

## Awakening the Dream

Sermon 81 | Greystone Baptist Church | December 6, 2020  
Advent 2 | Mt. 1:8b-24a, Luke 1:26b -38

When I was young, I used to have all kinds of dreams. Good dreams, bad dreams, dreams that would stick around no matter how many times I awoke as their drama played out in my mind, and dreams that would slip away as soon as I opened my eyes. I can remember a few scary dreams that used to haunt my sleep, the same monsters, the same plot lines, the same pattern of waking up just before the worst thing happened. When these dreams visited me at night, I would run to the room down the hall, seeking the comfort of my mother's arms.

I don't remember who it was, but somebody told me that I could be sure those bad dreams would never become reality if I just spoke their story out loud. If I brought it out into the light, so to speak, that green monster that liked to peer over the property line shrubs wouldn't come to get me. The good dreams, the ones I wanted to come to life needed to stay secret. Just like it was bad luck to tell everybody what you wished for when you blew out your birthday candles, giving voice to our sweet dreams was a sure fire way to make sure they would never come true.

Looking back on it now, I wonder where that logic came from? The logic that taught us to keep our dreams close, secret even... while giving voice to the nightmares that startled us awake.

Dreams play a prominent role in many of our sacred stories. From Abraham to Jacob, Joseph to Pharaoh, Samuel to Solomon, throughout the Hebrew Bible (which we call the Old Testament) God uses dreams and visions to communicate God's own will with humankind. It is through dreams: both the scary ones and the comforting ones that God's desires are made known.

It doesn't take long for the New Testament to pick up on this well-established theme of divine communication through dreams and visions. In the first chapters of Matthew, God's plan for the incarnation is communicated through dreams. When Joseph discovered that Mary was with child, he planned to do the honorable thing, he planned to dismiss her quietly, to break off the engagement for sure, but to do it in a private way so as not to draw negative attention to her. In the ancient world, this was really the best Mary could have hoped for. But Joseph's plans were interrupted by a dream.

Just as he had made up his mind, an angel visited in a dream saying: "Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife... for she will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt. 1: 20-21).

Although the text doesn't call it a dream – per se – the angel visits Mary in Luke's Gospel, with a similar message. "Do not be afraid," the angel says, "for you have found favor with God... the son you carry in your womb will be great, he will be called the Son of the Most High, he will sit on the throne of David, and to his Kingdom, there will be no end."

One dream and one vision. Both beginning with those startling words: *Do not fear.*

I wonder if we could put ourselves in Joseph's shoes, or Mary's shoes... would we classify these as nightmares or sweet dreams? Would we keep them secret in hopes that they couldn't possibly come true? Or would we gladly go and share the good news with everybody around us?

With thousands of years of hindsight working in our favor, it might be easy for us to say that we would boldly proclaim the good news of these sweetest dreams. But the reality is that for Mary this "good news" of an unwed, unplanned, and inexplicable pregnancy would have made her a likely candidate for capital punishment. There was in fact, much to fear. If Mary and Joseph chose to awaken this dream, to bring from the angelic visitation into the light of day where the whole town would soon see visible signs of pregnancy, people would start to talk. Relationships would inevitably be broken, because what Gabriel asked these two young teenagers to do had never been done before.

The birth of the Prince of Peace would not be so peaceful for those called to carry it to full term.

Though they, Mary and Joseph, might have been the first to welcome the idea of the incarnation in this specific way, they were not the first to receive God's dream. The prophet Isaiah foretold the dream of a peaceable kingdom:

*"where the wolf could live with the lamb, the leopard could lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling could live together and (you know the rest)... and a little child shall lead them." (Isaiah 11:6-7) The vision of the prophet continues: They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord..." (v.9).*

This prophet Amos as well:

*I will not listen to the melody of your harps  
but let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

The same dream for a new world where the poor and the marginalized are not exploited because of their social and economic position, where the foreigner and the exile are not locked up and locked out of community, where the earth itself is not seen as a commodity that exists only for human consumption but where all people no matter their age, race, nationality or creed are welcomed at God's banquet table where the food and the drink never run dry.

The Hebrew prophets painted this picture for us based on the dream they received from God. These dreams point us towards God's vision for our reality but until we receive them ourselves and allow them to awaken our bodies to actually DO God's work in the world,

peace remains an object of our sweetest dreams rather than a reality we can create with and for God and one another.

Given the context, it makes sense now that the angels began both visitations with the words: "Do not fear." Because if Mary and Joseph were familiar with the Hebrew Bible, as I suspect they were, they probably knew that what they were about to receive was a glimpse of God's dream. And if they were familiar with scripture, as I suspect they were, they probably knew that those who receive a glimpse of God's dream are then asked to live with a whole lot of courage.

It is one thing to dream of peace. It is a whole other thing to awaken that dream and to work to make it reality.

We dream of a world where peace is our reality.

Where lions and lambs and wolves and lambs can lie down together, where elephants and donkeys can share a family meal without dissolving into argument. Where socialists and capitalists can learn from one another. Where young and old can co-exist without one being threatened by the other. Where the pain and grief from our past doesn't sabotage the possibility of our future. And where grace abounds like a balm of healing over all that is broken to the point of violence, war, and upheaval. This is perhaps our boldest and most holy dream.

Bold because we desperately want it to awaken from our sleep, to become our reality.

Holy because it looks just like the revelation of God's dream spoken to us through the prophets of Israel and then brought to life in the form of Jesus of Nazareth.

This is our boldest and most holy dream... we dream of peace.

I wonder if we dare to wake this dream up?

In today's Gospel readings both Mary and Joseph faced the same challenge of courage. God's dream for the world given to them in visions of angels could have stayed locked in their minds if only they had said, "no."

Luckily, they didn't say no. They found within themselves the courage to say "yes" and to do as God was calling them to do.

"Here am I," Mary responded, "let it be with me according to your word." (Lk.1)

"Joseph awoke," the Gospel says, "and he did as the angel... commanded him. (Mt. 1)

Here, on this second Sunday of Advent, Christians around the world are praying for and dreaming of peace. We are reading scriptures and lighting candles and singing songs that remind us that another name for Jesus is the Prince of Peace. Our scriptures point to the reality of eternal and everlasting peace that God promises will one day come – and so yes, we wait, we hope, and we pray for peace.

But on this second Sunday of Advent in the year two thousand and twenty, we cannot be content to let God's dream for peace stop there. Lighting candles, reading scripture, singing songs... waiting, hoping, and yes, even praying requires so little of us this cannot be the sum of what God requires of God's beloved dreamers. If we, like the prophets of old, like Mary and Joseph, like the original disciples, and like Jesus himself have received a glimpse of God's dream, the one that promises peace, then is it not also our duty to awaken our little piece of that dream? ...to move it from the darkness of our hopeful yet solitary imaginations and bring it to life in the broad daylight of our daily lives? To say like Mary said, "Here I am, Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

Is God asking us to awaken the dream today?

Our, "yes," doesn't have to be a grand gesture or a big initiative. In fact, I believe that most of our opportunities to awaken the dream come in small little glimpses which to our human eyes often seem like ordinary occurrences.

Is there a bridge that needs to be built?

A relationship that needs mending?

Is there a story that we are struggling to understand?

Is there a longing deep within our hearts for relationships with those who are different from us?

Is there a recognition that our tables look nothing like God's table where all are welcome?

Is there an opportunity to share our resources with others who may be struggling? Or to take time to listen to one who may be hurting?

Is there room in our hearts for compassion and understanding?

Is there a "no" that needs be transformed into a "yes"?

Is there a dream given to you that needs the courage to wake up?