



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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"Christmas is for Dreamers"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
On January 7th, 2024, Epiphany from Matthew 2*

What does the needle in a sewing machine, the model of the Atom, the Theory of Relativity, *Frankenstein*, the double helix of DNA, "Yesterday" by the Beatles, the movie *Terminator*, the periodic table, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, various Beethoven sonatas, "Satisfaction" by the Rolling Stones, the underground railroad, the conclusion of Handel's *Messiah*, and Myers Park Baptist Church all have in common? Nothing. (Just kidding) These things may seem like they have nothing in common, but they all started as a dream. That's right, just like our church whose founders claimed they were "possessed by a dream," many of the most important achievements in science, technology, art, music, film, and literature began with a dream.

Today is Epiphany, the last day in the season of Christmas, which means it's the time we reflect on the story of the coming of the magi in the gospel of Matthew. Even if the word Epiphany doesn't mean much to you, most of us know the story of the magi who traveled from the East, following the star, and arrived in Jerusalem inquiring about the child who was born "King of the Jews," and then on Herod's orders made their way to Bethlehem to pay homage to the newborn baby Jesus with gifts of frankincense, gold, and myrrh. But what we don't talk about enough is the fact that in Matthew's version of the story, Christmas began with a dream. In fact, Jesus and the significance of Christmas were saved by a dream. Therefore, we can safely say today that Christmas is for dreamers.

In our culture, to be called a "dreamer" is not always a compliment. Today "Dreamer" can refer to someone with their head in the clouds, who gets lost in their thoughts, or worse, someone who lives as if they're asleep or unconscious. In certain cases, we might call someone who has a lot of ideas a dreamer. But in the first century, a dreamer was a job, a vocation, an occupation, and the title of someone who typically worked in the court of a King. And dreamers were called *magus*, or *magi*, the root of the word magician. Matthew's gospel is not the first time *magi* appear in the Bible. We find them in Genesis in the story of Joseph the dreamer, who became a *magi* for Pharaoh in Egypt. They appear in Jeremiah's description of the Babylonian court. We find them again in Daniel, who was a *magi*, and the book of Esther. Then suddenly they appear in the East at the beginning of the gospel to see a star at its rising and interpret it to be an announcement of the birth of the King of the Jews.



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One interesting theory about the star the magi saw is that in 7 BCE, Jupiter and Saturn came into conjunction with one another on three different occasions. Jupiter was known as the “royal” or kingly planet, and Saturn was thought to represent the Jews, therefore the magi may have interpreted that three-fold alignment to mean the King of the Jews had been born. We have no way of knowing if this is true, but we do know a lot more about the *magi* than most of us were taught as children. In those days, people believed the movement of the stars and the unconscious mind were both primary sources of divine revelation. The magi were a caste of high ranking religious and political officers in the Persian imperial court who served as astrologers and interpreters of dreams. As priestly advisors to the king of Persia, they read the stars and interpreted dreams to determine the will of the gods with the goal of ensuring the prosperity, productivity, safety, and welfare of the king and his kingdom.

At the time of Jesus’ birth, the Persian empire was engaged in an ongoing confrontation with the Romans. The Persians did not believe Rome had a legitimate right to occupy Israel and Israel was extremely important to their safety and autonomy. It was the only buffer zone between the Persian and the Roman empire. They knew that if the empire could invade and occupy Israel, then Rome would be right their doorstep, and eventually they would be next. They were right: 100 years after the birth of Jesus, Trajan invaded Armenia kicking off 100 years of war between Rome and the Persian empire. But the star the magi saw rising was a sign of hope to Persian people. A newborn king of the Jews, who wasn’t a bloodthirsty loyal puppet of Rome like King Herod would be the fulfillment of the dreams of their own people for deliverance from aggressive expansion, invasion, and occupation. So, the magi were not just following the star for spiritual reasons. They were also following their own dreams for freedom and liberation from the Roman empire.

