

Stranger Things

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Acts 11:1-18

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Have you ever had a dream or daydream that was more than just that:

one that was awash with color, sound effects, repetition,

specific geography, and surreal scenery;

not just a dream or vision that reflected reality,

but one that prefigured something else, something beyond;

a hint, an inkling, a foretaste, perhaps, of another dimension?

Have you ever seen people long gone in the faces of those closest to you,

or had the feeling that you have walked down this very street before,

or spoken these words earlier, even, perhaps, in a previous lifetime?

Then welcome to Peter's world as he sees visions and dreams dreams

in the aftermath of the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Luke, the narrator, says, "the apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard

that the (other) nations also *had received* the word of God."

The Greek word for the verb "receive", *dexomai*, also means "to welcome".

Thus we get a hint at the very beginning of this narrative,

in a story so pivotal to the history of the church that it is told twice,

in Acts 10 and 11, that its theme is welcome!

Welcome to God's kingdom! Welcome to God's dream!

And while we might imagine this global welcome of God's word
to be the long-awaited good tidings of great joy,
to the religious authorities in Jerusalem it registers concern
and raises red flags of barbarians at the gate.

The circumcised faithful are mixing and mingling with the uncircumcised goi,
and even worse, they are eating together at the same table.

Two foundational pillars of Jewish Torah practice are being scrapped to accommodate
the outsiders.

And as a religious professional myself, I understand
how those ancient religious gatekeepers might have felt anxious,
threatened and defensive about this sudden shift in Torah practice.

Peter, however, remains unflappable and responds to their panic-fed criticism
by relating the life-changing epiphany that came to him while in Joppa;
a dream or vision that he just can't shake,
that has stuck to him like fresh-cut wet grass.

It is one of those dreams that is more than just a dream;
one that has visuals, audibles, graphic details and repetitions.

It has come to him while praying, which in itself conveys the power of prayer!

He describes it as an ecstasy or trance,
in which he gazes, perceives, notices and sees strange things:

a giant sheet -like a chute conveying various beasts from heaven to earth.

And he hears a voice from heaven calling him by name, "Peter";
commanding him to "rise up, slay and eat"; to which Peter replies strongly

in the negative, "Never would I ever!"

The audible then responds to Peter with a reprimand (and I LOVE this line):

"What God has cleansed, you cannot regard as common." (v. 8)

In other words, nothing of God is beneath you.

All creatures were created by God as equally good.

And this vision, this trance, this ecstasy, this revelation is repeated for Peter

three times, to make sure he takes notice.

Down and up, down and up, down and up the sheet goes,

as if God, the heavenly fly-fisher, were casting a dream line

with the intent of catching the imagination of the dreamer,

before that chute finally becomes a ladder back to heaven

for all creatures of our God and King. Wow!

So, whose dream was it, I wonder? Was it Peter's dream, or was it God's dream

that caught Peter's imagination?

Jewish writer and poet, Roger Kamanetz says, "Dreams upset the applecart,

and sometimes the dining table: (and) that's exactly what happened in early

Christianity when the laws of Leviticus about food

were overturned by a dream."

(Kamanetz, Roger. *The History of Last Night's Dream*, p. 110)

He notes that early Christianity after the death and resurrection of Jesus

was entirely a Jewish movement, where disciples like Peter and Paul

were Jews who preached in synagogues.

And one important boundary line which they tried to keep was Jewish dietary law,

(*kashruth*) which made it nearly impossible for Jews and Gentiles,
insiders and outsiders, to share a common meal.

Some Jewish Christians, like those in Jerusalem, upheld the laws of circumcision
and *kashruth*, while others sought some degree of flexibility
while still remaining true to the Jews.

A dream decides this issue for Peter, who sees in his ecstasy or trance,
kosher and non-kosher animals sharing a sheet with certainly
non-kosher reptiles, and who hears an audible declaring them all...edible!

And while he wrestles with the dream and its implications, like Jacob once did,
Peter receives a strange confirmation when strange messengers arrive to tell him
that a Roman centurion, Cornelius, a Gentile, has been dreaming
about him, and has invited him to come for a visit.

Up to that point, Peter had not preached to Gentiles.

But the news of Cornelius' dream confirms his own vision as valid.

And Peter preaches the story of Jesus to Cornelius and his household, and they
become followers without first converting to Judaism.

Here is what is remarkable about that moment, according to Kamenetz:

it is the point at which Judaism and Christianity part ways.

"Until then, it was still possible to be Jewish and Christian, to follow the rules
of Torah while still believing in Jesus as Messiah...but Peter's waking vision
raises the stakes." (Kamenetz, p. 111)

Jews who abide by Sinai's Torah as the ultimate revelation of God will remain Jews,
while those who dream dreams and see visions that bend God's law,

and see the door to revelation still open, will become the church.
I find it quite remarkable, don't you, that "the rock upon which Jesus
tells Peter he will build his church," in Matthew 16: 18,
is based not upon commandments and laws carved in stone,
but upon a dream, a dream of loving one another as Jesus showed us,
a dream of all creatures created equally in goodness,
a dream of welcome, and a dream
of eating together at God's welcome table.

I'm thinking that we, perhaps, should pay more attention to our dreams
as a source of God's continued revelation,
and to the dreamers in our midst who dream them!

