

Christmas Eve - December 24, 2019

“Dreaming a Savior” - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Traditional Lessons and Carols

During Advent, the season just before Christmas, we have been talking about dreams and dreaming and what it means when our dreams and the dreams of God for us meet in this world. In the ancient world, in the times we are talking about tonight, dreams were considered to be visitations by angels, divine messengers, spirits. Some of those dreams were meant for just the person, some were meant for another person, and some were meant to change the world. Dreams spoke to present situations and also to the future. Back then, people knew how to sort out which dreams were which. They were messages from another equally present reality, a reality we spend a significant amount of time in during our dreaming. Today, we think all dreams are just about the person who had the dream, which seems to me to be as weird an idea as this ancient view of dreams I just described.

Last night, I dreamed I was somewhere with lots of really nice, high end houses. The place reminded me of the River Road in Minneapolis, which has about 2 miles of really beautiful homes that line the Mississippi River. I wasn't there in the dream, but it reminded me of there. It was dusk and one of the houses was made of glass and steel, very modern. The ground floor lights were on. They were recessed, soft lights, and they illuminated a kind of museum. There were urns and vases and other vessels on stands, arranged in a very artistic way. A couple of the glass walls were slid open, so I went down and stepped inside. Something beeped, an alarm that told someone they had a guest. There was a red laser system that I had set off. I heard someone upstairs, then someone coming down the stairs. A man of Asian descent came over to me and started talking with me. This was his space and he was an artist. He picked up a large marble urn that was square shaped and showed me how he had etched flames along the edges of the urn and carved a symmetrical design in the front. I saw that he had also etched in the price of \$300,000 in small letters along the base of the urn. I told him that seemed very expensive. He said, *“I charge whatever I think it is worth, not what I think people will pay.”* We talked some more. It turned out that he was a professional thief as well as an artist. He stole ancient artifacts, then brought them to his shop and remade them into what I saw in the ground floor of his house. He said, *“I rely on ancient things and bring them into the present day so other people can see them.”*

Aren't dreams strange?

Christmas Eve and Christmas have always felt to me like we are entering into a time of dreaming, even when I was a little kid. We do certain rituals to make ourselves more

present for the dreaming. Wrap gifts, prepare dinners, watch special movies. Perhaps this service tonight is one of those rituals of dreaming for you.

But it is also these rituals that make Christmas hard. Let me let you in on a little secret of us pastors - this is one of the hardest times of year to preach and plan. Easter is easier because we are at the end of the story. Here, we are at the beginning. And yet it is such a familiar story. But the biggest difficulty of this season are the expectations. I know that this is true of many of you as well. So many agendas come to the table on Christmas. We compound those expectations by making it all about the gifts we get and the gifts we give. And then, if you have conflicts between family members, losses that have occurred either recently or in the past, arguments about politics or religion, failed and broken relationships, the expectations, the weight of this time, can be devastating. Few other times of year hold the kind of weight and expectations that Christmastime does.

I think part of why this happens is because Christmas is a time of dreaming and because it is such a time, it is also a time of approaching the future without knowing. In that way, Christmas becomes an opportunity. How many of you enter a dream knowing what is going to happen? Dreams, by their very nature, open into unknown realms and unknown futures. In my dream, I was in an unknown place with a person I have never met surrounded by things I have never seen before. It is kind of funny that a time that is devoted to welcoming the unknown, Christmastime, it is also the time we fill with personal and political agendas, past expectations, conflicts, rather than taking the time to take in what we cannot know.

Christmas is a time to sit with Mother Mary. Think about her and the story we have heard. Mary has **no idea** what the future will bring. When angels speak to us, they come to us with open-ended prophecies and messages. There is no way, assuming we have never heard this story before, we can get from Mary's visitation by Gabriel to the Cross and then to the Resurrection and then to us here tonight based on what the Angel Gabriel told Mary. And yet, looking back from the end of the story, from here, to the beginning, it seems this story is the only inevitable outcome.

Mary's response to the unknown future of which she will play an integral part may be one of the most powerful prayers in all of Scripture, "*Let it be unto me, according to thy word.*" At every moment in Mary's life with Jesus, she will always remember that an angel of the Lord came to her and told her that she would bear the Son of God. I love the way the Gospel of Luke puts it: *But Mary stored up these things in her memory and in her heart kept wondering what they meant.*

The visitations of dreams and angels are not answers to problems; they are opportunities to wonder about and see how the meanings of things change over time. We, like Mother

Mary, keep wondering what these things mean. The angels also visit the shepherds. Dreams of angels visit Joseph, Jesus' earthly father, and also the wise ones who come to Jesus. I have no doubt that these visitations, either in waking or in sleeping, of angels and messengers stayed with the shepherds and Joseph their entire lives, touchstones into meaning and the unknown, over and over again.

They relied upon those memories. No matter the situation, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the wise ones, relied on the experience and the knowledge the Lord considered each of them worthy enough to bear, to witness, to welcome the One who has been born to save the world, worthy enough to be visited by angels and dreams.

What will we rely on this Christmas Eve? When things get difficult, either when you leave this space tonight or at any time during the coming year, what will you rely on?

Personal and political agendas, expectations built from the past, conflicts, arguments - none of these will tell you that you were worthy in the eyes of God, worthy to bear witness to the presence of God among us, worthy to welcome the One we call Immanuel, God with us, Jesus Christ. Will you fill the unknown, the time of dreams, with all the known things?

So often, we read these stories, these encounters with divine beings, these extraordinary experiences as happening in the ancient past. They are separated from us through time, through superstition, through rationality and scientific thinking, through literalisms and hyper-mythologizing. The Christian faith is not a museum of old ideas. This is a story meant for you and I, for right now. We are incredibly sensitive creative beings who are meant to have these ancient dreams today and make meaning of them now, to welcome messengers of the Lord who open us into unknown futures. We are creatures of great worth because the Lord has set our worth in his eyes, not in the worth of our bank accounts or our degrees or lack of them or in what others say about us. We are given direct access to this great knowing and understanding through this baby born this night, not just about ourselves, but also especially our neighbors and enemies.

These things of the ancient past are brought to us so that we can experience them now, in the present, so that God's future will become known, even as it is completely unknown right now.

The great teacher and civil rights leader, Howard Thurman, said,
There is more to life than we previously imagined. Angels hide in every nook and cranny, magi masquerade as everyday people, and shepherds wear the garments of day laborers. The whole earth is brimming with glory for those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

What will we rely on this night and going forward into this year?

Let us rely on the dream God has for us, a dream of a Savior who loves us and welcomes us into the future God has for each one of us. Perhaps that dream will come to you in the form of angels. Perhaps the dream will come to you in the form of another person echoing something you have been thinking for a long time. Perhaps the ritual of this night will create dreams for you that help you hold these things in your heart and memory, just like our Mother Mary, so you may always remember that God loves each of you and, as followers of Jesus, we are continually learning anew what it means to love one another.

Merry Christmas to all.