

October 24, 2021
“Like Those Who Dream”
Psalm 126 / Mark 10:46-52
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

In our house, Gabe and I sometimes begin our day listening to Amy describe, often in vivid and fantastic detail, one of her dreams from the night before. He and I don't tend to remember much, if anything, about our dreams when we wake up, so we can't relate. But it's become a sweet family tradition.

I don't know much about dreams, psychologically speaking. I wish I did. My uncle Jerry, a longtime pastoral counselor and caretaker of people's inner lives, knew more about dreams and their significance than anyone I've ever known. So when I could remember and share some details, he would gladly provide any insight he could. It was a fun game.

We all dream, of course. And I know, and trust, that the dreams we dream while we're sleeping somehow, mysteriously, tap into our deepest places, access our deepest fears, surface our deepest desires. And so can provide a good starting place for dreaming while we're awake. We gotta go deep!

And it's why in the biblical record, I think, God, the divine presence so often appears to people in dreams and visions. Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Pharoah, Samuel, Solomon, Daniel, Zacharias, Joseph, MARY, Paul. That's a lot of men, mostly men in fact. We have to acknowledge that pattern, but the point is, God wants us to dream big. God wants our dreams and visions to come true.

I'm thinking this morning about our new friend, Abby, who visited with us for just the second time last Sunday. And who, with four other young activists, began a hunger strike this past Wednesday in front of the White House, demanding that Congress and President Biden pass the full scope of the proposed reconciliation bill.

To reduce emissions at least 50% by 2030. To establish a new Civilian Climate Corps, make direct investments in public schools, housing, transit and clean energy. To end investments in fossil fuels.

Today is Day 5 of the strike. They've been drinking only water for the past four days, and one of the activists was taken to the hospital early this morning, looking visibly weak. Later this afternoon there will be a solidarity sing-in with the four activists who remain, including Abby.

We emailed, a few days ago, other ways you can support them and their action, and the ongoing fight for climate justice. Let me know if you didn't get that info.

Here's what Abby wrote at the launch of the hunger strike: "I want to keep living in West Philly. I want to have a home here one day, with my mom, my wife and my kids. I want to have a garden and go to church every week. I'm hunger striking because that future means everything to me, and I'll risk everything I have to MAKE IT REAL. I believe we can stop climate change, that there's a future where Philly is above water, where my family can live with dignity, and peace, and joy. I don't have millions of dollars to pay our politicians off to make that happen. I just have my life."

I just have my life. A verse from 1 Timothy comes to mind: "Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity."

We only have our lives. If you read through the Twitter threads in response to their hunger strike, it's not surprising that reactions range from inspired and supportive to cynical and dismissive. Many focus on how their efforts will inevitably fail, at best misguided and unrealistic. Unrealistic.

Maybe so. Probably so, even, but friends, Abby and her fellow activists are dreamers. With only their lives, they are dreaming themselves and the rest of us, if we're willing to share in the dream, beyond what is realistic, what is possible. Beyond the Big-Money, Big-Energy control of political discourse and policy-making. Beyond the acceptance that global warming is somehow an inevitable reality. Beyond the willful, self-interested rejection of climate science and just plain common sense. Beyond the way things are because, you know, we all know, the way things are is killing the planet and putting our collective future in peril.

It is hard NOT to be cynical and realistic in such a world so desperately broken, with climate change spiraling so rapidly beyond repair. With racism and xenophobia continuing to run roughshod over Black and brown lives and bodies. With poverty and violence, and yes, climate change, stifling and stealing our communities, forcing more and more people around the world – those already most vulnerable among us – to cross inhospitable borders in search of a better, safer life.

It's hard not to feel overwhelmed and paralyzed by such brokenness, resigned to the default position that there's nothing we, we, WE can do about it, when dreams of a new world and a new way have been so long ignored or delayed, or feel already destroyed.

"What happens to a dream deferred?" Langston Hughes famously wrote in his poem, "Harlem."

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Human history confirms, right up to our present reality, that so many individual and collective dreams have dried up and festered and crusted over and sagged. And exploded. But that, of course, is precisely why the world needs dreamers. People who believe the unbelievable, and then bet their lives on making possible what, by most accounts, is impossible.

“. . . one of our most important tasks,” writes Rabbi Michael Lerner of Tikkun magazine and the Network of Spiritual Progressives, “is to help people overcome their sense that the world that they really want, a world based on love, kindness, generosity, on caring for each other and for the Earth, is really possible. Almost everybody, and certainly an overwhelming majority of the nearly eight billion people on the planet, would vote for that. But they believe the people who tell us they’re ‘not being realistic’ and end up settling for a world that they don’t actually want.”

“The new world will be created by people who know better than to be realistic. Realism is crumbling all around us. We will learn what is possible by struggling for the world we desire.”

Two weeks ago we considered Jesus’s reminder, following his encounter with the rich young man, that with God, all things are possible. And with it the crucial reminder that the minute we concede our minds, our spirits, our bodies, to IMPOSSIBILITY, we lose hope. We give up.

The world needs more dreamers.

Langston Hughes also wrote, “Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.”

The world needs more dreamers.

“Hope,” wrote Jonas Salk, who we know developed one of the first successful polio vaccines and spent his final years searching for a vaccine against AIDS, “lies in dreams, in imagination, and in the courage of those who dare to make dreams into reality.”

The world needs more dreamers.

“There are some people,” writes Douglass Everett, “who live in a dream world, and there are some who face reality; and then there are those who turn one into the other.”

The world needs more dreamers who refuse to settle for what is merely realistic. Our communities, our schools, our workplaces, our congregations, need more dreamers.

