

Dreams and Visions

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Joel 2:23-32

Olive Brown Hoffman, a longtime Third Church member, died this past August. Though her given name was Olive, few called her that. She was known as “Brownie.” She was a remarkable woman, a spouse and parent, a distinguished nutritionist, a faithful Third Church elder. In her retirement, she became a mean cribbage player; if you ask Van Van Zanten he will tell you that she could beat him up until the end. She died, as her children said, “with all her marbles.” We all should be so fortunate, especially if we die with all our marbles at the age of 105. 105!

Brownie was one of four Third Church centenarians, now three. Her longevity, and theirs, has given me much to think about recently. I did the quick math, and within just a few months, Brownie died at an age nearly twice of what I am now. Comments about me having all my marbles aside, I’ve been thinking about her life, and mine, the lives of the elders among us, and our lives, the lives of all of us, those older than us, those younger than us. What they, and we, do with the years we are given? Their dreams and visions, and ours.

The Old Testament book of the prophet Joel, from which we’ve heard this morning, is unique. We get just a snippet of it every three years in the lectionary cycle. We also hear reference to it every Pentecost Sunday. Peter makes reference to this passage as he seeks to explain what is happening at Pentecost when the tongues of fire descend and people speak and understand different languages and the Holy Spirit empowers the earliest church.

Joel is unique in that its three brief chapters kind of float in the Bible historically. Scholars can’t pinpoint a date – either 600 years before Jesus or 800 years or 900 years. While the historical context is imprecise, the circumstance is not. Joel exercises his vocation as prophet, as a visionary mouthpiece of God, in the face of a locust plague and drought. Crops are gone. Famine is upon the people. It is a sobering scene.

Joel calls the people to a season of repentance because it is his belief that the plague and drought and famine have resulted from God’s judgment on the people. That is hard news to hear, and hard to live with in the reality of starvation and agricultural and ecological despair.

But all is not lost. Joel calls the people to repentance because Joel believes that God’s ultimate project is not plague and famine and drought, but blessing and abundance. Whatever the people did to receive God’s judgment is not permanent. Nor is judgment God’s final posture. If the people return to God, God will be gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love.

Now we may debate long and hard about this understanding of God as a punishing judge who brings suffering upon the people because of their behavior. But other moves are made in this passage as well. Joel describes a world in some ways parallel to ours, a combination of ecological and economic crisis. “Food insecurity,” widespread hunger, is prevalent. Water is scarce and the environment suffers. Today’s is not a conversation about climate change per se, nor a conversation about real hunger and real thirst and people’s access to adequate water and food. But it could be, because those realities always with us.

What grabbed my attention this time around is not so much the set-up, or even the dreadful circumstance, but the response, or, more accurately, the coupling of responses, ours and God’s.

Joel calls the people to repent, and when the people do that, with worship that is authentic and heartfelt, then God will respond. The earth itself will rejoice. Plants will grow. Animals will prosper. Rains will come and food will be plentiful and stomachs will be full and the people will be happy and God will be praised.

There is a clear connection between the ethical and moral life of the people and God’s response and God’s gift of full and abundant life.

What grabs us now is what often grabs us at Pentecost – the vision of the prophet that follows God’s blessing. “Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old (ones) shall dream dreams, and your young (ones) shall see visions.”

I think of Brownie Hoffman when I hear those words – our old ones dreaming dreams. What were her dreams in her teens and twenties, in her middle years, in her later years, as she approached 100 years and beyond? What were her dreams and visions? What are yours? At your age, whatever it may be?

It is not a question asked lightly. If we learn anything from this God who we worship and seek to follow and with whom we wrestle with on things like judgment and repentance, we know that we are always called forward. God is always doing a new thing. The status quo is rarely acceptable. We know that.

What is remarkable is not that God judges us – if we look around there is plenty in this world that would merit God’s judgment. What is remarkable is that God not only gives us the capacity to dream and envision, but encourages us to, empowers us to, gives us the gifts to dream and envision, not to accept what is, but to imagine what may be.

That is true in the dawn of our lives and their sunset and every moment in between. It was true for Brownie Hoffman and it is true for the babies baptized into our community and all of us in between.

The need is great for us to dream and envision. And I would imagine God's disappointment lies not in our lack of capacity, but in our lack of willingness to push that capacity to its fullest. "Make no small plans," the architect and urban developer Daniel Burnham said a century ago. Make no small plans, and God would agree, so much so that God's spirit is poured out on us. To dream big.

I think about my own dreams, or the dreams of my children, or the dreams we dream on their behalf. I think about not only my dreams, but what I do with them, how I live them out, how I live what the poet Mary Oliver calls my "one wild and precious life." This is about that, but so much more.

I think about the dreams of those living in poverty, and what an alternate reality would be. Or those living with gun violence every day, and simple dreams of safety and security, happy places for children to play. I think about what God's dreams for us would look like, and the moral and ethical will we must muster to live into those.

This summer we spent a week in Washington, D.C. We are a get up early and sight-see till you drop family, and that week was no different, made all the more enjoyable by temperatures near 100 and humidity near 1000.

So it was late at night that we walked about the mall, first to see the impressive and moving FDR monument and then to move to the Martin Luther King, Jr. monument. You might remember its controversy – the artist, the result, the use of quotations to help enlighten King's life and work. We parked the car and entered through a kind of stone passageway to the monument itself. It was about 10:00 p.m. and still there were dozens and dozens of people there, primarily African-American.

The monument itself is a sculpture of King embedded in a huge stone, almost as if he is emerging from a mountain. I hovered at the periphery, watching generations – grandparents and grandchildren, parents and children, teenagers on their phones paying modest attention, babies in strollers oblivious to it all.

We white ministers tend to be King experts one Sunday a year, at his birthday, and we often quote his "I Have a Dream" speech," though I try at least to quote other things when I do quote, so pay attention next January.

But in that context, in the heat and humidity, as “Black Lives Matter” protests were happening just a few blocks away on the Capital steps, at the confluence of FDR and Lincoln and the new African-American Smithsonian museum and the White House, the words of the “I Have a Dream” speech became more than a cliché, more than words I already fear are being lost to our dim and dull memories. They became a contemporary interpretation of these prophetic words now nearly three millennia old, our ongoing mandate. They became not just wishful thinking or an oratorical masterpiece, but a strategic plan. Equality. Racial justice. Freedom.

“I have a dream,” King said, and it is carved into stone at his monument, “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.” My children have lived that dream, so it becomes our marching orders to dream that dream for all children, on behalf of all parents, to remove barriers preventing them from dreaming.

And if it is true for children of African and Latin descent, it must be as true for every daughter as well as every son, for every child born into a poor zip code as well as an affluent one.

We dream little things, and that’s OK. For a long time I’ve dreamt about a Chicago-Cleveland World Series. That’s OK.

But the deeper calling is to a bigger dream. And the deeper calling is to dream for others, those who don’t have the capacity to dream, or don’t have it just yet. And the deeper calling is to make it so they can, because God gives all of us the capacity to dream, to envision, to imagine how things may be rather than accepting how things are.

That’s what Joel tells us, and every prophet since, that our best dreams are the ones that align with God’s dreams. “You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied.” That’s the dream – satisfaction that fills our stomachs and satisfaction that fills our souls. And not just ours. For all of God’s children, our old ones, our young ones, and every one, EVERY one, in between. Amen.