

Living in the Middle – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

Acts 11:1-18 • Psalm 148 • Revelation 21:1-6 • John 13:31-35

Visions and dreams can change the course of history. When I was in college, my friend's sister (I'll call her Julie) was planning to come to Greenville College as a freshman the following year. That spring she and her boyfriend, who was a GC sophomore (I'll call him Bill), announced that Bill had had a dream, and in that dream, Bill said God told him that he and Julie should get married the next fall "before the first snow." If they did this, that meant Julie wouldn't come to GC as a freshman that next fall; in fact, it meant that she would need to postpone going to college altogether so that she could work and they could get married. Many of us questioned Bill's dream from afar, but how do you argue with the voice of God?

I was skeptical. I had a hard time believing that God was telling Julie and Bill to get married before the first snow. It seemed much more likely that their hormones were telling them that was the right thing to do. If you're older than 18 or 19 or 20, you would probably agree that our hormones at that age usually have a much louder voice than God does. We assumed that Bill and Julie were just confusing these two voices. Yet despite our concerns, Julie and Bill got married before the next snow and Julie postponed college in order to work to support the two of them. Bill's dream changed the direction of their lives.

Despite my skepticism, I have had my own share of life-changing dreams as well. I had a decade-long dream theme in which I was frequently chased by people with machine guns. I would hide under beds and in closets and awaken just as the bullets were streaking toward me. That's probably why I vowed never to own a machine gun or any type of weapon. (I might have rid myself of those dreams more quickly if I had just stopped watching so many Hollywood action movies.) Overlapping with my gun dreams, I had about five or six years in the late 80s and early 90s when Michael Jordan would hang out in my dreams. Brad was a little worried about these, but Michael always behaved properly, probably better than he did in real life. Dreams can change the course of history. Because of my Michael Jordan dreams and obsession, I decided that maybe I was letting my head get a little too focused on the Chicago Bulls. About that time, Michael Jordan retired, came out of retirement, and retired again, so his appearances in my dreams gradually diminished over time. But as I said, dreams can change the course of history. I haven't followed a sports team regularly since then, and I did also vow never to play professional basketball or wear Hanes underwear. Dreams can change the course of history.

Literature and film are full of dreams that change characters' lives. Authors like Dante and Shakespeare, stories and movies like Alice in Wonderland, The Wizard of Oz, and more recently the Matrix and Inception all use dreams to change the direction of the protagonist's life. You can probably think of twenty or thirty more examples yourself right now. This coming

August we'll celebrate the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, and we hope King's "dream" will continue to change the course of history for many more decades.

Life-changing visions and dreams show up throughout the Old and New Testaments as well. Jacob pledged his allegiance to God after dreaming of angels ascending and descending a ladder from heaven. Joseph was sold into slavery after telling his brothers about his dreams. Later he was given a prominent government position that saved his entire family and a whole nation when he interpreted Pharaoh's dream. Daniel explained Nebuchadnezzar's dream. And in our first lesson today, Peter's dream made it possible for you and me to know Jesus.

The story of Peter's vision that Luke recounts in Acts must be important because Luke tells it two times, first in chapter 10 and then again in chapter 11. In our passage for today from chapter 11, we hear Peter tell the story of his dream to a group of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. These Jewish Christians are criticizing Peter because he went to the home of "uncircumcised men" and ate with them. Luke suggests that these circumcised Christians are bothered more by the fact that Peter went to the home of people who didn't follow Jewish law and ate with them than that Peter told these Gentiles about Jesus. Who they fellowshiped with at the table was very important. Peter violated Jewish law by eating with non-Jews. There was no denying it—he had been caught.

So how did Peter respond when he was caught breaking the law? How would you respond? I think I would try to defend my position as the right one. I would argue that Jesus died for Jews AND Gentiles, circumcised AND uncircumcised. But Peter doesn't argue. Peter is one of them. He understands their perspective. He has been living that perspective for a long time. So instead of trying to argue in defense of his actions, Peter responds a lot like Jesus might have responded. Peter was with Jesus from the beginning; he had heard a lot of parables. So instead of entering into debate with his friends, Peter takes them step by step through his own real-life parable by telling them the details of his dream and Cornelius' conversion.