I love the depiction of the magi in Matthew’s gospel, but I must admit, I’m skeptical of dreams. I have a hard time trusting my dreams or anybody else’s for that matter. It is difficult to imagine something surreal that takes place in our unconscious minds as an avenue for God’s revelation. My skepticism derives from how absurd my own dreams are, but also other people’s dreams as well. I can’t tell you how many times somebody has said to me, “I had a dream about you last night and you’re not going to believe what you did.” I try to laugh like they can’t be serious, but some people act as if their dreams really happened. They get angry with other people for what they did in their dreams, which is strange considering Carl Jung said everyone in our dreams is a symbol or aspect of ourselves. So, I feel the need to set the record straight with a public service announcement: I am not responsible for what I do in your dreams, and you’re not responsible for what you do in mine. You’re forgiven. We are absolved for the sins we commit in each other’s unconscious minds!



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More troubling, I've had a hard time dreaming at all lately, and it has nothing to do with my skepticism of the unconscious as source of divine revelation. You know there are the dreams we have when we're asleep and there are the dreams we have when we're awake, and it's the second kind that I've had a hard time finding in recent months. Have you ever been in a season when you found it difficult to dream? The last three months have been one of those seasons for me. My mind hasn't been generating dreams the way it usually does, and as I've reflected and prayed about this, I realized it's because my mind has been so clouded by all the disappointments and devastation going on in our lives and the world. Disappointment, devastation, and death have the power to stifle our dreams if we let them. And we've experienced enough in 2023 that we may never dream again if we're not careful.

The danger with disappointment and devastation is the more we experience it the more our minds begin to think that's what is always going to happen. If a person, group of people, organization, church, city, or nation disappoints us again and again, we start to think nothing will ever change. When we experience a steady diet of disappointment in our lives from the same people, groups, organizations, institutions, state, or nation, we stop dreaming because we don't want to get our hopes up too high and then fall down so low again. For the most part, we know we can't completely avoid disappointment in life as human beings, but we imagine that we can manage it easier if it comes in small doses. So, we stop hoping and we stop dreaming so that we can keep our disappointment and devastation to a minimum. We know we can handle a little bit at a time so we lower our expectations and set the bar low because if our hopes are lower, we think our disappointment will be lower as well.

A lot of people live like this for years—sometimes forever, and I found myself doing this myself recently. The problem is that if somebody had asked me if I was a dreamer, I would have said "Oh yes! Of course, I am. I have thousands of dreams! I'm dreaming right now." But it wasn't true. I thought I was dreaming but the reality is, I was having a dress rehearsal for disappointment [repeat]. We all know what a dress rehearsal is for a wedding, a recital, a performance, where we run through everything so are prepared. There's nothing wrong with preparation. But friends, life is not a dress rehearsal [Pause]. And if we spend all our time dress rehearsing for catastrophe, trying to manage our disappointment, hoping to minimize devastation, we will lose the ability to dream and miss out on the joy of living. Brené Brown said that instead of allowing ourselves to experience joy many of us are having constant dress rehearsals for tragedy. We don't dream because we're afraid that if our dreams fall apart, we'll be even more disappointed and devastated than before, so we settle for small hopes and small dreams, and stay at the dress rehearsal forever.



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As a people possessed by a dream, our church has had a long and illustrious history as an inclusive community for spirituality and social justice. We've made a big impact in the world and gained a lot of notoriety. But one of my professors at Duke had a saying that has always stayed with me. He said the worst thing that ever happened to Baptists in the South is that they were successful. The problem with being successful is that it can have the same effect as constant disappointment. When we're truly successful at something we often stop dreaming about the future because we want to replicate the success we've had in the past so we continue to do the same things we've always done. This is one of the reasons why, in my very first sermon here eight years ago I said, "As a community of dreamers we must ask ourselves this question: are our dreams for the future bigger than our dreams of the past?"

Dreaming is always a risky endeavor. It requires courage because there is always the possibility of failure and disappointment that comes along with it. But the purpose of dreaming is not simply so that our dreams come true. The act of dreaming itself has its own purpose and power. As the story of the magi in the gospel of Matthew teaches us. Dreaming is something that is sacred and holy. Dreaming is an act of resistance. Dreaming is an activity that is opposed to empire. Dreaming is an antidote to violence. Dreaming is a life-giving and liberating occupation. Dreaming is one of the primary ways we stay in tune with the movement of God in history and begin to envision a new and better world. Dreaming in and of itself is significant and can lead to an experience of joy even if those dreams never come true—because our dreams defy the ground rules of the way things are in the world today and testify to the possibility that something else is always possible. Dreams are the way we manifest hope.

