

The Second Sunday of Advent  
December 4, 2016

**"WHAT DREAMS MAY COME"**  
by Mary Anne Biggs

Isaiah 11:1-10 ~ Matthew 3:1-12

I have a bone to pick today with every teacher and preacher and parent, including myself. And that is how, in our rush to teach the rules and set the standards and socialize our children, we so often smother their imagination ... discourage their creative gift ... and stifle their dreams. Raising children is a fine and difficult art. You cannot let them grow unrestricted like so many wild weeds. They need structure and discipline, firm limits, clear values. But almost invariably in the process of socializing our children to fit the world, we shape them too much in the image of the world. We squelch that part of their soul which might dream of *more* than the way things are. Where would we be if it were not for those among us who push the limits ... who question the rules ... who refuse the "can'ts" and "nevers" ... and dare to dream new dreams? As Helen Keller said, "No pessimist ever discovered the secrets of the stars, or sailed to an uncharted land, or opened a new heaven to the human spirit." I say, imagination is among the highest values ... and it must be encouraged ... for the capacity to dream is one of God's best blessings to us.

Perhaps it's more of a mixed blessing. In some ways it is easier to settle for the way things are... to accommodate ourselves to the status quo ... to just go with the flow. Visionaries are always wrestling with depression ... because reality is as hard as concrete ... while their dreams seem a distant mirage. I know that I'm not as idealistic as I used to be. It gets harder as you get older and realize how difficult it is to change yourself ... let alone the whole wide world. Still, I cannot abandon some dreams that possess me, no matter how hard I try. I give up on them, and then slowly, irresistibly, they draw me back in. Not all my dreams deserve to come true ... because some of my dreams are selfish and personally ambitious. Even when I achieve those, they don't satisfy me for long. But those dreams which haunt me most are the most difficult to attain ... the ones which only God can accomplish ... because finally ... they are God's dreams for what our world should be. And the resistance just serves to remind me that God's dream is not mine to fulfill ... at least not in its fullness. I can make my contribution, but these dreams will not happen ... until and unless ... God finally brings them about.

This is the season for dreaming, of course. During Advent we read the great visions of the prophets who imagined a better world ... a world of peace and justice and righteousness ... a world flowing from the heart of God. We read texts so beautiful that two thousand years of repetition has not dulled them. They are enough to make you weep, unless your heart has become so seared by cynicism that no poetry can move you ... no beauty can touch you. I love these visions from the prophet Isaiah:

*(Isaiah 9:2-7) The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing*

*plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

And our reading today from Isaiah which told us that: *The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:1-16)*

My favorite passage from Isaiah proclaims that we are the agents of God's dream for the world:

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion - to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastation's of many generations (Isaiah 61:1-4).*

Isaiah even tells us what God's dream will look like when it comes to fruition:

*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord -*

These are breathtaking visions which God has given to us. Can you think of any better dreams than these?

The biblical prophets are remembered for their hellfire and damnation warnings about God's judgment. But their prophetic rage was set ablaze by their prophetic imagination. The reality

that they saw was so far from the dreams that God gave them ... and they believed these dreams possible. They are telling us that prejudice and poverty and war and oppression and violence and hate are not necessary. It is within our reach to create a world in which all God's children can live together in peace.

Sometimes it seems hopeless. I did some work on racial reconciliation while I was in my last semester at seminary. We met with an ecumenical group of laity to ask if they would encourage their pastors to dedicate one Sunday to address this issue from the pulpit. The reaction was astounding. Many felt that there was no problem...that racism had long been solved by the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and by the historic election of President Obama. Some denied any personal responsibility. "I never owned any slaves or voted for any Jim Crow laws; why do I need to repent?" Some felt that we were up to something...saying that we were just a bunch of fundamentalists trying to make them feel guilty. (I kind of liked that one; nobody has ever called me a fundamentalist before!) I actually heard one person say that slavery was a good thing for the descendants of the slaves because it brought them over here to this great country! God help us!

So it goes with almost any work of justice or peace or ministry you do. The homeless seem to multiply. Tribal wars keep breaking out here and there. Hate crimes are increasing. We are better at putting band aids on the wounds than we are at curing the sickness. There is still so much darkness in our world, within each of us ... myself included. Will we ever see the world God imagined when God spun the world on its axis and the morning stars danced? Will God's dreams for us ever come true?

You better believe it! The child has been given to us. The Son has been born to us: "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Jesus grew up with these great God dreams bequeathed to him by centuries of prophets. He preached the vision: "*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me, has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" And what did the world do in response to this extraordinary vision? They nailed him to the cross. They nailed him to the cross. You see, there are always those who profit from leaving evil be. There are always those who have something to lose if the world changes for the good and God's vision comes. You see, if you establish human harmony, peace with justice and righteousness, we might lose some of our status. We might lose some of our power. We might have less so that others might have enough. We might lose our excuses. So when Jesus said, let's change the world to a place fit for God's beloved and treat the downtrodden ... even the most notorious sinners ... with dignity and respect, they nailed him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, because ... don't you see ... nothing can kill God's dreams!

Therefore, don't give up on the dreams that drive you ... the ones that God holds before us again in this season. "*Peace on earth, good will to all people.*" God can do it. We can do it, with God's help. Don't slow down in the struggle to bring God's love to reality in the human family. If nothing else, let God make the dream a reality in your own heart. God has promised us all that these dreams will come true ... and has called us to take part in a new creation. God has given us the capacity to envision a human family living in peace and prosperity ... in righteousness and justice. God has given us the Christ as the guarantee that these dreams will come true! No entrenched evil ... no reactionary selfishness ... no oppressing cross will stop Christ from

reaching the goal and bringing us with him. He is the great dreamer, and his dreams are the only truth worth reaching for.

Forward then, my fellow dreamers. Forward. Let us never give up the dream.

May we pray?

Dreaming God,

You have made us in your image. You have given us a passion for the possible, a restlessness which abides as long as any child goes hungry, any woman weeps, any man casts his eyes abjectly to the ground. You have given us the spiritual vision to imagine a world where no one fears his fellow and no one betrays her friend, where there are no strangers, only neighbors, and your love reaches even to the hearts of the most violent of beasts. In this season we hear your dreams again, and we almost wilt with waiting. But if your time has not yet come for reasons beyond our understanding, make us patient but not too patient; make us strong but not too strong; give us peace, but never complacency, and fill us with your love in the name of Jesus the greatest of all dreamers, the greatest of all dreams. Amen.