

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
May 6, 2007

## **"AHA" Experiences**

Acts 11:1-18

First, I have a confession to make.

I am a morning person.

It's not just that I can function well in the morning -

I love mornings.

I love to be the first one up in our household,  
when things are still peaceful and quiet and unhurried;  
and I have time for just myself and God and my thoughts  
(and, of course, a few good cups of coffee!).

In the morning between 5:30 and 7:00,

I have my clearest thoughts, my most creative ideas,  
my most rejuvenating prayers.

It's the time of day I am most likely perceive a way forward  
in whatever dilemmas I face.

Now, the reason my being a morning person is a matter for confession,  
is because my dear wife is ANYTHING BUT a morning person.

Early in our marriage, I learned not to say things like

"Top of the mornin' to ya!".

For Mary Ellen, there is no "top" to the morning,

only "bottom", and the bottom gets even deeper  
when she encounters inexplicable cheerfulness  
before 9am.

As you may imagine, this presents a challenge to our marriage

when she stumbles into the bathroom in the morning  
barely able to see,

and I'm happily shaving,

I'm in 'the zone', with profound thoughts going at light speed,  
and I just can't wait to tell her about them.

If she is able verbally to respond at all,

it is usually with a despairing groan that goes something like,

"Dear God, how did this happen?"

How did I manage to become married to a morning person?

What did I do to deserve this?"

Perhaps it wouldn't be so hard on Mary Ellen

if our children hadn't also inherited this genetic predisposition  
to morning addiction.  
We have a rule that James and Langley cannot come out of their rooms  
until 7am, even if they are wide awake at 6,  
which they usually are.  
That may be the one aspect of the teenage years  
that Mary Ellen is looking forward to – kids who sleep late.

\* \* \* \* \*

One of the best things for me about waking up early,  
is that I have time to reflect on any dreams I may remember,  
and often this is a fascinating and illuminating exercise.

Langley and James also like telling about their crazy dreams  
first thing in the morning:

Langley's purple and pink, tap-dancing dinosaurs;  
James' magical camping tent that lets him travel among  
the Indian tribes of the Old West ;  
Then just the other night I dreamed I was walking at the zoo  
when all of my teeth suddenly started falling out  
(a dream that is surely traceable  
to having a 7 and 10 year old  
whose teeth really *are* falling out  
all the time – and they like to wiggle them  
in front of me!);  
or my sermon dreams  
in which I stand up behind the pulpit,  
only to realize that I have totally forgotten  
to prepare a sermon for that Sunday.

They say that we ought to pay attention to our dreams,  
that we ought to write down the dreams  
that seem most powerful or moving to us.

Dreams come from our minds,  
like the subconscious writing a letter to the conscious self  
to reveal the things that are going on deep in the psyche,  
deep in the soul.

Sometimes our dreams can lead us to insight in our waking life,  
or show us new possibilities we hadn't imagined  
in our conscious moments.

We all have these revelations at one time or another,

sometimes night dreams, or even in daydreams,  
sometimes in encounters with a friend,  
    or a complete stranger,  
sometimes in a very familiar place,  
or in a moment of disorientation in a new and unfamiliar place;  
    whether in the early morning, or in the afternoon,  
    or late at night, or upon waking in the middle of the night,  
perhaps because your mind is sufficiently at rest and at ease  
    to allow things suppressed to rise to the surface,  
or because it is startled or stimulated in an unusual way,  
    however it happens,  
    the revelation bursts upon you like the first rays of dawn  
    over the horizon  
(or sorry, if you're not a morning person,  
like a full moon suddenly appearing from behind a passing cloud.)

These moments in our lives,  
    when we suddenly see things anew,  
    and perceive reality as we have not perceived it before,  
    when things become clear,  
    and we suddenly know the way forward,  
        are referred to as "Aha" moments, or "Aha" Experiences.  
When we say, "Aha! That's it, of course.  
How could I not have seen it before – it makes so much sense!"

\* \* \* \* \*

But here's a question for a person of faith:  
    Is it okay, or just a religious fantasy,  
    to say that God speaks to us in our dreams?  
It seems that idea could be a bit dangerous, you know,  
    given some of the things we dream.