Queer Chinese American writer and designer Nina Jun (Chun) Yuchi kept a dream journal for a year to try and learn how to lucid dream, and to share her adventures with her friends and family. But after reading back through her journal Nina discovered something unexpected. She writes, "I realized my dreams aren't simply a way for me to escape the realities of my tangible world. They are also a simultaneous reality that I enter in my slumber. It is a purposeful act of self-care and forgiveness. Allowing myself to sleep and explore the depths of my relationships, emotions, and humor allows me to be whole. Dreams are political—they're an act of defiance against the hegemonies of capitalism and white supremacy, allowing the mind to mold and explore its own worlds without the oppressive constraints of time and space. Like science fiction and fantasy, dreams don't rely on the conditions of the present reality to forge new identities and communities. Marginalized people are free to imagine an emancipated world in which colonialist powers no longer exist, or in which humans seek to repair their relationship with nature.



Dreaming is a liberating experience. The essence of dreams beckons a framework for resistance. Dreams are illogical, unrealistic, and untethered to time and space, with endless possibilities that challenge the boundaries of our mind and imagination. This isn't to say that dreaming is a perfect practice, nor can it be the sole method of resistance in the struggle. We can't become trapped in the fantastical utopias of our minds and ignore the material conditions of reality. However, once we reject the idea that we are bound to this present time and space, we can also recognize that we have the capacity to shape the futures we want to live in. When we inevitably unearth and disseminate our histories of revolution, class consciousness, and racial solidarity, they no longer need to invade and overrun our present. Instead, those histories can serve as the remembrance that we are capable of building better futures—so long as we reject the temporal structures that confine us.”ⁱ

It is important to notice who has dreams and who doesn't in Christmas story. Mary and Joseph dream, the magi dream, but Herod and all the chief priests and scribes have no dreams. We are told all they had was fear and anger. The message here is obvious. We must always have a dream. We must nurture that dream. And we must never stop dreaming. We must continue striving to listen for and live out God's dreams for us and for our world. Because if we lose our ability to dream, if we cannot dream, or if we will not dream, like Herod, the chief priests, and scribes, we will be left with nothing but fear and anger. Without a dream all we have are our own worst impulses. Without a dream all we have is the empire and its schemes. Without a dream all we have is violence. Without a dream all we have is disappointment, devastation, and death. So, we have to have a dream and keep on dreaming.

The story of Jesus began with a dream that came to a caravan of Persian dreamers, warning them not to return to King Herod. The magi followed that dream and left for their own country by another road, defying the order of the King and leaving room for God's gift of life and liberation to grow more fully into the world. Christmas, the gospel, the good news of Jesus all began with a dream that led to a choice, and a choice that led to an act of resistance. The choice is the same in our day as it was in the time of Jesus: will we follow Herod, or will we follow our dreams? Will we follow the logic and impulse of empire, or will we be dreamers? Will we settle for the way things are, or will we be people who dream of a better future? Will we be content with the status quo, or will we engage in the risky revolutionary act of the magi and the founders of our church and dream? And will we dream only of the glorious past, or will we also dream of a glorious future? Will we continue to live in a never-ending dress rehearsal for disappointment and devastation, or will we allow ourselves to be dreamers? The choice is ours.



The measure of our courage and faith is determined by our willingness to dream despite the possibility of disappointment and devastation, and to keep on dreaming even when we face it. The call of Epiphany, the magi, the star, is to dream, to keep on dreaming, and follow your dreams, because Christmas is for dreamers, the gospel is for dreamers, the good news is for dreamers, liberation is for dreamers, the future is for dreamers. May we leave the dress rehearsals behind and live like there's nothing to fear, so together we can find the overwhelming joy of a life filled with dreams.

ⁱ Nina Jun Yuchi, "Mutual Dreaming: Rest as Resistance and Temporal Lucidity." *Futuress*, October 18, 2021.