

12/15/2019 - Advent 3A

“Dreaming New Realities” © - Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

We are exploring dreams and dreaming as we make our way through Advent this season.

I have been tracking my dreams during Advent and am trying to be deliberate about writing them down. Dreaming is a gift that keeps on giving - the more you try to remember and track your dreams, the more dreams you will have and the more vivid your ability to remember them will be.

The other night I dreamed I was back at my home in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. I was there for a family reunion. I was watching from the dining room windows as cars came up the quarter mile long driveway and emptied out people. A couple women who weren't part of the family were walking a golden retriever down the driveway. The house was crowded with people, and I knew none of them. One person stepped towards me and let me know that Chester was here somewhere. I was very excited because I knew Chester very well.

The thing about this dream is that we have never had a family reunion at the house I lived in in Eau Claire. Also, I don't know anyone named Chester.

Dreams are weird. They bend and twist what we have called '*the real*'. We call 'the real' what we experience when we are awake. In this dream, I am very familiar with my teenage home in Eau Claire, which is now the stage for the very unfamiliar. I have all kinds of associations with the place.

When we take dreams seriously, we begin to ask different questions. When we treat the dream as an also 'real' reality, in the same way we treat our waking world, the world we call 'the real', we begin to see very differently.

I use my dream today as an example of how the dreamworld can radically alter how we understand the dayworld. The biggest question I have about my dream is, *Who is Chester? He is my relative. I have a deep relationship with this person whom I have never met.*

In the dream, I never find Chester. But in the dayworld, I have been waiting for Chester. I am waiting for Chester to show up because I know that the dreamworld is intimately connected to this dayworld. I am waiting for Chester because I know my dreams are telling me something about this day world - maybe someone to wait for, maybe something I need to know about the past or the future, maybe something about myself.

In a house full of people who are related to me in the dreamworld, but of whom I have no idea in the day world or dream world, there is one person, Chester, whom I have never met in the day world, but who I know and love deeply in the dream world. I find that incredible and fascinating.

I think of Scripture as a large, multi-faceted jewel and each facet is a different perspective on the Word. Today, I want to think about the Gospel from the perspective of dreams and dreaming.

In our Gospel reading today, we are hearing a dream about conflicting realities and new realities meeting with old realities. John the Baptist' setting has been radically altered. He is imprisoned. Prison is the most confining of spaces. It is intentionally *not free*. Bars, concrete, guards, rules, laws, intimidation - all of these aspects are present in prison, whether in John's day or ours. This prison John the Baptist is in is the categorical opposite of where he has come from. Before, John the Baptist was coming out of the wilderness baptizing for the repentance and forgiveness of sins. He was wandering freely along the banks of the Jordan River, people coming and going, incredible conversations taking place. Now, he is asking strange questions from behind prison bars.

John is in prison because Herod was living in direct violation of Jewish law by marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. John called out Herod publicly and Herod imprisoned John for it.

John has been in prison for a while, and while he has been in prison, Jesus has become a rock star with massive crowds following him. Remember, John the Baptist baptized Jesus. He proclaimed Jesus the Messiah. That was John's job, to make the path straight for the arrival of the Messiah. And now John is imprisoned and sends out one of his own disciples to ask Jesus,

*"Are you the one who is to come, or shall we wait for another?"*

One way to think of prison is the coalescence of consensus reality. Consensus reality is, quite simply, the understanding we have all agreed upon that what we are experiencing is shared by everyone else. You see a church; I see a church. This thing is wrong, and we all agree. This is what a tree looks like. The world is a construct of agreement, chosen and unchosen, free and determined. Prison is where the perceptions, rules, laws, and powers that govern human experience have all come together to say to the one who violated those perceptions, rules, laws, and powers belong behind these bars, in this cell. John has come out of the wilderness, a place that opens into a wide open future. John is the pinnacle of the deep prophetic past, himself the crowning prophet who ushers in the Messiah. The future is expansive for the John the Baptist who comes out of the wilderness. But in prison, the world has become very defined and very closed in.

We often think of John the Baptist as impoverished and crazy, wearing itchy clothes and eating things from the wilderness floor. I have even preached him that way. Recently, I heard another way to think of John the Baptist.<sup>1</sup> A Camel's hair coat would be a high quality fur coat back in the ancient world. It certainly is today. I saw one from Brooks Brothers for \$3300 yesterday. A camel hair coat is a luxury item, even for the wealthy. Locusts have the highest protein content of any insect in the Middle East. Locusts were, and still are, considered a delicacy in Israel. They are a snack for the wealthy. What is better than cultured honey? Wild honey. It is top grade honey and wild honey is way more expensive than commercial honey, then and now. Instead of thinking of John as crazy and poor, think of John as flamboyant and glitzy, like Elvis or Sammy Davis, Jr, or Sinatra. Think Snoop Dogg.

Now how does the proclamation of the coming of the Christ sound to you? John the Baptist dressed well for the coming of the Messiah. The more he was recognized, the more of a target he became for the powers that be. The more he baptized people in the name of the Messiah, the more he drew the interest of the empire. Does this image of John the Baptist bend your reality and understanding of the man?

It should, because the coming of a Messiah is the arrival of a new reality. That this is a new reality is clear throughout Scripture. New realities are unpredictable, wild, disturbing. None of the categories that were in place remain in place once a Messiah arrives on the scene. The world as we know it, quite literally and in every way, will be changed. Nothing looks the same 'after' the arrival of the Messiah. We cannot fit the new reality into the categories and ideas of the old reality.

