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*Fourth Sunday of Easter*

## **“Dreams and Visions”**

Psalm 23

Acts 2: 42-47

I’ve never really grown out of a sort of childlike amazement at the beauty of the world around me. When I was younger I subscribed to a magazine called Nest, that was an interior design magazine – sort of. In the first issue I had, they featured several rooms in a women’s prison alongside the more standard articles about opulent apartments. The point was, these people had done something beautiful with the spaces they lived in, and I was hooked. When each issue came I would sit down with it for hours at a time, poring over each unique space in turn.

In my last semester of high school, as I was getting ready to go off to college in Providence, RI, the magazine included a feature on an old warehouse on the west side of Providence that had been taken over by a group of artists and musicians who called it Fort Thunder. It had started as a venue for their band practices and shows, and it turned into an amazing sort of commune as more people moved in, and they divided the space with walls they built out of plywood and furniture and whatever they could find.

Now, 6 years in, the entire building was covered in bright screen printed wallpaper, beautiful things rescued from the trash (old Christmas decorations and stuffed animals), signs, posters, paintings, trash, and more. One resident had briefly decided he was going to recycle all of his personal trash onto the walls, and so his room was papered with flattened soy milk cartons and cereal boxes, before he eventually realized that wouldn’t work for too long.

I was amazed – this was so unlike the world I knew, growing up a weird artsy kid in a fairly normal town – and I was inspired. This was the city that was waiting for me as I got ready to move away, and I was bursting with possibility.

So I got to school and mostly forgot about it, in all the busyness of my first year of college; until the spring, when I met a guy in a coffee shop who had known people who lived at Fort Thunder! He offered to take me there the next weekend, a little confused by how excited I was. So we went down there, on what felt to me almost like a pilgrimage of sorts, on a rainy spring evening that is the weather I always picture when I’m thinking about Providence.

I don’t know what I was expecting. The article had ended with some uncertainty about the future, as developers were eyeing that neighborhood, and their lease didn’t actually allow people to be living in the building, and anyway they could barely afford the rent as it was. And so we showed up at 75 Eagle St to find that they’d been evicted, and the fence was chained and locked around a dark, quiet warehouse.

It was gone. Everything was silent. And I stood there and I wept. This weird and beautiful place was just quiet and dead. So I cried.

I don't think I quite knew why it hit me so hard. I just knew that there had been something loud and exciting and colorful and crazily, messily beautiful in that space, and now it was gone. I hadn't even been inside, but somehow it was like a part of my own history had ended; like it was my own art studio gutted to become luxury condos.

But really, it's probably a good thing I never saw Fort Thunder in person. Some things never quite measure up to the stories we tell about them. I was a kid figuring out who I was in the world, and as I got ready to move up north into a brand new city on my own, the idea that it was possible to build a life for yourself out of paint and trash and eight-foot polar bears taken from abandoned miniature golf courses just caught my fantasy and didn't let go. Decorating my dorm room with sheets of tinfoil (unused!) seems pretty tame by comparison. But their story helped me learn to tell my own story of who I was and who I wanted to be.

I think we all have stories like that, don't we? Especially in groups, we tell stories about our past that change a bit with the telling, but every time we hear them again they remind us who we are. They start to take on a hazy soft-focus that blurs out the less appealing parts around the edges, but remembers the important parts in crisp light, with bold colors that highlight the pieces that tell the story.

These six verses from the book of Acts are just such a story for the early Christian community, and for countless other communities to follow. The essentials are there: studying together, breaking bread together, fellowship, prayer. And those things together changed everything for them, for all who believed. They reorganized their whole lives in response to this new way of being.

Day by day, Luke tells us, the people were together and caring for one another's need, praising God, living with glad and generous hearts, earning the good will of the people. And day by day, their numbers grew.

What's their secret, we might ask!? How can we grow like they did?? But somehow that's not quite the right question. The awe and the wonder and the good will of the people is what this story is about. Believers were acting out God's love and care for each other and for their communities, by healing those who were sick and ensuring that all were fed around the tables where they gathered in Christ's name, and the numbers are almost an afterthought. The faith and community is the inspiring part.

But as we sit here in the year 2014, trying to figure out who we're going to be in the future, we certainly know the temptation to get stuck on those stories of the past. We remember a time when church was important to people, when the pews were full and giving was high and the Sunday School classrooms were bursting at the seams. Or we *think* we remember it, anyway. And so we grasp at things we've lost, those shadows of the past we've told and re-told so many times that it's hard to know what was real and what we only wish was real.

In a way, it's not unlike the way an idealistic teenage mind might remember a post-punk artist commune; remembering the energy and paint and rhythm and glossing over the probably smelly reality of eleven men living in a warehouse with one working toilet.

We tell stories of our pasts because they help us to articulate who we were. But that reality fades, and the idealized visions won't be ideal for very long, if they ever really were. And yet, as we tell and retell the stories of how we used to be, and paint the picture of what we want to be in the future, we remind ourselves of what's important. We remind ourselves of who we are *now*, and who we feel called to be.

And reality won't ever quite measure up to our hopes for it, at least not in any world we know, but what we affirm in Easter is that our visions are real, our hopes are founded, and that as we strive to live according to the ways of God's kingdom, we will in some small part make that dream into reality. And we'll catch a flash of a new way of life, be filled with awe for a second, and then someone will leave dishes in the sink too long, or their screen printing materials in the bathtub; or Ananias and Sapphira fall down dead in the next chapter of Acts because they couldn't quite live up to the ideal either, and the dream slips through our fingers.

But we can never quite let go. Over and over, Jesus said, the kingdom of God is at hand, God's way is *here*. It is possible, it is now. And we know it's not *quite* now, either; we can't get away sometimes from all the things that are just not God's way. But we keep trying. We keep dreaming, we keep telling the story of how God wants us to live together.

We keep telling a story of a God who gives us green pastures to rest in, and walks with us beside still waters, even as we forget the details of the shepherd metaphor and don't quite know what it means anymore that our cups might overflow. It's a story of a God who leads us and comforts us and restores our souls, and those parts don't change.

And who *we* are is a community that cares for one another, both in practical things and in spiritual ones, studying together and praising God together. And even when that's not quite as true as we'd like it to be, we keep telling that story and living according to that vision.

Our human communities are never going to be perfect, at least not for more than a second. But God is working in us and through us despite that, just as God has worked through imperfect people as far back as we can remember.

And so let us rejoice, and let's keep dreaming. We pray that the Spirit will move in our imagining, and that our visions might be faithful to God's call for us.

In Christ, may it be so.