

“The Dream of God”
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Matthew 1:18-21
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Amid all the news of the past month, there is one story in particular which has stood out for me and no, it has NOT been the resurgence of Covid throughout the world nor involved the toll that inflation has taken on our pocketbooks or even the question of whether the Steelers will make the playoffs this year. It is the saga of Kevin Strickland, a black man from Kansas City, Missouri who has received much press of late. Last month, a judge exonerated him after more than 43 years in prison admitting that the state had incorrectly convicted him all those years ago. It was the longest confirmed wrongful conviction case in Missouri's history and one of the longest in the NATION'S history. You see, Strickland was found guilty for the 1978 murders of three individuals and sentenced to life without parole even though there was no physical evidence to link him to the crime scene, or that family members had an air-tight alibi as to his whereabouts that night, or even that the KILLERS THEMSELVES admitted he was never there. The case was built entirely on the testimony of one eyewitness- the sole survivor who later attempted MULTIPLE TIMES to recant her testimony because she said she was pressured by police to pick him.

Now think of that- 43 years or 2/3rds of a person's life was unfairly stolen from a man, years he can never get back again. For 15,487 days, he would spend every morning, noon and night confined to a tiny cement cell where he'd never again feel the sensation of grass under his feet, where his every movement was under constant surveillance by the guards, where he was unable to even attend his own mother's funeral who had passed away only two months earlier. And yet, as all those days turned into months and those months into years--SCORES of them--he NEVER LOST FAITH or GAVE UP HOPE. As a Christian, he had a dream of one day being liberated, that he'd walk out those front gates a free man and once again be able to hunt and fish and play baseball with family members like he used to. He believed that as God was a God of justice, justice would eventually win out and his release would one day become a reality- and by God's grace, IT DID! When a reporter asked him about his legacy, how he'd like people to remember him, he replied, “Just a fighter, a person that just didn't give up.”

As Kevin Strickland can testify, a “hope born of faith” has often been the ONLY thing oppressed persons have to fall back on, to help them through the worst of times. For centuries, negro slaves in this country could only DREAM about their independence as from sun up to sun down, they worked the fields plucking cotton or pulling tobacco under the impress of a white man's whip. As they labored, they would sing of one day experiencing TRUE freedom, if not on THIS EARTHLY Canaan, then certainly in the HEAVENLY Canaan to come. Just as the Lord fought for Moses and the Israelites, just as he toppled Goliath before David, just as he appeared to Jacob on the ladder, so would God work in THEIR lives. Their songs summarized these beliefs, expressing the genuine spiritual realities of a world STILL UNSEEN to them, yet no LESS real.

This morning's Old Testament lesson comes from the book of Zephaniah. Zephaniah was one of God's prophets who they estimate was born around 660 B.C.- that is approximately seven hundred years before the birth of Christ. He came from royal lineage with his great-great-grandfather being Hezekiah, king of Judah, and he prophesied during the reign of King Manasseh, in a period when Assyria, the greatest power in the West, was regnant. Manasseh was an especially EVIL ruler whose reign came about forty years after Ahaz, ANOTHER evil king who I spoke about two weeks ago. Out of great fear and respect for the Assyrians, Manasseh TOO continued the custom of adopting and spreading Assyrian customs while worshiping that nation's deities. By whoring after other gods, Judah was now apostate when they were told to love Jehovah ALONE and have no OTHER gods before him.

For their apostasy, Zephaniah received the call from God to speak doom to Judah. His words to her were words of total judgment, that God would utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth- every man and beast including all the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. Judah and all her inhabitants would be cut off from Jerusalem and the REST of her homeland. He indicted them with the strongest of words- the verdict of a righteous and angry God.

And Zephaniah made it clear to them that this judgment was IMMINENT. Because Jehovah was a HOLY God, God HAD to react against their sin. He said, "The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast...A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom...I will bring distress on men, so that they shall walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the Lord...In the fires of his jealous wrath, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full, yea, sudden end he will make of ALL the inhabitants of the earth." (1:14-18) Thus the doom is not just limited to Zion but to ALL the peoples of the earth for their constant infidelity.

But while dark clouds gather and destruction is at hand, God then offers them this hope in the form of his DREAM for them. He tells them that their future destiny will not ultimately end in RUIN but rather in something GLORIOUS. After being told that she will be crushed and scattered, God WILL gather his people home again. Once the disaster is past, victory, peace, and rejoicing lie ahead. The Lord will initiate a Golden Age unlike any they have ever seen. Hence, the prophet instructs them to "Sing aloud and shout!" With their troubles behind them, Jehovah will now be in their midst and he promises to rejoice over them with gladness; he swears he will renew them in his love. He will gather up the wounded and take away their reproach. Their fortunes will ONCE AGAIN be restored.

