

On this first Sunday of Advent, we begin a sermon series entitled “Those Who Dream”. God spoke to many people in the Bible through dreams – Jacob and Joseph and the prophets in the Old Testament, and in the Christmas story, Mary and Joseph and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, the shepherds and the magi. All these people encountered God in their dreams, and then responded to God’s dreams for the world with the way they lived out their lives. In this season of Advent, we step into the mystery and awe of God’s dreams for the world, and we pray that God’s dreams for the world shape our reality.

Our text for this morning is Mark 13: 24-37. Let us pray:

God of all dreams, You dreamed a dream for your people- a dream of hope and justice and a dream for eyes wide open. Plant that same dream in us. Pour out your Spirit on our hearts and minds so that we may stay awake and dream what you dream through your Word proclaimed. Amen.

Hear these words of Jesus:

²⁴“But in those days, after that suffering,

the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light,

²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven,

and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. ²⁷Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

²⁸“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at

dawn,³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

“Keep alert”, Jesus says in this passage, and then twice he says, “Keep awake”, because, he says, “You do not know the day or the hour when the Son of Man will come into the world.” On the surface, these words of Jesus refer to what we call “the second coming”, that moment at the end of time when Jesus comes back in all his glory. But in this passage, he also says that “this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place”, and that was many generations ago. So it seems to me that Jesus is saying here “Keep alert, keep awake, for you do not know the day or the hour when you will see “God with us” in your midst, any day, every generation.”

In this passage, Jesus also talks about things that are wildly disorienting – “the sun will be darkened, the moon will give no light, the stars will fall from heaven” – and he says that this time of disorientation and disruption and threat will be part of recognizing Jesus coming into our midst. Well, the sun may not be darkened today and the moon still gives light, but this past year has been wildly disorienting and disruptive and threatening – between the pandemic and all its’ many repercussions, the racial justice uprisings of the summer, and the climate crisis bearing down on us. In this text, I hear Jesus saying to us, “In the midst of all the disruption and disorientation of these days, look around, pay attention, stay alert, to see the Son of Man in your midst.” Maybe it takes disruption to be able to see things in a new way; maybe it takes disruption to see God’s dreams for a better world, to be able to hear God calling us to live differently.

“Keep awake,” Jesus says. It’s fascinating to me that leaders in the racial justice movement use the phrase of people being “woke” - people “waking up” like never before to our country’s brutal history of racial violence and injustice. There is nothing new about incidents of racial terror, but somehow, many of us have been oblivious to it. You might say we have been “asleep” to the issue of racism, but are now beginning to wake up and pay attention to it. Could this be connected to what Jesus is saying when he tells us to “keep awake”, to “stay alert”? And I wonder what else might Jesus be calling us to “wake up” about? How else is God breaking into our lives, through all this disruption, with God’s dreams for how the world is supposed to be?

What are the dreams we carry with us into this Advent season? Some of us may dream of a deeper connection with God. Some of us may dream of healing from a disease or healing from grief. Some of us may dare to dream of sobriety and stability. Some of us may dream of acceptance despite our sexual orientation. Some of us may dream of racial justice, or economic

justice, or a livable planet. And some of us may have given up on dreaming, because our dreams have been crushed too many times in the past.

The African-American writer Langston Hughes struggled to hold on to his dreams of racial justice in his day. He wrote a short poem entitled “Dreams”:

*Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.*

*Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.*

Daring to dream of a better world connects us to deep hope – and calls us to live out of that hope. This hope is not merely “looking on the bright side of things”; this hope does not deny the painful realities of life. Instead, this hope is a fierce claiming of God’s enduring love and God’s constant engagement with us as we long for a better world. This fierce hope sustains us as we work together for the world as God intended it to be, a world in which people live together with compassion, tending to each other’s needs and caring for the earth which sustains human life, a world in which peace and joy and love reign. Dreaming of a better world is an act of hope, an act of resistance, an act of faith.

In 2003, a children’s fantasy book came out, entitled The Tale of Despereaux, about the adventures of a mouse. The author, Kate DiCamillo, posted this reflection recently:

This morning I woke up thinking about a fifth-grade boy who came to a book-signing event years ago at a bookstore in North Carolina.

I signed his copy of Despereaux and he said, “My teacher said fifth grade is the year of asking questions.”

“Really?” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. He took out a notebook. “Every day we’re supposed to ask someone different a good question and listen really good and then write down the answer when they’re done talking.”

“Oh,” I said, “I get it. I’m someone different. Okay, what’s your question?”

“My question is how do you get all that hope into your stories?”

“That’s not a good question,” I said. “That’s a great question. Let me think. Um. I guess that writing the story is an act of hope, and so even when I don’t feel hopeful, writing the story can lead me to hope. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah,” he said. He looked me in the eye. “It’s kind of a long answer. But I can write it all out. Thanks.”

He picked up his copy of Despereaux, and walked away—writing in his notebook.

This was years ago.

Why did I wake up this morning and think of this child?

Maybe because this is a time to start asking good questions, a time to write down the answers, a time to listen to each other really well.

I’m going to get myself a little spiral bound notebook.

I’m going to listen and hope.

Amen.