A few weeks ago, my husband and I went to the Nasher Museum on Thursday,
the free day, to view and experience the exhibit of the little- known
Durham photographer, Hugh Mangum.

Mangum's glass-plated negatives, some 1,000 of them,
discovered in his family's old tobacco barn on the Eno River in North Durham,
show an intimate array of portrait subjects
cutting across lines of race, class, age and gender,
taken from 1897-1922, during the height of the Jim Crow era in the South.

(Edwards, Sarah. "Lost in a Durham Barn for Fifty Years, Hugh Mangum's Photo's Form
a Vivid Portrait of the Jim Crow South." *Indy Weekly*, March 27, 2019.)

That would have been a time when schools were segregated, when
drinking fountains and bathrooms were designated either white or colored,
where churches and courthouses had downstairs seating for white patrons

and balconies for colored participants, or none at all,
where black and white could not even be buried in the same graveyard,
or have their obituaries printed in the same newspaper.

The portraits that come to life from those scarred and scratched glass negatives
are remarkable in depicting both black and white subjects,
thus revealing that Mangum, always the artist, always the risk-taker
and boundary breaker, was not bound in his art or in his business
by the laws of segregation which had a strangle-hold on the rest of the South.

He took the portrait of anyone who strolled into his Eno River studio,
sometimes stringing between six and twenty-four images side by side
on a single glass plate negative, so that we now can see the order
in which they entered his studio and sat for their portraits.

Some of the negatives are even double-exposed, whether by mistake or intentionally,
with the haunting result of a black woman's eyes gazing through the face
of a white woman in the foreground, or vice versa.

I can almost imagine the artist in his little dark room, dipping the exposed plates
into the developing solution, down and up, down and up, down and up,
to convert the latent image to a visible image, the dream to reality.

They look almost regal, his working-class subject dressed in clean,
neatly-ironed clothing, collars very starched and high for the men,
lace collars and modest jewelry for the ladies, hair combed and secured in place,
a few pairs of eyeglasses, but no smiles for anyone.

No one shows his or her teeth in those portraits – if they had them.

But what is stunning is their eyes. The eyes of each subject are large and
luminous, as open as apertures to their proud souls, bodies and minds.
For the most part, these are normal people, neighbors, the kind you might meet
down on the farm, or in the mill, or behind the counter of a small store.
I could also imagine the voice from heaven sharing the same words with Mangum
that were shared with Peter, "What God has cleansed, you cannot
regard as common." (v. 9)

Whose vision was it, I wonder, that compelled this artist? Was it the artist's vision,
or was it God's vision that caught the artist's imagination?

My favorite portrait in the collection is the self-portrait of Mangum, either at the
beginning or at the end of the exhibit, depending upon which way you turn.
A young white man with neatly coiffed hair stares at the camera with a huge
hat held close so that the brim covers the lower half of his face;
once again, no teeth, no smile from this subject.

But the eyes of the artist, as he referred to himself, those eyes
are twinkling, laughing, and mischievous, as if holding a secret
of his art being an act of subversive civil disobedience.

Mangum's self-portrait reminds me of Bill Hader's character, Stefon, on
Saturday Night Live, who always covered his mouth with both hands
when he felt he was about to break out of character into laughter.

Mangum, the dreamer, the artist, was bearing witness in his work to
a strange alternative reality of welcome, which was deliciously dangerous
and unsettling to the prevailing cultural practices surrounding him.

And that welcome has the propensity to upset apple carts, or the dining tables,
if we're not careful.

South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984
has written a beautiful children's book called *God's Dream*,
which we present to each family here when their child is baptized.

It's Tutu's dream about catching God's vision and reflecting that vision to our children
and to our children's children. He says in a very simple way,

Do you know what God dreams about?...

God dreams about people sharing. God dreams about people caring....

*God dreams that every one of us will see that we are all brothers and sisters –
yes, even you and me – even if we have different mommies and daddies
or live in different faraway lands.*

Even if we speak different languages or have different ways of talking to God.

Even if we have different eyes or different skin....

Dear Child of God....

Will you help God's dream come true?

Let me tell you a secret...

God smiles like a rainbow when you do.

God's dream has a nice, inclusive ring to it; but it also presents a dangerous challenge.

As theologian Martin Buber once said, "This is the kingdom of God,

the kingdom of danger and risk, of eternal beginning and eternal becoming,

of opened spirit and of deep realization, the kingdom of holy insecurity."

(Taylor, Barbara Brown, *Holy Envy*, p. 81)

God's dream is as nice as a book we read to little children;

but it also opens us up to a risky state of holy insecurity!

Those whom God hooks with his dream just might make it their own,

even if it upsets the applecart, and upends our dining and communion tables,
our immigration and census tables, our old Jim Crow and new Jim Crow ways,
as it likely should and will.

So, friends, if we find ourselves living God's dream, will we become anxious, threatened
and defensive like the religious authorities in ancient Jerusalem,

or will we welcome the dream and laugh behind our hats

or behind our hands when neighbor love and welcome becomes our new norm?

Pay attention to your dreams, friends, as a source of God's continued revelation,

and pay attention to the dreamers, artists and musicians in our midst.

On this rock, a dream, God has built the church.

And as ephemeral as that might seem, it is a gift freely given

to young and old, brown and white, gay, trans and straight, neighbor and stranger,

migrant and immigrant, insider and outsider, all deserving

of the Christ-like love and welcome of God. Amen.