How easy it is to forget that the Old Testament is all about hope, but for too long we have thought of it as nothing more than law and wrath and judgment. Yet nothing could be further from the truth- it is REALLY about HOPE! The story of Israel begins with God promising his people an HEIR, then a GREAT NAME, then a NEW LAND, and finally a COMMUNITY OF BLESSING among the rest of the nations. God has the power to make all things new so that two persons as hopelessly barren as Sarah and Abraham are able to conceive and see that long-held promise of an heir finally become a REALITY.

Of those themes of prophetic hope, there is nothing private or spiritual or otherworldly about them. When God tells Micah to tell the people that it shall come to pass in the last days

that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established and the peoples of the earth shall flow to it that they may learn of his ways and walk in his paths; when he promises also in that day that the nations shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, that nation shall not lift up sword against nation and neither shall they learn war any more, he is not speaking of some vague wish for people to latch onto. He is talking about a promise that is as sure and dependable as the reality WE presently inhabit.

SIMILARLY, when Isaiah declares of God that he will “create a new heaven and a new earth, and that all mankind will from henceforth dwell in security and peace,” that “the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; the dust shall be the serpent’s food,” he is not speaking METAPHORICALLY of some spiritual peace in the soul but of an ACTUAL DAY AND AGE in which these things shall TRULY come to pass.

And when Ezekiel states that in the Last Day God shall make a covenant of peace with the peoples of the earth, that they will be able to dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods without fear; that the trees of the field shall yield their fruit and the earth shall yield its increase; that they shall know who the Lord is when he breaks the bars of their yoke and delivers them from those who enslaved them, the prophet understood he was declaring an ACTUAL social, historical, political, and economic order and not some pie-in-the-sky mumbo-jumbo.

In the New Testament, the disciple John is exiled to the island of Patmos where he is given a final vision of all things. In it, God reveals to him his final destination for his people: “There was the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it and his servants shall worship him; they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads. And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever.” All these texts show the DIFFERENCE between God merely offering them some hope, some kind of palliative to get them through their immediate crisis, and God providing them with a DREAM- one which would carry them, not just through their CURRENT situation but in the ages YET TO COME!

When we look at the dreams God had given to Micah and Isaiah and Ezekiel and John, we see that they are REALLY ONE AND THE SAME. Together, they represent God’s collective vision for his people, the hope of Israel and the Church- the establishment of a new social order which would embody peace, justice, freedom, equity, and well-being. This hoped-for kingdom would one day take public and visible form and it would displace all the other orders and kingdoms that presently claim our allegiance. But we must be clear on this- it doesn’t say that this will take place in the HEAVENLIES long after we have died nor is it meant to be some personal, privatized hope that will merely find fulfillment IN THE HUMAN SPIRIT. Rather, God’s spokespersons believed that this kingdom would become A LIVING REALITY RIGHT HERE IN OUR MIDST- not only in our hearts and minds but in our SOCIAL and POLITICAL and ECONOMIC INSTITUTIONS AS WELL. It would represent a NEW AGE in which human sin would be destroyed and all injustices in the world be rectified. With God’s

assistance, it would begin NOW, and though we would never see it completed in OUR lifetimes, we could still be confident that God, in God's own time, would finally bring it to fulfilment.

This past week, Justo Gallego died at the age of 96. He was a former Spanish monk who one day received a dream to build a cathedral to God. He subsequently spent decades constructing a grand edifice as an act of faith and devotion, and did so almost single-handedly with neither public funding nor support from his Roman Catholic Church. With its sprawling entrance steps, 125-foot-tall cupola and two cloisters flanking it, the edifice—commonly called the “Cathedral of Faith”—grew to dominate the farmland that Mr. Gallego had inherited. Using nothing but recycled materials like old car tires and bicycle wheels, leftovers from local factories and unwanted bricks that he picked up from other construction sites, his dream gradually took shape, and as it progressed, it even became a tourist attraction. He had no training in construction but he argued that his religious faith and determination more than made up for his lack of architectural or engineering skill. He was unfazed by those who criticized his project as the absurd notion of a crazy man, an eccentric monk. However, he knew it was a vision he'd received from God- a dream that would sustain him even when everyone else told him it was IMPOSSIBLE and that he was no more than a FOOL. But such is the power of a dream!

Then again, God has ALWAYS used such “fools,” hasn't he. Such were the PROPHETS OF OLD- always seeing the possible where everyone else saw the improbable. Amidst all the judgment and destruction the people of Judah had brought upon themselves, God raised up persons of faith who could behold a time when God would restore them to their homeland and fulfill their calling to be a light to the gentiles- those prophets, God's personal mouthpieces, looked and could SEE such a day. It was a dream, a vision that would carry the Jews through seventy years of exile in a foreign land and keep their hopes alive centuries afterwards. For US, the Church—as the first sign that that dream was at last becoming a reality--began with THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST IN BETHLEHEM. When we study his life and see how he reached out and embraced persons of ALL stripes- young and old, women as well as men, the healthy and the sick, rich and poor alike, both learned and illiterate, Jew and gentile, and made them feel accepted and loved, we can now say we know what that kingdom looks like. Since Jesus's entrance into this world two thousand years ago, NONE of us now ever has an excuse that we DON'T know what that kingdom is or what it is God expects from us.

