

THE VERBS OF ADVENT

4) Dream!

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Every once in a while, someone will ask me why we don't sing Christmas carols earlier in the season. After all, they point out Walmart has been playing Christmas music for months! Not only is this a fair question, but it's the kind of question that pastors love because it provides an opportunity for a teaching moment on the meaning and significance of Advent. I usually begin by pointing out that, in our culture, we often go for immediate gratification. We want to attend the party without having to get ready for it. So it is that we celebrate Christmas as soon as the Malls put up their Christmas décor and start playing Bing Crosby's "White Christmas." And that is, I think, usually about the end of October.

Yet, in the church year, we take a different approach.

The Season of Advent, the four weeks that lead up to the celebration of Christmas, is designed to be a time preparation and building anticipation of the "One who comes." The music of Advent is not especially bright or cherry, but often reflective and even somber. Bruce reminds me that it is music in a minor key.

Advent is, as is often suggested, a season of preparing the way for the One who comes. But in order to do that, we must, first of all, prepare ourselves for the celebration. Before we rush too quickly into singing the lively, "Joy to the World," it is important to sing, "Come, O Come, Emmanuel" in all of its haunting beauty. The carols will come and they will be sung with joy and passion, but they will hold much more meaning if they follow on the heels of the music that invites our reflection, meditation and preparation.

On this the fourth Sunday of Advent, we are finishing up with our preparation and the celebration of Christmas is nearly here. But, before we get there, there is yet one more verb to consider in our Advent lexicon—the verb is "to dream." Thus far, we have focused our attention upon the importance of **watching** for the activity of God at work in our world, of **turning** away from our sin and turning back to God, and, last week, of **seeing** the world as it really is and the power of God as it makes its presence known. This morning, we conclude our Advent focus, by considering the importance of daring to dream of the world as God would have it be.

The inspiration for this fourth verb of Advent comes directly from our Gospel lesson this morning and the story of Joseph's dream. You will recall that in Matthew's account, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and invites him to place his trust in God and the way God will be at work in the birth of the baby to be born to Mary. Joseph, the angel makes clear, need not be afraid of appearances, but should take Mary as his wife and simply trust that this child will be born in order to fulfill God's plan and purpose in the world.

Joseph, placed in the unenviable position that he is, decides to do as the angel suggests, placing his trust in God and the way that God was at work in his circumstance. And the

rest, as they say, is history—the history of God’s salvation at work in the baby who grew to be the man, Jesus of Nazareth.

The premise then, that I am working with this morning is that God is often at work in our dreams—not only in our nocturnal dreams when we sleep, but, more likely, in our dreams of the daytime that take hold of our hope and imagination and lead us forward. While Advent is a season to watch, to turn, and to see, it is, ultimately, I believe, as season that invites us to dream—to engage in the active work of daring to imagine a life, a relationship, a world that is not yet, but, by the grace of God, might yet be.

If our dreaming is to truly be an instrument of the Spirit of God at work in our world, however, it must move beyond the more passive approach that seems dreams take. Some dreams, you see, are characterized by more of a wistfulness than a willfulness. They entertain certain hopes and possibilities, but never quite take them seriously enough to attempt to translate them into reality. Hence, we sometimes hear the phrase, “You’re just dreaming!” The implication is that when you wake up and come to your senses, you will see that this was merely an idle thought that has no grounding in what is actually possible.

Some dreams are merely idle dreams and have, therefore, no real substance to sustain them over time. We may, for example, dream of world peace—especially at Christmas time. It is such a lovely thought and such a timely theme, but we know full well that it will amount to nothing more than an idle dream unless it has the legs to carry it forward to specific task assignment or task. It’s one thing to sing “Silent Night” on Christmas Eve and wish for peace. It’s another thing to actually choose to take on the important work of making peace, of working for peace in whatever context we might find ourselves.

Suffice it to say, then, that idle dreams are really of little use to us—or to God, for that matter. They may make us feel all warm and fuzzy inside, but they simply lack the staying power to bring about creative and constructive change.

Author, T.E. Lawrence once observed: **“All people dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds, wake up in the day to find that it was vanity. But dreamers of the day are dangerous people, for they act their dreams with open eyes to make it possible.”**

What our world needs—and what God needs—are those who choose to be “dreamers of the day.”

In 1870, the Methodists of Indiana were meeting at their annual conference when a guest speaker made a startling prediction. The days was approaching, he announced, “when people would fly through the air like birds.”

There was an audible gasp among those in the audience and the presiding Bishop quickly interrupted. “This,” he said in a measured tone, “is blasphemy. As I read my Bible, flight is reserved only for the angels. I will entertain no such talk here.”

