

May 2, 2010, Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 11:1-18

Visually Speaking

When I was teaching I learned about the different ways that people learn. Some of us can only learn by moving. Until we actually take action we don't know what we are learning well enough to retain it. This is called kinesthetic learning.

When I first saw a teacher leading his class through their spelling words while doing jumping jacks, I thought he was just trying to multi-task, but then I learned about this way of learning and found out that the kids assigned to his class had a hard time learning through conventional means, and suddenly it all made sense.

Other people learn auditorially. No, I don't mean by sitting in an auditorium! I mean, they have to HEAR the information. These kind of learners do very well listening to lectures and sermons. The education system seems set up for this kind of learner, at least in classrooms where the teacher loves to talk and talk and talk.

Another kind of learner learns visually. They have to see a picture, or at least be able to picture something in their minds. I am not talking about just reading. Seeing words in print is not enough. Pictures, actual objects, demonstrations----these learners need these kinds of visual aids to process and remember what they are learning.

There is one more thing the research into learning styles tells us ---- most of us are visual learners! I cannot recall the exact statistic, but it's something like 75% of us learn best when we can SEE or visualize what it is we are being taught!

A picture is worth a thousand words is not just a saying. It's a documentable fact!

And so, when a question arose in the early church, we have in our scripture this morning a very vivid image that answers that question.

There was a debate among the early Christians about Gentiles becoming Christians. The question was asked, "Did these new Christians need to follow the Jewish dietary laws? Did they need

And so God sent him a clear message that answered the debate.

The message didn't come in words. Peter didn't find the answer written in a book. He didn't hear a voice coming from the clouds or a burning bush.

Peter was a visual learner, so God sent him a visual message---a vision!----of all the animals and birds and sea creatures being lowered down to earth in a huge sheet. And then, just to get to the auditory learner side of Peter, God said, "Kill and eat!"

Peter protested, but God persisted. The sheet went up and down three times to emphasize the point.

And just to drive the point home, just at the end of the vision, three men, three GENTILES, came to the door and asked

him to go with them. The Spirit then took over, telling Peter not to make any distinction between Jew and Gentile.

When Peter got to the home of the men, he shared the gospel with the whole family. The Holy Spirit came to all of them, a family of Gentiles.

The debate was over. Peter responded, understanding that God was saving these people who did not follow the Jewish law, who were not circumcised, who were not part of the Chosen People.

Peter said, “If God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we first believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”

The vision that Peter had seen convinced him. There was no arguing, no denying, no ignoring that powerful image of all those animals going up and down in that sheet!

These days we don't think much about visions or dreams. We just don't give them much credibility. Dreams are just our brains making up stuff, and visions----well, that just seems sort of like hallucinations or imagination or even some kind of craziness.

So even if we have a vision, we don't like to bring it up much.

Who's going to believe it anyway?

But on the other hand, who are we to hinder God?

In the book of Genesis, we read about Jacob wrestling with a stranger all night long. This was more than a vision, it was a physical reality that ended with his hip being permanently injured!

He was asking for God's blessing, and this is what he got, an injury and the blessing as well! He also got a new name from God----Israel.

At an earlier point in his life, Jacob had dreamed about angelic beings going up and down a ladder from heaven.

Visions-----

Jacob, the man that God named Israel, was not an exceptionally holy man. He didn't spend weeks and months alone in the desert praying for visions. But God spoke to him in pictures! God knew that he was a visual learner!

God spoke visually to other people besides Peter and Jacob.

Jacob's son Joseph was famous for being able to interpret dreams. And God had appeared to Abraham, Jacob's

grandfather, as three men, telling him that before another year passed, he and Sarah would be parents at long last.

Mary saw the angel Gabriel, who told her that she would have a baby even though she wasn't married. Without actually seeing an angel---if she had just read a note or her mother had relayed a message, maybe she wouldn't have believed it, wouldn't have acquiesced so easily, saying "Let it be with me as you have said."