Peter explains that he was only doing what God instructed him to do. By telling Peter in his vision three times to "kill and eat" unclean animals, God, rather than Peter, becomes the law-breaker, the one who overturns Jewish dietary law. In Peter's vision, the Holy Spirit also told Peter to go from the seaport city of Joppa to Cornelius' home in Caesarea, another coastal city where he would rub shoulders with more Gentiles than he typically did in the Judean hills. God tells Peter that he shouldn't "make a distinction" between Gentiles and Jews in Caesarea. Since these words came from God, Peter could honestly say that he didn't take the initiative himself to go to the Gentiles. God directed the events in the story and Peter merely acted out the part God gave him. God is then to blame for Peter breaking the law rather than Peter. Most importantly, because of Peter's obedience to God and disobedience of the law, according to Luke Cornelius became the first non-Jew to receive the Holy Spirit, and this changed the course of history for the Christian faith. It also undoubtedly affected the whole dynamic of their Christian community. Receiving the Holy Spirit didn't make them into Jews. They were still

Gentiles, and we know from later New Testament letters that that blending of cultures wasn't always an easy thing. Even though they experienced the same Holy Spirit, the faith community would change because the Gentiles brought a new culture to it. Peter's dream changed the course of history for the early church, and it made it possible for each of us to know Jesus as well. What might have happened had Peter not been brave enough to follow the direction God gave him in this vision?

Well thanks to Peter, we are all a part of the Christian faith community now. We are a part of St. Paul's, we are a part of the Gateway Conference of the Free Methodist Church of North America, and we are a part of the church universal. Even though we seem quite homogeneous most Sundays, and even though we share the same table Sunday after Sunday, like this early blended faith community that God began with Peter and Cornelius, we are not all alike. We aren't all Free Methodists. We aren't all Americans. We don't all wear shoes. We don't all vote the same way in Society Meetings. Some of us like to clap after the offertory, and some of us don't. Some of us take huge chunks of bread, and some of us take tiny ones. Some of us are grossed out by the large pieces of bread debris floating in the common cup toward the end of the communion line, and some of us dive in after those pieces. Despite our differences, we do all experience the same table, the same Lord, and the same Holy Spirit.

Who can argue with the voice of God? The Jewish Christians couldn't. They were silenced. They were uncomfortable, probably even angry, with what had happened, but they couldn't argue with the voice of God, so after their silence, they praised God for the Gentiles' conversion. I will never know if it was really God's voice telling Bill and Julie to get married before the first snow, but I thank God that they are still married, they have a family, Bill has been a Free Methodist pastor for more than two decades, and God continues to work through them. God doesn't speak to us all in the same way, but God does speak to us all somehow.

In the familiar passage we read today from the Revelation of John, we are reminded of John's great vision of a "new heaven and a new earth" to replace the imperfect world in which we live. In this stunningly beautiful "new" world that John envisions, God lives side by side with us. This vision gives us tremendous, life-changing hope for the future. It reminds us that God is the "Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." God was creation and God will be the new heaven and the new earth. But what about the time in between the beginning and the end, what about the middle where we live? It is very good to live with the knowledge that a "new heaven and a new earth" are coming, especially when life is difficult, but Jesus showed us that the time in between is valuable as well. Jesus taught us what to do and how to live in these middle times. In our Gospel lesson for today, as Judas goes out to betray Jesus and Jesus continues to prepare the disciples for his death and resurrection, Jesus gives them a "new commandment"—to "love one another." It might have been more appropriate for Jesus to call this a "new 'old' commandment" since the command to love your neighbor as yourself was at the heart of the Jewish law. But just as God will make this old earth new someday, Jesus made the commandment to love "new" by demonstrating in his life and death a new way to love.

So as we live in the middle, let's celebrate the life and work God has called us to in these middle days. Let's continue to dream dreams, let's invite and welcome our world's "Gentiles" into our faith community, let's work to share our table more widely, and let's keep trying to figure out what it means to love as Christ loved. Just as Peter participated in God's work of rebuilding the earth, we who continue to live in the middle must do the same.