As biblical Christians,  
    who look at life through the lens of scripture.  
And in scripture, God does speak to people in their dreams.  
We remember Jacob, asleep with his head on a rock at Bethel,  
    dreaming of angels ascending and descending  
    on a ladder to the heavens.  
And we remember Samuel from last week's scripture and Allison's sermon,  
    who heard the voice of the Lord calling him  
    as he lay down in the temple, ready for sleep.  
And today, Peter's very odd dream

about four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles and birds,  
descending from heaven on a sheet, lowered by its four corners.  
All of these dreams,  
one a promise, one a calling, and one a challenge,  
moved these dreamers into word and action  
that would carry forward God's purposes.

So, as believers in God's revealing work,  
we resist reducing these dreams and moments of clarity  
to simply human mental activity.  
Sometimes, we want to make a theological claim about these moments,  
to say that, somehow, because God is powerful in all things,  
God may be speaking to us, revealing something to us,  
through this activity of our subconscious rising to consciousness.  
But how can we know?

\* \* \* \* \*

Peter's "aha experience" sends him on the march for a big-time change  
in the Christian community, which only Jewish Christian  
up to that point.  
He says God is extending the gospel to the Gentiles, too,  
without requiring them to adhere to the Jewish law.  
Certain non-kosher animals which were once prohibited for consumption  
can now be eaten by all Christians  
without religious consequence.  
What was once considered profane and unclean  
is now, in Christ, called clean;  
*"What God has made clean, you must not call profane."*  
Peter heard it in a dream,  
and his dream was even confirmed by people  
outside the faith community.

But Peter's is no unchecked personal revelation.  
As a member of the Christian community,  
he is called to lay his revelation before the community  
for their discernment.

Peter and the Christian community test the validity of his Aha Experience  
by two shared standards:  
the community's experience of God's Spirit, and  
the community's knowledge of God's Word.

Peter's first claim is that this Gentiles experience of the Spirit  
looked and sounded and felt  
like the experience of the Holy Spirit  
shared by the believers gathered in Jerusalem  
on the Day of Pentecost.

Peter saw a consistency in these experiences –  
a quality that they shared,  
which he took to be of the same origin – the Holy Spirit .

Furthermore, Peter appeals to the Word of the Gospel:  
He says, "...I remembered the word of the Lord,  
*how he had said, 'John baptized with water,  
but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'*"

Peter made his claim that this experience could be interpreted  
by the words of Jesus in the gospel.

Peter argues that his "Aha" experience  
*resonates with scripture and with prior experiences*  
which have been agreed upon by the community  
as being Spirit-led.

This new experience is recognizable, understandable  
within the categories of scriptures  
and the past experiences of the spiritual community.

Things are going to change,  
not just willy-nilly,  
but grounded solidly in the community's  
reading of the Word  
and experience of the Spirit.

\* \* \* \* \*

And so should we approach our "Aha" experiences,  
when we see everything in a new light, with a new clarity,  
and a new understanding.

In the gospel tradition, "new" is a good thing.  
But because it is a *tradition*, a very old tradition,  
"old" is also a good thing.

Our challenge is to receive the old and experience the new,  
not mindlessly, or unreflectively,  
but discerning how each critiques the other,  
and asking what God wants from us *today!*

We do not ignore the tradition,  
but neither do we receive it uncritically.  
That means that there are very few, if any, *easy answers*  
to the challenges that are faced by the church today:  
whether it be the issue of war and peace,  
or the best way to address global poverty,  
or the question of homosexuality,  
on which the scriptures  
are NOT clear.

There is nothing quick and easy about the ongoing work  
of discerning God's will.  
But if the scripture teaches us anything,  
it is that we must expect the unexpected.  
We must look for God's revelation in the most unlooked for places,  
and be ready for the surprise of the "Aha" Experiences  
God has in store  
for us.

That is finally what we mean when we come to this table.  
God's miraculous Aha Event  
of Jesus Crucified and Risen,  
is clearly and decisively known today  
when we all join together  
and break bread in loving fellowship in his name.  
At this table we meet the God who is the same  
yesterday, today and forever,  
and yet, whose mercy and love  
are fresh as the morning, sure as the sunrise.

So let us dream as we feast,  
and open our hearts to the grace of God  
which almost always comes as a great surprise  
breaking over the horizon  
of a brand new day.