This coming of the new age and the new governance of God lay at the heart of biblical faith and it is what makes the message of the prophets and of our Christian gospel so radical. It provides us with a measuring stick by which we, as Christians, are to evaluate and judge the CURRENT society we live in. Christ HIMSELF instructed us to work towards its realization when he asked us to pray “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” But we know that the kingdom has not come “on earth as it is in heaven” when we continue to wage war on one another, ravaging whole countries and killing so many innocent lives. We know that God's kingdom is still far from us when people, often of a different race or ethnicity, sexual orientation or personal life style, are looked down upon and relegated to lower-class status. And we know that the kingdom of God is not yet here when we refuse to reach a hand out to those who are socially or economically disadvantaged, whether they are poor or hungry or just plain lost between the cracks. Christ's kingdom, God's dream for us and his world, is nothing short of a

mandate in our present society and it must make us critical of present institutions when they fall far short of that vision.

Now God has ALWAYS employed dreams and visions to speak to his people, and they're ESPECIALLY prominent in the account of our Lord's birth. Matthew informs us that the announcement of Christ's birth, the warning to the Holy Family to flee to Egypt, and then the invitation for them to return to Israel all came to Joseph through dreams. We're also told the wise men returned home by a different route after "having been warned in a dream." However, we need to be clear that there is a distinction between having a "hope" and possessing a "dream" as there is a subtle but distinct difference between them. You see, a HOPE is a generalized feeling; it is a deep desire or impulse for something that has not yet been achieved; hopes tend to be personal and subjective in nature. A DREAM, on the other hand, takes those fondest hopes and deepest aspirations and begins the process of translating them into some kind of reality. Employing our imagination, our hopes are transformed into a specific dream or vision that is capable of stirring or inspiring the hopes and dreams OF OTHERS. When Martin Luther King addressed America on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that hot afternoon in August, 1963, he didn't say, "I have a HOPE." He knew people hadn't come to hear his HOPES. He said, "I have a DREAM!" and then went on to articulate just what that dream looked like. God's desire for his creation was not some vague hope or aspiration God kept treasured within his own heart. NO! God possessed a DREAM, a CONCRETE VISION- one which he delivered through his prophets and ultimately made possible through the birth, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ; a dream God has now extended toward US to participate in so that WE might in turn take it up into our OWN hearts and strive to make it a reality OURSELVES!

By now, I hope we're all able to see that the Bible has always been a futuristic book, a book of dreams and visions. God gave Abraham a dream and he BELIEVED that promise; he journeyed in obedience to it without ever knowing where he would end up. When Israel became captive in Egypt, God ONCE AGAIN gave his people a vision. He promised to liberate them and provide them their own land which he EVENTUALLY DID. When Judah was taken into exile in Babylon, God raised up prophets to revive their dream. He revealed through Isaiah how in the Last Day, the Lord's house would be established in the top of the mountain and all the nations would stream to it. God would inaugurate an era of unprecedented peace and love, where swords would be beaten into plowshares and spears converted into pruning-knives. Nation would not lift sword against nation nor would they ever again train for war. This was GOD'S VISION for his world, a dream that sustained them even in their DARKEST MOMENTS.

With the birth of Jesus, God began to REALIZE that dream. By sending his Son into the world, he established a kingdom founded upon love, mercy, and justice for ALL people. He opened its gates so wide as to allow the WHOLE WORLD in- GENTILE AS WELL AS Jew. By his death and resurrection, God confronted and destroyed the forces of evil and death; he freed us from its dominion that we might live as God's children OUGHT to live, as citizens of his kingdom. Through the outpouring of his Spirit, the love and joy and peace that CHRIST KNEW became OUR OWN.

What that means for US is that REGARDLESS of one's age, the dream hasn't ended YET. Christ promised to one day return for US, to raise us up from out of the dust and bring history to a close. Then this promise, made so long ago to Moses and the prophets, to the apostles and early Church, will finally be COMPLETE and we will live with Christ and the rest of God's children FOREVER. That dream in all its fullness and power, in spite of all the bad news we hear each day, is STILL alive this morning. From the long lineage of prophets and apostles, it has been handed down through history and is now entrusted into our OWN keeping- God's dream has now become the dream of the CHURCH, the dream of YOU AND ME. This means that as Christians, we cannot shut our eyes and ears to inequality and injustice, to issues of war and peace. As members of God's kingdom, we must never allow the bowels of our compassion to dry up; we must never stop caring and fighting for the rights of those weaker than ourselves. Our concern and sympathies must be ever-enlarging, ever-expanding. In other words, we must DARE TO DREAM GOD'S DREAM- a dream rooted in the earliest pages of the Bible; a dream based upon love, mercy, peace, and justice; and a dream that has and will become our eternal inheritance! Believe it, my friends, hold on to it tightly and never let go of it for it is our strength and our salvation. Amen and amen.