

PROPHESIES, VISIONS, AND DREAMS

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Acts 2:1-21

This summer, in July, there is a movie scheduled for release. This movie looks like it's going to be a blockbuster and will likely win a bundle of awards. The film is called *Oppenheimer*. And it is based, of course, on Robert Oppenheimer, who is regarded as 'the father of the atomic bomb.' During World War II, Oppenheimer led a team of scientists who were tasked with creating a weapon that would alter the course of the war. This effort was known as the Manhattan Project.

Oppenheimer was born in New York City in 1904. His parents were German Jewish immigrants. At an early age, it was obvious that Oppenheimer was a natural scientist. In 1922, he entered Harvard University to study chemistry and graduated top of his class. However, along the way, he developed a love for the science of physics and so pursued his graduate work in that subject at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom. After Cambridge, he studied in Germany to learn about theoretical physics. While in Germany, he published numerous scientific papers including papers on the newly developed idea of quantum theory. In 1927, after earning his doctorate, he accepted dual professorships at both the University of California, Berkeley as well as the California Institute of Technology shuttling between these two universities teaching and doing research. His fields of expertise included nuclear physics, quantum field theory, and astrophysics.

In the 1930s, as the Nazi movement expanded across Germany, Oppenheimer realized that Nazi scientists had the potential to develop a nuclear weapon. When war broke out across Europe in 1939, Oppenheimer actively advocated that the US should develop a nuclear weapon first. In 1942, General Leslie Groves invited Oppenheimer to become the scientific director of the Manhattan Project, the top-secret US initiative to develop an atomic bomb. Oppenheimer selected a location for the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos, New Mexico, and the US army began constructing a series of laboratories. There, they also built a town for the scientists to live in.

Oppenheimer recruited the best minds in physics from the US and Europe and brought them and their families to Los Alamos and tasked them with creating a bomb like the world had never seen. Eventually he had a team of thousands working under his direction.

In July 1945, at Alamogordo, New Mexico, after close to three years of work, Oppenheimer and his team were ready to test their atomic bomb. This was known as the Trinity test, and it was successful. Less than a month later, America would

drop atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki effectively bringing an end to the Second World War.

At Hiroshima, the bomb known as “Little Boy” leveled five square miles of that city killing 80,000 people instantly. Tens of thousands more would die later from radiation exposure. The Japanese did not immediately surrender, so the US dropped a second bomb called “Fat Man” on Nagasaki which killed 40,000 people on impact.

Here in Tennessee, we are well aware of our connection to the Manhattan Project through the town of Oak Ridge. In that location in East Tennessee, the federal government located another secret laboratory for the purpose of developing the nuclear materials needed for the Manhattan Project. By 1945, 75,000 people inhabited that valley. The uranium separation facility known as K-25 covered 44 acres and was at the time the largest building in the world.

Robert Oppenheimer and the other scientists working on the Manhattan Project were well aware of the enormity of the tasks they had been given. They knew the consequences of Germany developing a bomb first. They recognized that the bomb they were creating could end a war and save the world. But they also understood that the bomb would change the world. And it did.

These scientists were working diligently to split an atom in order to unleash an unimaginable amount of destructive energy. This was power the world had never seen before. Robert Oppenheimer, for the rest of his life, campaigned for the containment of nuclear weapons even as the US and the USSR were locked in a Cold War of nuclear development and escalation.

On the church calendar, today is the day of Pentecost. This event is commonly regarded as the birth of the Christian church.

Our reading for Pentecost is from the book of Acts which is the sequel to the Gospel of Luke. Acts begins with the resurrection of Jesus. Following his resurrection, Jesus then spends time with his disciples teaching them more about the kingdom of God before he ascends into heaven. As he ascends, he instructs his followers to wait together in Jerusalem. So, they do.

Pentecost did not originate with the Christian church. It is an ancient Jewish festival that commemorates God’s delivering the Ten Commandments to Moses.

So, according to Acts, on the day of the festival of Pentecost, the followers of Jesus are gathered together in a house in Jerusalem (as Jesus had instructed them) when something happens. It is difficult to explain. There is a loud, chaotic noise. It is like an airplane flying low over your house at the very same time that a freight train is passing by while both your neighbors are mowing their lawns. Our

Scripture describes it as being like the rush of a violent wind. And by violent, think tornado. This noise fills the house where Jesus' followers are gathered.