The modern mind and the modern world has made the dreamworld all about the person who has the dream. Dreams are the function of the brain, which is in an enclosed space, and therefore only reflects the experience of that brain and body in that individual. Asking what dreams are doing and what they mean is a fool's errand, according to the materialist, rationalist mindset - a mindset which is breaking down with each passing day.

Instead, let us remember what our ancestors from around the world over the course of thousands of years thought about dreams. Dreams are the messages of angels, gods, and spirits. Dreams are what we see when the veil of human imposed, agreed upon, consensus reality is lifted. Dreams are artifacts from what is sometimes called 'the really real', the world that supports this one. We have everything backwards and upside down:

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<sup>1</sup> I heard this during a cohort talk with Dr. Leonard Sweet. Dr. Sweet presented this with no reference, so I have no idea where this version of John the Baptist comes from. I love it, though.

*we believe that our actions in this world impact what we will dream, but the truth is that this world is completely influenced and governed by what we dream.*

The prison we have imposed upon ourselves is the consensus, the agreed upon reality we all agree to participate in, just like the prison in the picture on the bulletin by Di Paolo. Just like the prison John is now in. The lines all converge onto a single point, but the wilderness out of which all this has arisen opens into multiple points in the past, present and future. Concrete structures are invaded by the organic, curvy, unpredictable forms of animal, plant and human, but we try to fit everything into one 'perspective'.

When John the Baptist came out of the wilderness, he had an incredible expansive vision of what was to come. The future would be radically altered because of a person, Jesus, and because of the relationship this person has with God. This Jesus event will change everything.

In the wilderness, in the wonder and amazement at being the messenger for the coming Messiah, John the Baptist was open to the greater dream. He was an open channel for the spinning, singing visions of the Kingdom of God coming to Earth in Ezekiel, the dreams of Daniel and Joseph, the soaring alternate realities of Isaiah, the culture-flipping of social and spiritual norms in Hosea and Amos, the beauty and trust in God of Zechariah. And then, in a moment, all those spiritual and eternal realities are crushed into a single perspective, a cell in a human built prison overseen by a temporal and brazenly earthly empire.

But it is more than just space and place that is strange here, because the other thing that gets weird in the 'really real', in the dream world, is time. Time in the dreamworld and in Scripture and in our experience of God and Christ becomes something very different from what we experience in the dayworld.

In the dayworld, we experience time as one moment moving forward into another moment. Time is linear. But in my dream about my house in Eau Claire, I was younger. The people were all younger. Time was weird. The sun was in the sky but it was dusk. *When does a dream take place?*

Time, in Advent, gets very weird. This is the time of waiting. What are we waiting for? The Messiah, whom we know has already come. That is why we gather together to worship, to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah and thus the Savior of the World. And yet, we wait, even in this knowledge, for the future that has been promised. We present ourselves in the present to wait for what has already occurred.

Which brings us to John's question again:

*“Are you the One who is to come, or shall we await another?”*

What a strange way to phrase a question. Many commentaries point to this as John suffering doubt about what he has done and what Jesus is doing. Perhaps. But from the perspective of the dreamworld, this question is intentionally messing with time. Past, present, and future tumble all over each other here.

Are we speaking of past possibilities becoming future realities?  
Are we speaking of present situations changing past realities?  
Is the future coming into the present?

John’s question, the pinnacle prophet of prophets past, is mind-bending. The past questions the future in order to understand the present. Or is it that the future alters the past in order to change how we experience the present? Does Jesus exist in the future, since he is coming again, or is he here with us in the present, and if both are true, doesn’t that change the past? Can we really change the past? The Cross and the Resurrection and the person of Christ seem to say a very strong “Yes” to such a question.

Jesus’ answer to John’s question, though, is as strange as John’s question. As always, Jesus doesn’t answer directly. First, he tells the messenger and the disciples that, indeed, the things that the prophets of the past said would be done are being done. The prophecies of the past are happening now, and you, John the Baptist, were exactly right in the way you presented them.

Then Jesus turns to the crowd, who have witnessed the question from the messenger of John, who was himself the messenger for Jesus. Jesus asks the crowd, *What did you come out here to see? A reed in the wind? A miracle again? What did you think would happen here?*

Jesus is asking perception questions. He is asking people to become dream interpreters. Since we are talking about dreams, let’s reframe Jesus’ answer. *If you came here to see the world from the same point of view as you always see it, you will see what you thought you came here to see. Why would you do that? There are no surprises in your agreed upon reality. But if you came to see to see a prophet, then you have come to see the dream. And if you came to see the dream we are dreaming together, you will see that John the Baptist is the greatest of all prophets who has ever lived. And yet, in this great and continuing dream, even John the Baptist will be the least in heaven once we all start seeing from the perspective of the dream.*

Eternal realities are distorted by human realities. This is what John in prison tells us. The foremothers and forefathers of the faith, the teachers of wisdom of old, the prophets of

the ages, John the Baptist, Jesus Christ are guides and ministers who re-open the gates to the dreamworld from which they arise; they are agents of the really real for our sakes. They remind us of who we are truly becoming. Through those interpreters and through the dreamworld, we ask far better questions about our faith and what we experience in both the dayworld and the dreamworld.

Advent, like John the Baptist and Jesus, is bending our reality, forcing us to walk into the agreed upon, consensus reality with a new vision, a new way of seeing, to see from the perspective of the dream world, not. Can we let time and space bend with the new channels of information and understanding that arrive from those new and other realities? Be prepared though, because the challenge is always the same when confronted with a new reality: will we let the new reality change this world, or will we reinforce the new reality with the prison bars of this agreed upon reality? Let's walk in the dream together and create new realities in Christ together. And if you see Chester while you are out there, tell him I am looking for him.

Amen.