

“Awake to Dream and Serve”
Acts 2:1-21 (NRSV)
First Presbyterian Church, Greenwich, Connecticut
Pentecost May 27, 2007
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Before I read the Scripture, I want to thank you for extending to me the privilege of worshiping with you today. Pastor Bill Evertsberg has told of your wilderness wanderings for close to two years, so it must feel satisfying to be able to gather here again. I also want to mention that it is especially fine to be serving together with Kibbie. We have known each other for over ten years in New Canaan, Pleasantville, and now Greenwich. In 1999 we made a trip to Nicaragua together. And from October 2006 to early April 2007, I had the unusual opportunity of serving as temporary supply pastor at Kibbie’s former church, The Presbyterian Church in Pleasantville. So for this and other shared experiences past, present, and into the future we both give thanks. Please pray with me in prayer before we read, proclaim, and reflect on God’s Word.

Speak, O, Lord, on this Day of Pentecost, for your servants are listening.
 May the wind of your Spirit blow through your Word.
 May the fire of your Word give light to our path.
 May our minds be clearer and our hearts strengthened for the journey ahead.
 In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

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Question for Conversation- How might we become part of a prophetic tradition instead of being “reluctant evangelists” of the Christian Faith?

“Reluctant Evangelists”- I want to pose a question at the beginning of my sermon that will stimulate further questions. I hope to inspire a conversation here because I am curious about how God transforms us from being “reluctant evangelists” into becoming Christians who are fully awake to dream and serve God out of a prophetic tradition? Let me explain how I am using the terms “reluctant evangelists” and “prophetic tradition.”

As I use the words “reluctant evangelists,” I want to reference Pastor Anthony L. Bennett of the Mount Aery Baptist Church, Bridgeport, who preached the most amazing sermon last week about Apostle Peter and how God transformed a “reluctant evangelist” into a powerful witness for Jesus Christ (Bennett, Sermon, 5/20/07).

Pastor Bennett taught from the story of Peter's encounter with the Italian centurian, Cornelius (Acts 10:9-20). And so, I have been thinking about his words all week. It has been my experience that good sermon will always raise deeper and more complex questions. How does God take us and move us from being ambivalent and vague about our faith experience and transform us into persons who are fully awake to dream and serve Jesus Christ out of a prophetic tradition?

Prophetic Tradition- I am using that phrase as understood in the essay, "The Crisis in Contemporary American Religion" by Cornel West. He writes, "To be a part of a prophetic tradition is not to be a prophet or elitist. Rather, it is humbly to direct your strongest criticisms at yourself and then self-critically speak your mind to others with painful candor and genuine compassion" (West, 357). Out of this perspective, West decries charity done at arms length, and urges social justice to change oppressive systems (357). He says that "American life,... suffers from social amnesia.... This social amnesia prevents systemic social analysis of power, wealth and influence in society from taking hold among most religious Americans" (358).

I would like to braid the portrait of Peter started by Pastor Bennett with images related to the prophetic tradition from Cornel West. I want to reflect on Peter's journey through the privileged discipleship he enjoyed with Jesus. Through this journey, I would make the claim that Peter developed from being a "reluctant evangelist" into a passionate, and fearless witness for Jesus, who identified with the great prophetic tradition. At the heart of that tradition is the belief that God is alive in history, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. In Peter's first sermon he cited the Prophet Joel and the Psalmist, King David to show that Jesus was the promise fulfilled in a long-standing prophetic tradition. Peter's sermon brought hundreds of new believers to know Jesus Christ as he preached the first sermon in the Christian Church on Pentecost.

Peter's Early Experience of Discipleship- Looking back on Peter's early experience with Jesus, an encounter occurred when Jesus was calling his disciples one morning in the area around northeastern Galilee. They were on Lake Gennesaret, in the district of the Sea of Galilee. When commanded by Jesus, to "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch" (Luke 5:4), Peter obeyed. Peter had a kind of, "Yeh, but!" response to Jesus because Peter was a practical sort of guy who knew his trade and

when he failed to catch any fish the night before, he was calculating how he might support his family. He was understandably discouraged that morning. But upon hauling more fish than he could carry in the boat, Peter, “amazed at the catch of fish,” left his fishing boat and began his discipleship with Jesus for the next three years (5:9-11). We learn nothing about how Peter’s family survived his departure. These are aspects of the stories in the Bible that leave me with so many questions!