Joseph saw an angel, too, who told him that Mary was pregnant. Without seeing that heavenly being right in front of him, maybe he would never have married Mary.

Seeing is believing and convincing and undeniable.

It's hard to argue or resist something you have seen with your own eyes.

So, do people have visions any more? Do we have dreams that are visual messages from God?

The book of Acts quotes the prophet Joel, saying, “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.”

Who are we to hinder God?

Whether or not we are in the “last days” I don’t know, but people used to dream dreams and see visions, and if the prophet said it will happen in the future, why can’t it happen now?

“Your sons and your daughters” in the ancient Hebrew language was not just the next generation, but the next and the next and every subsequent generation.

Why not now? And if it’s happening and we are suppressing it---who are we to hinder God?

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, I watched the news for several days straight, like everyone else. On the second or third night, I had a dream.

I dreamed th9004(H)2.68022(u251434d)-0.616744()2.9468()-4.59004(H)744(r)7.59

One of my friends knew of my inner turmoil and wisely counseled me to wait, that my time would come. Only a few days after that I found out that the church I was interning at was organizing a mission trip to Mississippi to help rebuild homes.

Who am I to hinder God? I signed up, the first name on the list.

The next April I found myself in Mississippi, rebuilding homes. Exactly the way I had seen in my dream.

That dream is still with me. I am not finished rebuilding homes. So I'm going back.

Who am I to hinder God?

God has sent me a number of dreams. Dreams of comfort after my brother died. Dreams of hope as I began my ministry.

Dreams of light and love. Dreams of guidance and direction.

I know I'm not the only dreamer. Some of you have had dreams that are God speaking to you visually. Some of you hear God regularly. Some of you find God's message to you when your hands are busy and your feet are moving.

Pay attention to whatever way God speaks to you. Sometimes it is in the circumstances of your life. If something you have planned doesn't work out, look for the opportunity in that disappointment.

If you feel like you just have to move, get up and go. And pay attention to what God is telling you in that action.

If you hear and especially if you see, if you dream or imagine, pay attention!

What are your dreams? What do you see that brings you hope, comfort, peace, joy, reassurance, and love?

Pay attention. And don't disregard it. Who are we to hinder God?

Now I do have to say, of course not all dreams are from God. Some dreams are just random access memories and jumbled thoughts triggered by tv shows or movies or just from out of nowhere.

So be aware, when you are remembering your dreams, that God will not tell you to do anything dangerous or frightening or harmful. God will not send you a message that causes you pain. But if your dream is helpful, healing, life-giving, love-bearing, hope-filled, and inspiring, pay attention.

In our noisy, busy, mile-a-minute lives, sometimes the only time we are quiet enough to hear God is in our dreams.

Who are we to hinder God? Who are we to overlook and disregard it when he speaks to us, whether it's in words or pictures or actions?

Look and listen. Move and breathe. And God's message will come through to you.

When I taught children with severe disabilities, I had no realistic expectation that more than a very few of them would learn to read. Most of them could not speak and most of them didn't listen very well, either.

So I used pictures a lot. And when I could, I used real objects, hands-on materials that they could see and hold.

It was sometimes very frustrating to teach these little ones how to communicate what they needed, what they wanted.

Someone very smart had the idea to use pictures. So at lunchtime, especially, we taught the children to give us a picture of a sandwich, or a cookie, or milk, or a banana so that we knew what they wanted.

Instead of speaking out loud, we got a visual message. And everyone was a lot happier!

We are like those children. We can't always find the words to tell God what we need. We don't always understand the words that God speaks out loud, mistaking it for thunder or some other noise.

So God gives us pictures to communicate with us, pictures called, in the New Testament, parables, in the Old Testament visions and prophecies, and in our lives dreams and sometimes visions.

Dream your dreams. Do not deny your visions. Do not hinder God!

Let those who have eyes to see, understand what God is telling us. Amen.