In our reading from the Psalms this morning, Psalm 126, we get a little glimpse into the glory of dreams fulfilled. First looking back to the experience of deliverance, freedom, presumably celebrating the Israelites' return from exile: "When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy . . ."

WE WERE LIKE THOSE WHO DREAM. Even they who had known their dreams dried up and festered and crusted over and sagged, even exploded, knew dreams made real. Come true.

And then buoyed by the memory of those dreams realized, the Psalmist continues, looking forward with the hopeful anticipation of dreams yet to be realized: "May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy . . ."

Those who go out weeping, bearing, EVEN WITH TEARS, the seed for sowing possibility beyond impossibility, shall come home with shouts of joy.

Keep dreaming. The world needs more dreamers.

In our reading from Mark's gospel this morning, we get a little glimpse into the persistence required when chasing dreams. The story of Jesus's encounter with the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, is technically found only in Mark's gospel – that is, Mark's gospel is the only account where Bartimaeus is identified by name. In Matthew there are two blind beggars, unidentified; and in Luke's gospel, just one, also unidentified.

In all three accounts, though, the encounter is more or less the same. And it comes right before Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, what we commemorate on Palm Sunday.

By this time, of course, Jesus's reputation precedes him. By now he is well known as a healer.

He's on the road out of Jericho, about 20 miles northeast of Jerusalem, which is where he meets Bartimaeus, sitting by that same roadside. Making public his vulnerability and need that no doubt went beyond his blindness. Likely taking advantage, or trying to, of the crowds of people heading to and from Jerusalem in observance of the Passover.

When Bartimaeus hears that it's Jesus who's passing by, he shouts out his name, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

A crowd of people immediately tell him to shut up. Hear that! Quit wasting your time. Quit wasting our time. Leave us alone. Leave Jesus alone. We could understand at this point if Bartimaeus left it at that. If he just gave up, discouraged and/or afraid, and kept his dream to himself.

BUT THAT IS NOT WHAT HE DOES, amen! He does what anyone who's chasing a dream and refuses to give up on that dream would do, however unrealistic the dream may be, undeterred by the naysayers and realists. He gets louder!

"Son of David, have mercy on me!" "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Amidst the crowds of people following Jesus, you could hear a pin drop. And Jesus, the text is clear to point out, stood still. Still.

Remember: Jesus was on the move with his disciples, on his way to Jerusalem to face the final consequences of a lifetime of teaching and organizing for a new world and a new way marked by love and compassion and justice. Chasing his own dream, God's dream, in fact.

But hearing Bartimaeus, whom everyone else told to shut up, Jesus stood still. He HEARS him and he SEES him. He calls Bartimaeus over, and Bartimaeus, understandably thrilled that his shouting, after God only knows how many days or months or years sitting by the roadside, finally got someone's attention, throws off his cloak, springs up, and goes to Jesus.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks him, inviting him, if you will, to share his dream. And what else would a blind man ask for? “My teacher, Rabbouni, let me see again.”

We don't really know anything about Bartimaeus, but we learn here that once he could see and now is blind. And impressed by his faith, acknowledging that it is his faith that has made him well, a faith that even HE deserves mercy because EVERYONE deserves mercy, Jesus tells him to go. Now, miraculously, as one who once was blind but now can see. Again.

Just like that, his dream comes true. But then he doesn't, he DOESN'T shout with joy, as far as we know. He doesn't run off to celebrate. He doesn't go his own way, content to enjoy his newfound sight. We could understand if he did.

Instead, you could argue that he does what anyone who has experienced a dream come true would do. He keeps dreaming. He dreams beyond himself. Bartimaeus has regained vision on multiple levels. Let me SEE again. Let me SEE with new eyes.

And so he promptly, even matter-of-factly, follows Jesus on the way – on the literal way out of Jericho to Jerusalem, and on Jesus's Way of love marked so clearly and consistently by compassion and justice. The Way of dreamers.

Now we have to be careful here, as with all of these miraculous healing stories, about our takeaways. It doesn't mean, as the Church has often suggested, that if we simply believe or dream enough, have ENOUGH faith, that we will get what we want, as Bartimaeus did. That our pain, our suffering, our tears, will necessarily, miraculously, go away.

But such stories do still invite us to hold tight to the power of faith and hope, trusting in and leaning toward the divine assurance that new life is possible, one way or another. That, as the Psalmist puts it, those who sow in tears WILL reap with shouts of joy. Will come home, one way or another. Such stories, I think, also call us to recommit ourselves to the work of hearing and seeing each other, to creating and holding spaces for each other that make possible dreaming and healing and joy.

And so in that Spirit, like Abby and her fellow activists, gathered now as we gather, in front of the White House to demand WITH THEIR LIVES a call to climate justice . . .

Like the Psalmist, who both remembers and looks forward to the ecstasy of dreams come true . . .

Like Bartimaeus, who kept shouting as loudly as he needed to his desire for mercy, and then followed Jesus in the Way of mercy . . .

And like Jesus, our MIRROR to the power of human hope and persistence and our WINDOW to the depth of divine possibility and promise . . .

May we be dreamers, those who dare to dream beyond what is realistic. May we be faithful facilitators of God's holy imagination, dreaming God's dream while we are wide awake. And inspired by that dreaming, may we sow seeds OF, and make space FOR, new and abundant life for ourselves, for each other and for the life we all share together with the earth.

Knowing, always knowing, that even our tears – our tears and the planet's tears – can seed the dream of a day when those same tears will turn to shouts of joy.

May it be so.