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16:9-15**

Acts

THE GOOD NEWS

My wife used to tell me her dreams in the morning as we were getting ready for work. This was before we had kids when we could actually talk to one another in the morning beyond phrases like, “Have you seen Alec’s shoes?” or “Who is picking them up from school today?” She used to remember her dreams so vividly, perhaps she still does but I don’t know about it anymore because of the aforementioned morning ritual changes.

One morning she recounted a rather vivid dream about a family member in a crisis situation, which seemed so outlandish and yet so realistically portrayed – none of the usual elements of dreams like flying elephants, we both just counted it as weird and moved on. Then, about a week later that very same scenario came true, almost exactly how the dream had portrayed it with just a few details different. Then that happened again, and again...and pretty soon I did not want to hear her dreams anymore.

Maybe this was just Kathy’s subconscious putting together pieces of existing information and drawing reasonable conclusions that we weren’t seeing consciously. Or maybe these were communications from God via some action of the Holy Spirit. As far as I know, Kathy’s dreams don’t really happen anymore but we did begin to establish a bit of trust in them and maybe even a little fear as well. Visitations from the Holy Spirit aren’t always good news, and the dreams weren’t either. Getting that kind of information, especially with a growing track record of accuracy, can be quite unsettling. I don’t really remember my dreams most of the time and when I do they seem more like Lewis Carroll novels than communications from the Holy Spirit, but I do believe that God interacts with us in much more subtle ways than we are taught to expect.

Having just finished the series on Revelation I hope you have learned that the first century in the Roman Empire was a time in which people had a much closer connection to dreams and the contact of the so-called “spirit world” than we may appreciate today. This kind of contact

figures into both the book of Revelation and this reading from Acts in which Paul has a vision and the whole evangelical operation he is leading appears to be driven by communication with the Holy Spirit. Now I will be the first to say that Acts is written *about* Paul and not by him, so you cannot always trust what is being claimed about Paul from the book of Acts. Still, Paul's letters are abundantly full of references to visions and the action of the Holy Spirit.

But I wonder how we view this today? Do Paul's visionary encounters make us think of wise sages engaging with the Spirit or do they make us think of Pat Robertson or Oral Roberts receiving the "word of God" that so conveniently resonates with the very things that benefit them? How do we contend with visions or spiritual encounters like these today? Do we believe that people can actually talk with God or receive instruction from the Holy Spirit? And if so, how does that get evaluated? I can't believe that any Holy Spirit I would have faith in could give Pat Robertson any of the ridiculous assertions that he claims. Even more extreme would be a man like John Yettaw, a Gulf war vet who recently helped keep the Burmese Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Ky in house arrest. Claiming a "message from God", Yettaw swam two miles across a lagoon to Suu Ky's home in order to warn her of impending danger. Likewise the Bible is full of "messages from God" commanding wars, destruction and genocide...so how do we distinguish between messages from God and either mental issues or self-serving justifications?

I happen to believe that we can still communicate with God, and this usually happens in very trans-rational ways that are often hard to judge. One way that I believe that we judge such encounters with the Holy Spirit is by measuring them to the Gospel. Now, I don't mean the gospel as one of the four books ascribed to these authors from the first century...I don't mean that they have to match up to the narrative of Jesus' life, at least superficially. I mean that they must be the gospel...and this requires a little linguistic information.

The word in Greek that is translated as gospel is *euangelion* (euu-ang-elyon) which literally means "good news" but is a contextual word employed by messengers to announce to a ruler that his armies had won a battle. It usually came with a reward – political good news and a reward to the deliverer for that news.

But Jesus didn't speak Greek and most likely wasn't literate so he didn't read or write it either. He spoke Aramaic. And in Aramaic, the word for gospel is *sevartha*, which means "hope". There is no reward, no contextual metaphor that accompanies the word, it just means hope. And that's the gospel I'm talking about – I believe that we can measure our communications from God with the plumb line of hope.

Looking at Jesus' message as deliverance not of victory and reward but of simple hope changes things immensely. If we go with the Aramaic, then when we say that we are all about the gospel, then we are all about hope – hope beyond all things...suffering, death, government, institution, even religion. Hope becomes our primary driver, but not just blind hope...the kind of hope that recognizes brokenness but sees wholeness and that lives in the embrace of what could be...the

new creation that lies at the heart of not only Revelation but also the visions of Paul the Apostle. Hope is not always a shining beacon on a hill, sometimes it can come in the form of tough choices that will require great sacrifice or change from us. But the gospel hope is willing to roll up its sleeves and look at something beyond only what it can see. Hope is the choice we make each and every day and with each situation. Christopher Reeve, a man who clearly needed hope if anyone did, said, "Once you choose hope, anything's possible."

Choosing hope in that way needs nourishment and renewal, because it is hard work. It requires rejuvenation from the community around you and some sort of internal source – the source that I call God. Listening for the still, small voice of hope takes some skill at discernment, for you hear many messages these days from a zillion different directions...some of them are hopeful, most of them are not, and some of them are wrapped in a kind of hope, maybe even presented as the voice of God, but contain only fear or hatred. Learning to discern our way through the maze of messages involves knowing what hope looks and feels like and trusting ourselves and God enough to follow that pull – sometimes with little more to guide us than intuition. Choosing hope means that we cannot always be safe – it requires us to re-define, to re-interpret and to cross boundaries.