Peter as a Privileged Disciple- Shortly before Jesus was transfigured and anointed for service, Peter, who was very self-confident as a new disciple, proclaimed that Jesus was “The Messiah of God” (9:20). But Peter did not really comprehend what he had said about Jesus. Not long after this, when Peter was on the mountain with Jesus, Peter was dazzled by the mountain high with the vision of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus together. Peter wanted to hold onto this moment and make it permanent, so he visualized building three dwellings, one for each of them (9:33). Peter enjoyed privileged discipleship with Jesus, and in that moment he lost sight of the ministry he had been called to do. This happens to all of us from time to time because we are human and weak, but the eventual realization that we have compromised ourselves is so very painful. Calvin wrote a brilliant response to Peter’s intention. “Why did he narrow down Christ’s Kingdom to a little space of twenty or thirty feet? Where was the redemption of the whole church? Where the fellowship of eternal salvation?” (Calvin, *Matthew, Mark and Luke Vol. II*, 200). Peter was momentarily influenced by the power and the glory of the mountain high and failed to take into consideration that he had been called to serve those in great need in the valley below.

Peter’s Extravagant Claims- Just before Jesus was arrested Peter made an extravagant claim of loyalty to Jesus. He said, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!” (Luke 22:33). But Jesus knew Peter would deny him three times by the end of the day (22:34). And sure enough Peter did deny Jesus and afterwards Peter “went out and wept bitterly” (22:57; 58; 60; 62). Peter began to reckon with himself. He knew the privileged position of closeness with Jesus had shifted. He became vulnerable and recalling Cornel West’s words above, was able to weep because he began “humbly to direct [his] strongest criticisms at [himself].”

Peter's Disbelief and Belief- After Jesus' death and resurrection, Peter, together with the other disciples, first interpreted the women's witness of the empty tomb as "an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (24:11). This must have been so hard for the women in the midst of the trauma of grief and loss not to be believed by the men. But Peter, unlike the other men, did run to the tomb and verified what the women had said was true and that Jesus' body was not there (24:12).

Peter in Jerusalem- Before Jesus ascended to God he had instructed his closest disciples and followers, "And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). In addition to many foreigners traveling to Jerusalem to bring the first grain harvest to the Temple for the annual Festival of Weeks, there were also 120 followers of Jesus who had formed a new community and were in the city praying and waiting for God's outpouring (Acts 1:15). Peter was part of that community ministering among them in a leadership role. One does not get the impression that he had much preparation time for his first sermon. How was Peter's sermon shaped? Something happened to Peter and the 120 believers who were praying and waiting.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:1-4).

The Visible Presence of the Spirit of Jesus- Fresh as the wind that blew over the void of Creation was the Spirit of Jesus. The Spirit of Jesus came as a fire to awaken, brighten, and clarify the journey of the community of faith. The Spirit of Jesus touched each individual in a personal way. Calvin understood how important it was to have some sort of visible manifestation to remember that a fundamental change was taking place that would shake the foundations of the existing structures and awaken believers to a new religion, Christianity. "The gift had to be visible in order to stir up the disciples through the bodily senses. For such is our dullness in appreciating the gifts of God that unless He first aroused all our senses His power would pass us by and vanish

unrecognized” (Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles Vol. I*, 50). Calvin reminds us that our faith journey is lived out of our physical bodies and we cannot separate this part of our reality if we are to love God with our whole selves.

