

Dreams, ...and in the Meantime
Lessons: Isaiah 25:6-9, Revelation 21:1-4a

Lessons from Scripture

Isaiah 25:6-9

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.⁷ And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. ⁹ It will be said on that day, "Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

Rev. 21:1-6a

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

Sermon

The book of Revelation is filled with visions, and ends with this dream of a "new heaven and a new earth...from God." Let's begin with a dream? What is your dream? What is your hope? What promise pulls you toward the future?

We all have a dream. We never stop dreaming. Sometimes we hold on to them and cherish them, turn them into motivations and goals and plans. Sometimes our dreams can become distant hopes – out there where we think they are beyond our grasp. Sometimes life or time or some event has dashed our dreams and made us feel hopeless. Sometimes we try to forget dreams, because we think they have passed us by – when the truth is we have passed up on them.

We were made to dream. God made us to look toward the future. The difference between Adam and Eve and all the other animals was they could dream, ...look into tomorrow and imagine it could be different. So, God's best gift to us is putting the promise and the peril of "what if" into our hearts and hands.

People have said that a nation, a family, a community, a church is only as strong as its dreams. Maybe there is some truth there. When we forget our hopes for the future, we usually focus on our fears in the present. When we stop imagining, we give up on the promise of God's what-if. When we stop looking ahead, we see only peril in the present, and we want to go back to some past that we convince ourselves was better than the future could be – mainly because we got through it and wonder if we will get through tomorrow. It is not good when a culture, a church, a person loses faith and caves in to fear.

Facing the future with faith is what it means to be what God has made us to be – people of God's promise, hoping for God's future. AND living by faith in the present by being faith-full.

What is your dream? What is your promise? Is it as big as the one in Isaiah or Revelation?

If anyone had an excuse to give up a dream, it was those Christians back then when Revelation was written. Some churches love to study Revelation for all the wrong reasons. All those mysteries and puzzles and tiny symbol-details become a great excuse to get completely absorbed in minutia of impending disaster that feeds fear and denial. But for faith and hope, the real message of Revelation is God's triumph over a world of horrible suffering and real evil.

Presbyterians tend to run the other direction whenever someone mentions Revelation. Let's admit that we generally duck whenever someone says "Bible study." Like an Elder in my past said once. "We put Bibles in the pew racks. We don't carry them to church, ...and we don't read them much, either."

Those Christians back then went through, ...well, Hell on earth. We just think we have problems in our time. These people were the victims of decadence and greed and violence and power and privilege and self-centeredness. Come to think of it, times are not much different for a lot of people, but we Christians are not really the victims in our time.

We Presbyterians quit accentuating the negative. We need to grow up and get over it, and go back to the positive work at making our old earth look more like God's new heaven. The Presbyterian solution is always to quit complaining and start doing something for God every day. Churches and communities and cultures are built on Christians with imagination who decide we might do something new – like say, dream up a different kind of Halloween night for the community. And before you know it, we help create a traffic jam at the entrance to a Fall Festival.

So here's the first lesson today: the Revelation Christians kept the dream big when we might have turned to despair. This passage is at the END of the book. They were dreaming in the middle of their terror and troubles, and they were imagining a tomorrow that would – by God – be different!

God was bigger than their problems and their fears. Faith and hope would keep them going until God brought a new heaven and a new earth, and every tear was dry, and crying and pain

and death were things of the past. God's future was more real than their past, and it was worth the work of faith-fullness in the present.

My Texas roots run deep. My father was born on 200 acres of what mother called "God-forsaken dirt and mesquite" near Goliad. His father plowed a 20 acre field with a horse. If my dad had ever seen the green grass and real trees and running water of Washington County, he would have thought the new heaven and new earth had already come. I was a teenager when we visited my grandparents' graves in Goliad, and I first saw the 3 other graves beside them: a baby still-born, 2 children killed when a flu epidemic swept through in the 1914. My Dad looked me straight in the eye and said, "Son, don't let anyone talk about 'the good old days.'" The good thing about the old days is they are gone forever."

The first century church never prayed for a return to the old days. They prayed for a new day, a new heaven and a new earth – by God.

...because they put their hope in their future and their faith in the present in a God who is always making all thing new.

Yes, we Presbyterians are always just a little different from most other Christians. Our worship is centered more on grace than guilt. Our prayers are generally more pointed to gratitude for what God has given than greed for what God should provide next on their wish list some call prayer.