This was, in many ways, the whole of Paul's ministry. He shifted everything in his life after hearing the gospel and began to walk a whole new path. And this path was not known. Throughout Acts and the letters of Paul he is a wanderer...moving where the Spirit directs him...and it often directs him to places he doesn't want to go or is not supposed to go. Paul begins his ministry by crossing a huge boundary – from the most ardent persecutor of the Jesus movement to a firm believer in this new expression of God's unconditional love. Then he proceeds on a mission of border crossings – literal and figurative, speaking to those who are "outside" the normal boundaries of religion and venturing to places far away from what Paul knew as normal. He does all of this by being able to discern God's call in his life – and at least part of that measurement for Paul is that God's call asks him to hope his way across boundaries.

We might spend some time thinking about the spiritual practice of discernment, and the question of how we know that God is leading us in new and unexpected ways. Paul may have thought he needed to go to Asia, but "the Spirit of Jesus" said no. He may have packed all his things and had his itinerary all worked out, but the Spirit of Jesus closed the door on that plan. Don't we wonder how Paul felt, with his plans frustrated? How did he feel about all those travels just to end up outside the city gate with only a bunch of women to listen to him? How do we know what God wants us to do, and where God wants us to go, and with whom God wants us to work? And when we get to where we're going, what surprises wait for us?

For Paul surprises abound, starting with the locale. He is venturing into the far northern regions of the Roman Empire, what we today would call Europe. He is called by this vision of a man, but what he finds when he gets there is a woman. And once again we see the Bible presenting a woman as the ideal for behavior. Often these women are edited out of texts or reduced in some

fashion but they are still there. In the gospels it is often the women who understand Jesus much more profoundly than the male disciples and in Paul's letters he frequently praises women as leaders of the church and invaluable to his cause. But still in some letters of Paul, ones that many scholars think are written in his name rather than by his hand, there is a clear reduction of the role of women. How can Paul say both that in Christ there is no slave or free, no Jew or Greek and no male or female and also that women should be silent in church? Perhaps because as often as God calls us to cross borders we tend to redraw them, especially when those who are telling the stories have a vested interest in not following the challenge of hope that the gospel lays out before them.

Still Paul and his companion Silas encounter this woman Lydia, who seems an unlikely candidate to be their first convert in this faraway land. Commentators throughout the ages have been confused and challenged by Lydia – is she married, does she bring her whole family to be baptized, is she a former slave – the simplicity of her description in the text leaves many unanswered questions. Yet, oddly, she is one of the more detailed women in the New Testament. We know where she lives, her name (a really big deal in those times), her occupation, even something of her faith life and character. This is remarkable given that we know only this much about Mary, the mother of Jesus.

What is also remarkable, and a little “hidden” by this lectionary selection, is that Lydia not only frames this part of Paul's ministry – she absolutely defines it. Paul is bringing the gospel to the margins. These are not only women; they are worshipping outside the gates of the city, near a river. They are on the far edges of that society. Paul is disregarding the Pharisaic prohibitions against talking with women he does not know and he is going to them and counting them as worthy – an astonishing, hope-filled thing in his context. And once again Lydia operates like a lot of other women in the Bible – her story is marginalized, but her faithful response sticks out like a sore thumb...it cannot be ignored.

I think that there is a reason for Lydia's presence in this story just as I think that there is a reason that women can get reduced but never eliminated from the Biblical narrative. It is not stated if Lydia is a mother; it only says in the text that she and her entire household were baptized. But I happen to think that she was. Why? Because she shows that sense of intuition that mothers seem to have. Part of that comes from growing eyes in the back of your head, but another part comes from caring for a defenseless life for nine months and then for many years afterwards. It is not the only way to gain this kind of intuition, but mothering (and parenting in general) places you squarely against your own values and beliefs like no other thing can. It tests your endurance, your compassion, your grace, your sense of fairness and pushes you to ask questions of yourself that you might never ask otherwise.

Motherhood, in all of its forms, is an exercise in hope. From hoping that the first fever breaks to hoping that high school doesn't completely destroy your child, parenting and mothering force us

to decide if we will be hopeful or cynical. And at least for me my best times with parenting have come when I have let go enough to be hopeful and not require a blueprint.

Lydia is already, the text says, a “worshiper of God”, so maybe she’s already open to hearing wisdom from external sources and submitting to it. All of the mothers I have ever known, each in their own way, have surrendered in some fashion to love. They don’t need to rationalize it or explain it; they are able to simply have it be. Faced with the chance to be cynical or hopeful, they have (on average) chosen hope. This is why I think that Lydia was a mother, because she responds so fully to the good news – to the hope that Paul preaches to her. She understands that kind of hope – the kind of hope that brings her outside the city gates to worship, most likely because it was the only place left for her marginalized group. It is also why I think that women can be diminished by prejudice and oppression but never fully eliminated from the narrative...because they so often represent the very kind of hope that is the gospel. They so often preach to the preacher – just as Lydia did to Paul – living out gospel hope in a world driven by competition and greed.

It’s why we need to hear the stories of women – in the bible, in our history, in our theology. We need to Marys and the Marthas – with their dedication and action, their faith and their determination. Perhaps what is needed more in the church is more of that mothering love. Perhaps such love could reignite in the church a spirit of hope, a spirit that reminds us to open our hearts and minds to God at work in our lives in the most dramatic and unexpected ways, ways that might forever change us, even to the point of providing hospitality to foreigners or those most marginalized among us. Perhaps what we need to do is love more and judge less, to hope more and fear less, to dream more and justify less. Perhaps the church could be the church again if it would, like Lydia did when she encountered the wandering stranger, listen with open hearts and then insist that they stay for dinner. That might be the best way to be Christian in the world and, coincidentally, the best way to celebrate Mother’s Day too.

AMEN