

To Dream Again Proverbs 29:18 KJV

[Note: I preached the following sermon nine years ago when I first came to my current church. Actually, it's more of a devotional than a sermon. But if you are staring up a new pastorate, perhaps this sermon will help you prepare for your first Sunday. I'm thinking about revising this and preaching it again next year when we launch several major new initiatives here. If so, I plan to call it, "To Dream Again—Again." This sermon was preached before we had projection capabilities, so there are no projection suggestions. During the service we celebrated "An Order for the Celebration of an Appointment," which can be found on page 595 of The United Methodist Book of Worship, The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992.]

I want to begin today's comments with one of my favorite stories. A certain pastor had just been sent by the bishop to a new pastorate. As he set up his office, he came upon a letter in the top drawer of the desk. Stapled to the letter were three sealed envelopes numbered 1, 2, and 3. The letter was from the previous pastor. It said, "Welcome to First Church. When things get bad open envelope number 1. When things get really bad, open envelope number 2. When things get unbearably bad, open envelope number 3." The new pastor thought, What a negative guy! He promptly stuffed the letter and envelopes in the back of the drawer. Everything went fine for almost a year. But then, all of a sudden, things got bad. The pastor remembered the letter and envelopes and opened up number 1. It said, "Blame the previous pastor." On Sunday morning the pastor said, "I know we've been having some problems around here, but you know, it's all the previous pastor's fault. He messed this church up something awful." The people all said, "Amen, that's right," and everything smoothed over. Things went along pretty well for awhile, but about a year latter, things got really bad. The pastor went to his drawer, got out envelope number 2, and it said, "Blame the denomination." On Sunday morning the pastor stood up and said, "I know we're having problems here, but it's all the denominations fault. Our bishop and district superintendents are out of touch with the churches, the bureaucracy of the Methodist church is awful, and that's causing all our problems."

"Amen," said the people. "It's all the denomination's fault." Well, that settled everything down, and things went along just fine for another year. But then, after three years, things were

unbearably bad. The pastor hated to use the last envelope, but he had no choice. He went to his desk and opened envelope number 3. It said, "Prepare three envelopes." Well, I hope it's a long time before I have to prepare three envelopes! I'm delighted to be your pastor and look forward to serving with you in this place.

Years ago, when my family and I lived in Hawaii, I heard Chuck Colson tell a remarkable story. At first I thought it was a yarn, a tall tale. However, I later learned that the story was absolutely true, and was carried in major newspapers all over the country. The event happened in Los Angeles.

The story involves a man named Larry Walters. At the time, Larry was thirty-three years old, and he was bored. He spent most of his spare time sitting in a lawn chair in his back yard drinking beer and generally wasting time. One day he decided to do something unusual, something novel. So he went to the army surplus store and purchased forty-five used weather balloons and a canister of helium. He then invited his buddies over to his house. They went to the backyard and proceeded to strap Larry into his lawn chair. Next they filled the balloons with helium and tied them to the lawn chair. They gave Larry a six pack of beer, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and a BB gun. The theory was that after he got tired of being airborne, he could shoot the balloons one by one until he gently came back to the ground. Well, Larry had expected to rise about fifty to one hundred feet off the ground and get a new perspective on his neighborhood. So he was caught off guard when his lawn chair soared eleven thousand feet into the sky, smack in the middle of air traffic at the Los Angeles International Airport. He was too frightened to shoot the balloons and stayed airborne about two hours, forcing the LA airport to shut down, creating long delays all over the country. Finally, a helicopter team rescued Larry and brought him back down to the ground. When he arrived, a herd of reporters was waiting to talk to him. They asked him several questions: Were you scared? Yes. Would you do it again? No. And then someone asked him, "Why did you do it"? To which Larry Walters responded, "You can't just sit there!"

Well, I would not give Larry Walters any awards for intelligence, but he was right about one thing: you can't just sit there. People who "just sit there" and never dream any dreams, never stretch or challenge themselves, will stagnate. The Bible teaches that truth. My text for today's message is Proverbs 29:18 which says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." The Bible is telling us that when we have no dream, no goal, no vision, then we dry up and

stagnate. In the words of Larry Walters, you can't just sit there! To truly be alive, you must have a dream.

That's certainly true in the life of a local church. You see, every church is born out of a dream. This church stands here today because a group of people, almost 200 years ago, had a dream of starting a new church in this community. Every church in existence started with a similar dream. The problem, however, is that the original dream of most churches almost always fades away. Churches either forget the founding dream, or they become sidetracked with other issues, and they neglect the dream. So, if the dream is not rekindled, or if a new dream is not dreamed, the church grows stagnant.

Several years ago I spoke at length with a Vietnam veteran. He said, "When I first went to Vietnam, I had a clear sense of purpose. I went to save the world from communism. But as the weeks and months wore on, and I saw the insanity of the war, I gained a new purpose—to survive another day."

Sadly, that's the story of many churches. They start out with great vision and dreams, but as the years pass by, they let the dreams slip away. Before long they are just like that Vietnam vet, their only purpose is to survive another day, another week, another year. They are trying to bring in just enough money to stay afloat, get enough teachers to keep the Sunday school going, maintain the building, etc. But sooner or later, that kind of survival mentality leads to stagnation, decline, and ultimately will kill a church. The Bible is right, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

I want you to know today that I have not come to Lebanon First UMC just to survive another day. My agenda will not be to maintain the status quo. Rather, I've come to this place to dream new dreams with you about what God wants to do with us in the months and years ahead. Of course, that raises the question, what kind of dreams should we have? I'll tell you—I don't know! I've only been here six days! It will take time for us to dream specific dreams about our future. But I can tell you in broad strokes what I hope some of those dreams might be. My greatest dream is that we will be a Great Commandment church. That we truly love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and that we will love our

neighbors as ourselves. Having a Great Commandment dream will give rise to many other dreams. Dreams about vibrant worship—worship where we truly encounter God and our lives

are impacted by that worship. Dreams about Christian fellowship—that we will truly love and support one another as a community of grace. Dreams about evangelism—reaching new people for Christ and this church. Dreams about ministry—about serving hurting people in our community in the name of Jesus. Dreams about discipleship—about spiritual growth and nurture. Those are some broad-strokes dreams we might dream, but I don't know yet what specific dreams we should have. However, in time, I believe God will lead us to dream significant dreams about our future.

You will soon learn that I love stories. I want to close today by telling you a children's story from Winnie the Pooh. In this story Pooh and Piglet take an evening walk. For a long time they walk in companionable silence. Finally Piglet breaks the silence and asks, "Pooh, when you wake up in the morning, what's the first things you say to yourself?" Pooh said, "When I wake up in the morning, the first thing I say to myself is, 'What's for breakfast.'" They walked a little farther, then Pooh asked Piglet, "Piglet, when you wake up in the morning, what's the first thing you say to yourself?" Piglet answered, "When I wake up in the morning, the first thing I say to myself is, 'I wonder what exciting thing is going to happen today?'"

A breakfast dream or an excitement dream? Which will it be? I don't know about you, but I have no interest in having a breakfast dream—a dream simply to survive another day. I want to dream an excitement dream, and I hope you will join me as we seek God's excitement dream for our church.

The Bible says that where there is no dream, the people perish. However, the opposite is also true. Where there is a dream, the people flourish. And that, my new friends, is my prayer for Lebanon First UMC.

###