Peter’s Sermon- To observers, the reaction of the disciples speaking all together in different languages made them appear drunk. The gift of tongues was a great gift and Peter offered an interpretation to the bewildered crowd. He explained that what was happening had been promised nearly 400 years before by the post-exilic 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.
 Even upon my slaves, both men
 and women,
 in those days I will pour out
 my Spirit;
 and they shall prophesy.
 And I will show portents in the
 heaven above
 and signs on the earth below,
 blood, and fire, and
 smoky mist.
 The sun shall be turned to
 darkness
 and the moon to blood,
 before the coming of the
 Lord’s great and
 glorious day.
 Then everyone who calls on the
 name of the Lord shall
 be saved.’

(Acts 2:17-21); (Joel 2:28-32).

Prophets Joel and Psalmist King David- What Peter proclaimed from Joel helped the listeners to remember God had not forgotten God’s people. Joel proclaimed God’s Word nearly 400 years earlier, after the return to Jerusalem from the Exile in

Babylon. At that time Joel proclaimed there would be a promised day of spiritual outpouring. Even earlier than Joel, reading further into Peter's sermon, which was not included in our lectionary for today, Peter referenced Psalmist King David (1000 BCE), who proclaimed a successor, a Messiah who would be raised up from death. "I saw the Lord always before me,/ for he is at my right hand so/ that I will not be shaken" (Acts 2:25; Psalm 16:8). By recalling Psalm 16:8-11, Peter helped ease the sense of loss that believers might have experienced when Jesus ascended just a few days before. But beyond this immediate literary context is the historical experience of the late first century Gentile Christians or Jewish converts reading Luke/Acts written c. CE "85, give or take five to ten years" (Brown, 226). For these individuals, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in c. CE 70, would have been unimaginably traumatic. Life could never ever be the same again. Another sermon could give more discussion about the relationship between the texts and the impact of historical events. But it bears saying that for first century readers, the connection with a prophetic tradition, using Joel and David's Psalms, would give hope and daily sustenance to a fledgling Christian community. In the last part of Peter's sermon he cited Psalm 110:1 and reminded his listeners about God's sovereignty, "The Lord said to my Lord,/ 'Sit at my right hand,/ until I make your enemies your/ footstool'" (Acts 2:34-35). Peter was no longer a "reluctant evangelist," or privileged disciple, but now preached as an apostle out of a prophetic tradition in which he was genuinely able to proclaim Jesus was "both Lord and Messiah" (2:36).

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Awake to Dream and Serve- We have to be awake to have memory. We have to have memory to make sense of the present and the future. When has a new insight come upon us "with the rush of a violent wind?" (2:2). When he died on April 12,th 2006, aged 81, just four days before Easter last year, William Sloane Coffin left behind many of us asking, 'who would be the next prophet for our time?' I noted his death in my calendar. I saved obituaries and yesterday reread parts of them. William Sloane Coffin's life speaks to me on this Day of Pentecost and Memorial Day weekend 2007 about standing with courage in a prophetic tradition so that each one of us will comprehend that we can make a difference in our communities, and the world. He reminds me never to be intimidated

by power, wealth, and influence at the institutional level. And he has something to say to me about patriotism. Once in the mid-nineties I heard him speak in the Common Room at Yale Divinity School. During those years I was traveling back and forth to Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Southern Mexico with groups I had organized to build homes in very poor communities. I felt good about the work I was doing. During the question and answer period following William Sloane Coffin's lecture, I raised my hand and asked a question which was related to my work in Central America. He was silent for a moment and then he turned to me and asked 'what was I also doing in this country to work with African Americans, for example? There was so much work to be done in this country, and had I given any thought to that idea?' I did not understand the deeper meaning of his response until many years later when I went to Gulfport/Biloxi Mississippi soon after Hurricane Katrina in October, 2005. Though he did not use the word 'racism' in his answer to me, he raised new questions for me about how I have lived in the invisibility of white privilege all my life. His influence continues to challenge me.

On this Pentecost how will we hear God's message traveling down the years of time to this minute? How will we invite the Spirit's power to help us dream and serve God in new ways? May we believe that we are ready and we are waiting, "together in one place," as God comes to us through a closed door. Amen.

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