Then, in addition to the noise, there are these strange objects that appear in the house among the people. These objects look like flames of fire, and they dance around the room before settling on each person there.

We know today that what these people experienced in that room is the outward manifestations of the Holy Spirit. And each person in the room is filled with the Spirit. One immediate result of their being filled with the Spirit is that each of them is given the ability to speak in a foreign language.

At this time in Israel's history, Pentecost was a widely observed festival. Jews from all over the world converged on Jerusalem to worship and celebrate. Many had traveled from different lands where they spoke different languages. The turbulent sound emanating from the house where the disciples are gathered attracts attention, and a crowd congregates outside the house. These people are curious about the source of this racket.

As the followers of Jesus pour out into the street, the crowd is confused and astonished because they are able to understand these people even in their own native tongues. Amazed, they ask, *How do we understand these Galileans?* And then we, the reader, are provided that lengthy list of peoples and nations, supposedly representing each group in the crowd: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and so on.

The people immediately understand that the disciples are speaking about God and telling of God's deeds of power. Some in the crowd, however, denounce the disciples saying that they are not speaking in any language, but they are simply babbling after drinking too much cheap wine.

So, Peter steps forward and takes control of the situation. He addresses the crowd telling them that the disciples are not drunk as they might assume because, for one thing, it is only nine o'clock in the morning. Peter quotes the prophet Joel where Joel foretells of that day when God will pour out God's spirit on all people. On that day there will be prophesying, and dreams, and visions. When that day comes, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Peter then preaches the story of Jesus and how Jesus is part of God's great plan for all. The crowd responds and they ask Peter what they might do. Peter tells them, *Repent, and be baptized... in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

We are told that 3000 people were baptized that day. And the community of believers grows, and the people share their belongings and give to those who are in need. They worship and eat together and give praise to God. The church is born.

As I mentioned, one thing that Peter does in this sermon, is to quote the Old Testament prophet Joel saying:

*In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall **prophesy**, and your young men shall see **visions**, and your old men shall dream **dreams**. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.*

In doing this, Peter is placing the events of Pentecost into context. This is not some random explosion of the Spirit; it is part of God's great plan of salvation for all. Everyone will be included. It is not just for the wealthy, or for certain believers, or even just for men. It is for all people—sons and daughters, free and slaves, men and women. With the power of the Spirit, they shall prophesy, they shall see visions, they shall dream dreams. What will they see? they see a new way of living—of living with God at the center of their lives. Their prophecies, visions, and dreams will show them a glorious new reality, the reality of God's magnificent kingdom. What they see will change the world.

The immediate result of Pentecost was the birth of a movement that we call the church. Just a few verses later, Luke tells us how these believers restructure their lives and lived in common. *All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need* (Acts 2:44-45).

These visions are not lost. They are available to us today. We just need the courage to open our hearts to see them. We need the courage to speculate "what if?" We the courage to pose the question, "What does God want from me?" Just asking that question is like splitting an atom. It will initiate a chain reaction that has to potential to change everything. What does God want from me? What does God want from this church?

The result of dropping the atomic bombs on Japan was an immediate end to a horrible war that had engulfed the world. The worry was that if it became necessary to invade Japan, that millions of lives would be lost. The calculation was that thousands would be sacrificed so that millions might live.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. In this country we set aside Memorial Day to remember those who gave their lives in military service to our nation. In my family, we will remember my uncle, William Edington. He is my father's brother and was killed in battle in Italy. His remains lie in a military cemetery in that foreign land.

I never knew my uncle because he died 20 years before I was born. But my father always spoke highly of him, and I wish that I had been able to know him. But that is the pain of war. It takes from us.

But the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost enables us to dream of a time without war, to prophesy of true peace, to envision a world in which all people live with the Lord. In other words, the Holy Spirit divulges God's kingdom.

The people of the Manhattan Project shared a vision of peace brought by great power—destructive power. We, as Christians, can also share a vision of peace brought by the great power of God. Let us embrace this vision and change the world.