After adjourning the meeting, the Bishop, whose name was Wright, went home to his two small sons, Orville and Wilbur. What he could not realize at the time, of course, was the fact that what he deemed to be an idle dream, was, in fact, a dream that would completely capture the imagination of his sons. They would be “dreamers of the day” who enacted their dreams with open eyes and a tireless dedication and devotion to the possibility of flight. Together, Wilbur and Orville, logged countless hours, unending disappointments and a considerable number of “flat out failures” in order to translate their dream into stunning reality.

It would be **Wilbur** who would later observe: **“Thousands of men had thought about flying machines and a few had even built machines...but these were guilty of almost everything except flying.”** There comes a time in which the dream cannot survive without the choice to act.

Susan B. Anthony was one who summoned the conviction and the courage to act out her dreams with eyes wide open. Born and raised in a Quaker family, she was taught that there is a basic equality between human being and it was this understanding that served to plant the seeds of a dream within her. As a girl, those seeds began to take root in her work with the Abolitionist movement, working to abolish slavery. As she grew older, her conviction only deepened as she became aware of the plight of women and their status as second class citizens, deprived of the right to vote. Interestingly enough, she was criticized in the early years of her work for women’s rights as trying to destroy the institution of marriage—a charge we have heard used in another context in our own day.

Over the ensuing decades, she became the champion of women’s rights and it was largely through her inspiration and effort that the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was eventually passed, granting women the right to vote. Her dream had come to pass, but sadly, she did not live to see it, having died fourteen years prior to the amendments passing.

Susan B. Anthony dared to dream with open eyes and the willingness to act upon her dream.

As we all are aware, **Martin Luther King** also had a dream that he shared in his epic speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. **“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood...”**

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

The power of those words still resonate with us today over 50 years later. And what makes them so powerful is that they were not idle words—not merely a passionate example of wishful thinking. No, King’s words were words that were deeply rooted in a commitment to action. Delivered as they were during the initial “March on Washington,” they were words that galvanized those who listened to help tear down the barriers that racism had erected and led directly to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a monumental

achievement in the fight for equality. And they are, of course, words that continue to challenge us today in our efforts to be a nation of liberty and justice for all.

Three brief examples of dreams that were defined not by wistfulness, but by a willfulness that not only changed lives deeply and profoundly, but would also change the life of our nation. There is, you see, great power in the choice to be dreamers of the day, to dream not only with open eyes, but hearts that are, likewise open to the work that God sets before us.

Advent, of course, is the season which invites our contemplation of the magnificent mystery of God's dream for us and for our world. In the birth of a baby born to a peasant woman and her bewildered but trusting husband, we see the surprising outline of God choice to enact this dream, to make it tangible: **The Word became flesh and lived among us**, says John's Gospel, **full of grace and truth**.

And it is in the witness of this baby who grew to be a man full of grace and truth, that we see God's dream of justice, peace, reconciliation and love translated into action—action that would forever change the life of our world.

Laurens Van der Post, a South African author and humanitarian, spent considerable time researching the lives and culture of the Kibhara Bushmen. In one of his journals, he recalls the simple comment that one of the Bushmen made to him: "There is," the man said, "a dream that is dreaming us."

I believe that this simple statement puts the matter in its proper perspective. What I am really speaking about this morning is the importance of the "dream that dreams us," the dream that is so deeply implanted within us that we cannot ignore it or pretend that it isn't there. It is the dream that stirs our hearts and moves within our imagination. It is the dream that invites us...call us...compels us to offer what Stephen Covey refers to as "the deeper "Yes" to the possibility, the purpose, the vision that is within us, waiting to be detected.

What does that purpose, that possibility, that vision look like in your life this morning? What is it that God has planted within you that awaits your "deeper Yes?" What dream might you, by the grace of God, dare to dream this morning?

It is important to remember that these dreams need not be magnificent or impressive in scope, they need not make the headlines or be recorded in our history books. It is far more likely that these dreams will fly under the radar of common knowledge or attention. It is far more likely that they will quietly address the hurt or the hope of another in ways that make a difference. It may be in the context of a relationship that is broken and needs mending. It may be in the context of challenging ourselves to move out of our despair and cynicism in order to live with a sense of hope and optimism. Or, it may be in the context of simply being clear with ourselves as to why we are living and what we are living for.

What is the dream that is dreaming you this morning? And in what specific ways might you, with open eyes, act to make your dream a reality? No doubt, for some, Advent and

Christmas is a season for entertaining idle dreams that have little likelihood of coming true. After all, it is the fashionable thing to do and it makes us feel all warm and fuzzy inside—at least until January arrives. But for others—others that may include you and me—I pray that this will be a season to dream, not in the dusty recesses of the night, but in the clear light of day. Let us dream with open eyes and open hearts to make those God inspired dreams possible. Amen.