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STEPHAN K. TURNBULL

Dreaming God's Dream: A Sermon on Isaiah 56: 1-2, 6-8¹

Do you have dreams? Dreams for your kids, if you have any? Dreams for your career? The next book you want to write, the problem you want to solve, or the influence you'd like to have? Do you have dreams for your church? For the next hill to climb as an organization? For how you'd like to reach your community with the Gospel? Or maybe other achievements like finishing a marathon or traveling the world or visiting your ancestral home?

Oddly enough, I've always been light on dreams. I'm a pretty driven person, but I have mostly kept my distance from dreams. I'm naturally uneasy with emotion, and not wanting to be disappointed, I think I taught myself not to dream. In fact, I've had to re-learn the art of dreaming as I've gotten older. And probably my greatest teacher in this regard has been the Bible itself. The longer I live as a Christian, the longer I read the Bible, the more opportunity I have to teach the Bible, the more I find myself drawn to dream the dreams that drive the plot of the story that is the Bible.

One articulation of that dream comes from the passage that has been assigned for our worship tonight. The passage is from Isaiah 56: 1-2, 6-8:

This is what YAHWEH says:

“Maintain justice
and do what is right,
for my salvation is close at hand
and my righteousness will soon be revealed.
Blessed are those who do this—
who hold it fast,
those who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it,
and keep their hands from doing any evil.
And foreigners who bind themselves to YAHWEH
to minister to him,
to love the name of YAHWEH,

and to be his servants,
all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it
and who hold fast to my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain
and give them joy in my house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house will be called
a house of prayer for all nations.”
YAHWEH the Sovereign one declares—
he who gathers the exiles of Israel:
“I will gather still others to them
besides those already gathered.”

There's something beautiful in that dream, isn't there? All the nations of the world, scattered in their rebellion, addicted to their worship of things that are not God, returning to the Living God in worship and obedience. All the peoples of the world, alienated from God by the power of sin, by their injustice and idolatry, are reconciled to God. And God is worshipped in His house, a house of prayer for all nations—a verse which, by the way, was quoted by Jesus and is inscribed in steel on stone on the rear of the sanctuary where I lead worship each Sunday, in case I needed a reminder of God's dream.

There's something beautiful in that dream. God is in his heaven, as my grandmother used to say, and all is right with the world. You could almost say that it's Edenic, if it weren't at the same time so Sinaitic. But table that thought for a minute, if you can, and see what's even more basic here. Isaiah is dreaming God's dream. And God is dreaming of getting his world back. God is dreaming of bringing his creatures home again after their sojourn under the power of sin, after their adultery with false

gods of a bewildering variety. God wants his world back, and that is a dream worth dreaming.

I wish I could say that whatever dreams I do have were composed of that dream. But I've got piddly little dreams. Maybe you do, too. I'm a parish pastor now. My heart is constantly pulled toward, tempted by, shadow dreams of a shadow mission. Dreams of balanced budgets that even get met. Dreams of a stable, peaceful congregation. Dreams of going 6 months without navigating some kind of personnel issue.

Many of you are vocational academics. Your heart is analogously tempted. Ah, to read a whole batch of midterm papers written in clear English, arguing a single thesis coherently, citing works properly and plagiarizing none. It's almost too much to hope. Deans who lead clearly, copious opportunity for intellectually stimulating collegial conversations, students whom we can disabuse of one sort of fundamentalism or another. Visions of sugarplums dancing in our heads.

Small dreams. Components of God's dream, perhaps, but often masquerading as the dream itself.

We've got a lot of company, though. Long generations of worshipers of our God have similarly downsized their versions of God's dream to fit within the shrunken parameters of fallen imaginations. Kings of roughly Isaiah's day (no matter which Isaiah you wish to locate chronologically) dreamed of peace in Zion and figured that political alliances with nearby pagan powers would do the trick. That's sure to make the dream come true, don't you think? Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots, and Sadducees of Jesus' day worshiped Yahweh and dreamed of the coming of His Israelite Kingdom and each pursued it according to different strategies: nomistic, separatist, revolutionary, or political-assimilationist. One of those things would have to make the dream come true, right? I guess I'm not the only one who's been a pretty lousy dreamer.

Good thing God's dream wasn't waiting on ours. Who could have dreamed that God getting His world back, that the *birth* of God's reconciled new creation would come when the dying of the old one would be taken up into the dying of God's Messiah? Who could have imagined that seeing this dream become reality would happen in waking up, when Jesus the Messiah woke up again from the dead, the first fruits of the new creation, early in the morning in the garden on the first day of the new week.

I want to wake up into that dream. I want to dream that dream when I lie down and when I rise up. I want to live my life watching that dream come true, knowing that it will come true without my work or even my praying for it. But I also want to participate in the work of seeing it happen in my life.

And you and I are teachers, preachers, and church leaders. We have the unearned and unsurpassed privilege of articulating this dream to others. We have the opportunity to teach them to

read the Biblical story of God's mission, of God's unwavering commitment to his post-Eden dream of getting His world back in Christ.

And never in the history of this dream has the need for its telling been any higher. The stakes for us are sky high. The world around us is literally dying to hear this story. They need to hear it on our lips, and they need us to multiply the lips who tell it.

I was talking recently to my colleague who is the director of student ministries at our church, and we were talking about the latest research on youth culture and student-age folks who are walking away from the church and from the God we worship. And he said more and more students are saying that the church just isn't offering them anything that's worth their time, their energy, and their life. The church hasn't offered them a big enough story, an inspiring story for their lives to be caught up into. Now is that just their natural *opinio legis* striving for their own significance or is it a hunger for the God who made them? Or is it a case of the former perverting the latter? Whatever it is, it needs the Gospel.

They have perceived that the church has offered them a gospel that's smaller than the hopelessness and chaos that they see and experience all around them. They've heard a gospel that says, "Believe in Jesus. Wait to die. Go to Heaven." That's not quite the same dream. Yet, we have all preached sermons that small, born of dreams that small. And I think that there is something in their hearts that intuits that that dream is too small to be biblical.

The dying of this world is not news. Most of our world is aware of its degenerative condition. Postmodern hopelessness is alive and well—merely taking the place of modern hopelessness. What is news however is that this dying has been foundationally transformed by the cross. It has been detoured from a road that leads from cross to grave to dead end onto a road that leads from cross to grave to new creation, to the restoration of all things, to the reconciling of the world to God in Christ, in the One who makes all things new.

That is the dream of God, the dream that Isaiah sensed and spoke, but also the dream that God has been dreaming and pursuing even before Sinai shaped the prophetic imagination and the Torah played its custodial role. It is the dream of God that drives the plot of the story of the entire Biblical canon, revolving around the cross, coming true at Easter's dawn, and inviting us to participate in the work of its fruition. And it is the dream into which the world will wake up as we tell it and teach others to the same.

Endnotes

1 This sermon was preached Aug. 12, 2008, at the "Savvy with Substance" Convocation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Central Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN.