gift of bold speech. The crowd consists entirely of Judeans. They come from all parts of the Roman Empire, and they have returned to live in Jerusalem.

There are two different reactions to the speaking in different languages. Some are amazed and marvel at it. But they dismiss it because everyone who is speaking in different languages is from Galilee. "Are not all who are speaking Galileans?" Galilee was the rural backwater of Israel. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

Another reaction was even more skeptical. They mocked the speakers. "They have been filled with sweet new wine."

The crowd doesn't know how to interpret this dramatic event. The Spirit gives the disciples the ability to understand Scripture. Their eyes have been opened, as in the Emmaus story.

Peter stands and gives the first Christian sermon. He interprets the events through the lens of the gospel, which is what all preachers try to do.

Peter lifts his voice and speaks out boldly. Just 50 days earlier Peter was outside the high priest's house and had refused to admit to a slave girl that he knew Jesus. The Spirit has breathed new life into a once cowardly disciple and given him the gift of bold speech.

Peter responds to the taunts of the crowd. "These are not drunk as you suppose. They are fulfilling prophecy that was spoken through the prophet Joel.

Luke again uses eschatological language. Instead of beginning, "after these things," which is how the scripture in Joel reads, Luke's sermon for Peter begins, "And it will be in the last days." This is a sign that the present evil age is ending and that the new age is coming. God says that in the new age I will pour out from my spirit on all flesh.

"Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams." Sometimes we reduce prophecy to

predicting the future. In the Old Testament, prophecy means to speak for God. The prophet was a mouthpiece for God. He delivered God's judgment to the people. Prophets pointed out the sins of the people in neglecting God's ways, in taking advantage of the poor instead of caring for them. Prophets were rare, but when the new age comes, everyone will prophesy, sons and daughters, young men and old men. All people will turn to God.

It is an image of universal salvation. God says, "I will pour out from my spirit, even on my male slaves and my female slaves." Men and women, even slaves, will prophesy. Everyone who calls on God will be saved. Being saved in the Gospel of Luke means that people will turn from their selfish ways and experience the new age, the kingdom of God.

The scripture from Joel also has words of judgement, but Luke omits them. He wants to focus on redemption.

We only hear the first third of Peter's sermon in today's Scripture. Peter goes on to proclaim that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a sign that the new age has come. The people in the city respond to Peter's bold speech. At the end of the sermon, 3,000 Judeans are baptized.

Second Move: CeCe's Nightmare

It is a beautiful dream. It is a dream not just for the church but for the whole society. Luke says that a multitude had gathered. Josephus calls it an assembly, which is a secular word for the government of the city, similar to what we think of as a town hall. The Greek word, ἐκκλησία is translated in the New Testament as *church*, but in secular Greek it means *assembly*. It is the people of a city coming together to govern themselves. Luke's vision is that all people in the assembly, male and female, young and old, slave and free, will be filled with the Spirit. All people in the city will recognize God's presence in all the different groups of people in the city. All people in the city will respect each other and listen to each other.

Are we any closer to that vision today, or is it just happy talk? James Cone, one of the founders of black liberation theology, compared the very different visions of America that Martin Luther King and Malcolm X had. We all know about Dr. King's dream. We hear tapes of it every year on his birthday in January.

Malcolm X had a different perspective. Here is what Malcolm X said in a Methodist church in Cleveland in 1964:

No, I'm not an American. I'm one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism. One of the . . . victims of democracy,

nothing but disguised hypocrisy. So, I'm not standing here speaking to you as an American, or a patriot, or a flag-saluter, or a flag-waver—no, not I! I'm speaking as a victim of this American system. And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare!

Cece, what do you see? Dream, or nightmare, or both?
Listen to the podcast for CeCe's response.

Third Move: Our Dream

Listen to the podcast for a dialogue between CeCE and Don. The following are remarks that Don prepared beforehand:

Police shootings of black men are one way that racism manifests itself today. Another is mass incarceration.

Police reforms are not enough. Criminal-justice reforms are not enough. Abolishing the death penalty is not enough. As Michelle Alexander writes in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, the underlying racism is still in people's hearts and minds. It will simply morph into another institution. It began as slavery, then after the Civil War, it mutated into black codes, which restricted freedom of movement for African Americans and compelled them to work for sharecropper wages. Then it mutated again into poll taxes that took away the right of African Americans to vote and Jim Crow laws that legalized segregation and inequality. After the Civil Rights movement did away with Jim Crow in the 1960s, it mutated again into a campaign for Law and Order and a War on Drugs. The result was mass incarceration.

African Americans are not the only targets of racism. Latinos, Muslims, and Asian Americans have all been victims of racism. It may not be constructive to continue to call it racism. People get defensive and stop listening when they are accused of racism. I would call it dehumanization. We dehumanize the other and treat him or her as a thing instead of a person. They need to be controlled and kept in their place, out of white people's space.

Michelle Alexander believes it is not so much hatred of the other, as simply not caring about the other. We don't care that they suffer. We rationalize that they brought it on themselves. Martin Luther King recognized this. He saw that blindness and indifference to racial groups contribute more than racial hostility to the creation

and maintenance of racial caste systems. It is indifference to the plight of other races that supports Jim Crow and mass incarceration.

We have laws and constitutional amendments against racism. That is not enough. I believe that the great challenge is to change people's hearts and minds. Maybe that will take two or more generations of people dying off and being replaced by young people who don't share their prejudices. The Bible holds out hope that people can repent.

America is more violent than any other Western democracy. I would say that violence is our original sin; racism is part of that violence. I believe that my call to ministry is to mainstream nonviolence. How's that for an impossible dream? To rid our society of violence, or at least to reduce the level of violence in our society. There is no quick fix. It is the work of several lifetimes.

Conclusion

We feel sadness at the tragic death of George Floyd. We grieve for him. We can listen to our black brothers and sisters as they express their pain; the loss is much more immediate to them.

Luke's vision and Dr. King's dream are different images for the kingdom of God. It is not happy talk. It is the driving force in our lives. It is the good society, the Beloved Community that always lies beyond us, like the horizon. We can approach it, but we never reach it. Our challenge is to be moving toward it.

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