

5th Sunday after Easter, April 24, 2016 – Baptism of Isabel, First & Special Communion
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Acts 11:1-18

Crazy Dream

Peter has a dream in today's Bible reading from Acts, chapter eleven. When I try to picture Peter's dream as it is described, as something like a large sheet being lowered from the heavens, when I try to picture that—let's just admit it—that very odd dream, the best I can come up with is a laundry detergent commercial: somebody flinging a sheet, high up into the air and the sheet falls gently down. But in Peter's dream, as the sheet comes down, Peter sees that it is filled with animals. And in Peter's dream, the animal in the sheet is not a stuffed teddy bear, with an impossibly cute voice and giggle—you know that teddy bear from the Snuggles fabric softener commercials, (Hi I'm Snuggles...) No Peter sees four footed animals, and reptiles, and beasts of prey (which, to be honest, bears are) and Peter is commanded, "Kill and eat!" (Sorry Snuggles.) It's a crazy dream, and it's a recurring dream, Peter has it three times today's reading from Acts says, and this isn't even the first time we hear about it in the book of Acts, this very same story is told, in all its crazy detail, just a chapter earlier, in Acts chapter 10, we also hear about this crazy recurring dream.

You probably have had some crazy and recurring dreams, too. I have, I do. I regularly have a dream that wakes me up with a start: "Church is starting and the sermon's not done!" My husband will tell you that, for me, that's a crazy dream to have, because I am a bit neurotic about getting the sermon done early. That's why that dream makes me wake up! My husband Tim, on the other hand, has had recurring dreams in which Reggie Jackson appears. That's actually a crazier dream, especially when you know that the Reggie Jackson he's dreaming about is a hamster. Reggie Jackson was Tim's childhood hamster. He was a little kid in the late 70s in New York City... I find it oddly endearing—or maybe endearing, but odd—that as an adult my husband dreams of a hamster that's been in heaven for quite some time...

But then again, maybe it's not so odd—to dream of that, to dream like that, to yearn for things felt, deeply, and fondly—felt as when we were children, when the world was a place of baseball and beloved pets.

Children can be especially attuned to that. Children can be attuned to that kind of emotion. One of the joys of this place is that we get to tune to it with them. One of the gifts of being a worshipping community of all different ages is being connected to that, to the abundant and exhausting and blessed energy of children—and to their quiet awe. We can see both here, both the energy and the awe, as children are baptized, as they partake of the sacrament of Holy Communion, what a day here for Geo, and Vivian, and Emma, and Isabel.

There is something about dreams that can bring us back to that intensity of experience that children can epitomize, to that sacred regard for life, to that wonder in the world that we know, and in the world beyond, that we can barely imagine, a world that cannot be commercialized or bought, a world that can only be received, as a child, as it says elsewhere in the Bible. There is something about dreams that can bring us back to that, something that stirs in us that longing for things we've loved, creatures, people, who are no longer with us. We dream of them, as adults. We see them in our dreams. People tell me of that, how they see their loved ones, who have died, mothers, husbands, children, they still see them in their dreams. Even years later, the loved one, even they themselves, may be old, and still they dream of them.

It is not just a dream of children. It is not just a dream of the blessed who mourn, it is God's dream. It is God's dream as described in the Bible, in the book of Revelation, when every tear will be wiped away, when the one who is the beginning and the end gives the water of life to all who thirst. It is God's dream, as described in the book of Acts. I called it Peter's dream at the beginning of the sermon, but it isn't really. It was never Peter's dream to become a butcher. Peter preferred fish. It is God's dream for Peter, and it's a dream that is less about what Peter can eat than who Peter can with, who Peter must eat with—it is all in the imperative, what he must do, what he must eat. That is why the sheet was filled with all those strange animals, because Peter along with most all of the early church were Jews, and that meant there were things they didn't eat. To them, many of the animals were unclean, profane—probably unappetizing, maybe stomach turning. They wouldn't eat them. More significantly, they wouldn't eat with anyone who did.

But God's dream for God's people is wider than that. God's dream is so wide, so big, and so strange, that we have to hear it, again and again. It has to be repeated, it has to recur, and it ought to wake us up—because it's so strange that it might disgust us. It's all too easy to think it took Peter way too long to get it, to get together with non-Jews. We might want to turn up our noses at Peter, but the truth is this story compels us to recognize that that person that we find repulsive, that person who has those political views, that's the person God is ordering us to go sit next to, because that person is a child of God.

And God's got this dream, God's got this crazy dream, that we can eat together. All of us. God sets a table before, and God's got a place at the table for everyone: for you, and for me, for our children, and for our enemies, and for the dead. They join us at the heavenly banquet, people we've loved who have died join us here, as do all creatures, they join us in praise, as the psalm says, wild beasts and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds. And at the last, and from the first, we are joined by God himself, God the beginning and the end, God who becomes our meal, and then sends us out to be his dream.