We Presbyterians trust God, and give thanks. In comfortable worship, we thank God we cannot imagine the hard work of faithfulness in a world as bad as the one that made people dream the dreams we hear from Revelation.

But maybe a second lesson today might be about where we point our gratitude. We generally look back to the past, and say grace over what we've got. We give thanks for what WAS. Maybe today we should turn our thanksgivings to the promise of God, and give thanks for what WILL BE! God's dream for us is bigger than any of the dreams we can imagine for ourselves. Let's give thanks for God's promise, and let what God dreams for us pull us toward a future that comes closer to what God wants for us, ...and for all of God's people.

The imagining of Revelation and the dream of God's making all things new is so big that it will never be completely fulfilled. So we live "in the meantime." We live in the time between those people in the past who imagined God's future and gave us their dreams, and the time out there when our dreams of God's future become the spur to the imagination of others.

Let's give thanks for those people who lived faithfully in their meantime and gave us their dreams. They didn't sit on our hands and wait for God to do something. They didn't look at all the evil around them and wonder why God hadn't already done something. They didn't waste energy deciding whom to blame for their troubles. They didn't pay more attention to the news than to say... well, the New Testament. Here's the thing: the reason we are here this morning is the people from Revelation through a Reformation and the start of all the churches including this

one who had hope in God's promise and faith in God's dream to make a difference in the world around them.

We are here - not just because Jesus lived God's love in an evil world that put him on a cross. We are here because of all the people who did what Christ asked them to do: they followed his lead, and loved others the way he loved them.

It's that simple – so simple that eleven unsophisticated people who had no idea what they were doing could band together with a few others to trust the dream and live the promise ...and change the world.

Today is All Saint's Day on the Christian calendar. Presbyterians have ignored this holy-day for too long. Yes, we are always just a little different, but it is time we put our little different view on this really important holy-day. Our history includes not believing in saints. We didn't think that people should be separated for their goodness and given a title. After all, they were just like everybody else, and worse than some. Well, yes and no. We don't have official saints. But we can have our own un-official saints.

We all have saints. That is why we can celebrate all the saints. They are the people who live the promise. They are the people who image life the way Christ would want it, and simply try to live it. They are the imperfect people who show us perfect grace. They are the people who understand that grace is not an idea, or an ideal, or an impossibility. They know that grace is as real as trying to do some good for God every day. They know that the only way we get grace is "in the flesh." And they live grace-fully in their real living.

You know some of these people. Some of them are sitting right here in the room today. They showed you love "in the flesh" and that's why you sing "Jesus loves me; this I know." It's not just the Bible that tells you so. Maybe you think of a Sunday School teacher long ago who loved you, or a pastor who lived generosity and service and selflessness in your midst every day. Maybe you are thinking of a person who has "never darkened the door" but is/was a better model of Christ than most you could name who go to church most weeks. Maybe you call the name of friend who came in your dark hour or a person who brings laughter to most any hour. Maybe you think of someone who has joined that "cloud of witnesses" who cheer us on from that new heaven they already know, and maybe you are thinking of someone you thank God is still cheering you on right here "in the flesh."

So, in your own meantime of living: Give thanks for the saints of your past, and give thanks for the future of God's hope for you – and listen for the cheering section who keep telling you that God is at home with us mortals, that we are God's people who live the new heaven in this old earth. And we have seen all around us in a troubled world that there are people who live with love and faith and hope. Thank God for what will be – by God - and dare to dream and live with imagination, ...because Jesus Christ is still making all things new!

Prayers of the People

So in the presence of this crowd of saints gathered, and the cloud of witnesses who still cheer you on, start calling the names to God of your very own, unofficial saints. In the stillness where God hears each small voice, fill this holy room with the great host of the faithful who still lead us onward.

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Now pray simply to follow their lead – and Christ's lead.

Pray that God will point you to do something good for God today, this week.

Pray for people who had a harder time than some of us: pray for those who grieve, those who are weak, those who are in pain, those who are in tears. Pray for those who know death is near in their future, or near in their yesterday to put loneliness in their future.

Pray for the hungry of the earth. Pray for the poor who, like Jesus, have no place to put their heads. Pray for a culture to overcome its fear-driven self-centeredness, and might imagine what could be done with a generous future. Pray that churches will become models of grace in the flesh and witnesses of conscience that God is working to make the world different.

Pray for Brenham Presbyterian Church, that our imaginations together will build hopes in the future and dreams for changing our community in God's direction.

And close your prayer by asking the rule of God's love to come on this earth, just as it rules in heaven – the way he taught us to pray...