

## "Dream Big"

One of the most famous speeches from American history includes the words "I have a dream." Delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in August of 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at the height of the Civil Rights movement in America. The words that everyone remembers best are these: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

Since I was not yet four when this speech was given, I decided to reread it in its entirety this week as I began thinking about dreams in connection to the recent event that our Youth attended. The theme was "Come Dream With Us". I pondered my dreams for God's ministry with me as His vessel, God's dreams for his children in today's world and our collective dreams for the church home that we call Nazareth Presbyterian.

I suppose it is because I had just read the entire book of Joel and also because I have been so troubled by the climate in our nation today that my heart was captured when I read the words from Dr. King: "We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back." Friends that is a big dream!

In many ways, I feel our nation has turned back – and not just because of people's reactions to the last election, but for a while now. And I wonder if that is what the prophet Joel was worried about when he wrote his words of judgement *and* hope to the people in and around Jerusalem. They had just returned from Exile in Babylon. Maybe he needed to remind them and us that, while the past makes us who we are, if we really are going to dream big, our dreams need to be about marching ahead.

The people who heard Joel speak would have been from two distinct age groups. There were a few, a very few, who had lived through the Exile and were returning. Their dreams had been of coming home, of rebuilding the Temple, of making Zion the true center of the world, the Promised Land as they had been told.

But most of the people who had returned had been young when they were taken to Babylon. They didn't remember Jerusalem and all of her glory. And many had even been born in the seventy years that the Israelites had been captives. So the OLD men were dreaming of the past, the good old days. When gas was 18 cents a gallon and you could get a large Coke at the fountain for a dime. They were probably dreaming about remaking Jerusalem into the city of God that it used to be. But the young people were more likely dreaming of the future – of the lives they would build and the fortunes they would make and the happiness they would share. They would have been more focused on God's promises for tomorrow.

Well as odd as it may seem, perhaps we can consider our dreams for today and God's promises for tomorrow as we look more closely at Joel's world. Joel begins his prophecy at a time when his listeners had lived through a terrible crisis. They had been able to come back home only to live through a horrific natural disaster. All of their crops had been completely destroyed by a plague of locusts – giant grasshoppers – and there was famine throughout the land. The people cried and lamented that God had forgotten them, as *we* often do when our dreams don't come true. Joel instructed them to fast, pray and prepare for the Day of the Lord.

In the Old Testament, the Day of the Lord was when God would pour out wrath on Israel's enemies and his blessings on the chosen people. It was a time when the people of God would receive the Spirit which would give them direct access to their Heavenly Father and peace would abound.

Joel reassured the Israelites that God was still their God. He addressed the elderly and told them to remember the promises of God. He spoke to the young and assured them that God would listen and deliver them so they would have a future. In fact, Joel's words are quite clear that the gift of the Spirit is inclusive in age and gender and status.

So the people listened to Joel and fasted and prayed and God rescued his people. The crops that had been destroyed began to flourish again and there was a level of prosperity in the land. But the promised Spirit would not come for over 500 years - after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. You see, although the people of God had a dream, given to them by the Lord himself, it was not God's will for them to receive this Spirit until after God's son, Jesus Christ, came to earth. It took the reconciliation between humankind and God *through* Jesus before we could be truly ready to receive the Spirit.

And this shouldn't surprise any of us because, truth be told, we all know that, even when we don't like it, God's timing is not always our timing. God's dreams do not always align with ours. But because of God's promise that He will be our God and we will be God's people, we know that we can trust in God's order for our lives.

I grew up in the '70's. And I had a dream too. I was going to be Mary Tyler Moore. Some of you young folks had probably never heard of her until a couple of weeks ago when she died. But due to a regular Saturday night babysitting job in my early teens, it was my DREAM when I grew up, to move far away from my native Greenville where I had been all my life to live in a big, exciting city. I was going to have a great job and live in a wonderful apartment and have lots of friends who would drop by for advice since I would have it so "all together". I was NOT going to get married until I was thirty and NEVER having kids. I was going to marry an

older man that had some teenagers that I could be friends with. Basically, I was going to turn the world on with my smile.

Evidently that was NOT God's dream because when I graduated from Clemson at 21, I was engaged to my high school sweetheart. I moved back to Greenville to live with my parents until the wedding so I could save money to buy a dryer. And by the time I was 29, I had two children who turn my world on with THEIR smiles.

And being a preacher? Well, I never even saw Mary Tyler Moore go to church, yet here I am! But each time one of the children here gives me a hug when they see me or someone sends me a heartfelt email about how the sermon gave them what they needed; each time I walk through the valley of the shadow of death with a family and help them to the other side where the light is shining again through the joy of resurrection or someone thanks me for listening to the complications of their life, a small part of the word is turned on with a smile, and I realize that God's dreams are big. That God's dreams and my dreams have become one in a way that I never imagined. And that God still accomplishes those dreams through us – today's disciples.

Our young people have a dreams too. They have just gotten back from the "Faith in 3D" journey, which everyone here had a part in through our prayers and our contributions. Along with 1700 Christian youth, future leaders of our nation, they learned about God's dreams for them, for us and for the world. I have asked two of them, Janie Guffey and Kathryn Kotecha, to share *their* dreams for Nazareth Church.

Janie Guffey

Kathryn Kotecha

We all have dreams don't we? Well let's look quickly at how God fulfilled that dream that he spoke of in Joel's day and see how it reassures us that God has a plan to fulfill our dreams according to God's will, and what a beautiful day that will be.

Joel's words were the text that Peter used as the basis for the first sermon to the Christian church. The sermon that was preached on Pentecost. A sermon that was preached to people from all over the world of that day, who spoke languages that were foreign to the Israelites and came from places they had never visited. Words meant to unite ALL of God's people into one voice, one body, where our diversity would create unity in Christ. "Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit."

The words that Joel gave the Exiles, who had come home to rebuild their dreams, were a reminder of God's big dream for the world. You see, if God were here today, I believe God might echo the words of Dr. King by using Joel's prophecy. Clearly, when God says, "I have a dream" it includes the old, the young, males and females, slaves and free, even people who don't understand our language. Because God's dream is for us to be one.

And as Martin Luther King said – we can do this by walking ahead and walking together. Friends we cannot accomplish God's dreams if we are not willing to move forward. God's dream is for us to quit judging our friends because of who they voted for or excluding others because of they are different in status or birthplace or sexuality. God created us in His image but also made us beautifully unique. God's people are called to celebrate our differences by using them to glorify God. God doesn't care if we wear jeans and flip flops to church and or dress in a three piece suit to honor him. God only cares that we are here.

God's dream is for us is to focus on that which unites us more than that which divides us. Because the truth, THE GOSPEL, is that we are all the same at the foot of the cross. Each one here, simply sinners redeemed by God's grace. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit who empowers us to dream big! Amen.