

# A Dream Declared

From the Lenten sermon series: The Dream

*Text: Luke 4:18-19*

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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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Are you a dreamer? Do you have a dream? Is there something in the depths of your being, some deep yearning, longing? Do you have a dream? Do you ever think about it? Or wake up in the middle of the night and suddenly come to consciousness that there is something really in the depths of your being that cries out for realization? Do you have a dream?

Maybe it's a dream that doesn't extend too far beyond the circle of your immediate life; maybe you have a dream about your relationship or about your children. Maybe a young person would dream about a career, and as I look into the eyes of a few of you here, I can see a dream dawning in your eyes about the ideal retirement.

Well, I think probably we all have certain dreams that live in us, but do you ever dream on a broader scale? Do you ever paint on a wider canvas? This nation was built on a dream. There were people who had a dream of a different kind of government, casting off that European culture with the divine right of kings and the privilege of nobility.

Probably the biggest dreamer that I know personally is Bob Schuller. Bob went out to California at age 30 with a 40-year dream. His only problem was he realized the whole dream in 25 years. By that time he had the Crystal Cathedral and the Hour of Power. The last time I talked with him a year or so ago, he told me since that he has become depressed. And when he stopped to think about it, it was because he was in year 39 and he realized that he hadn't dreamed any further. And so, dreamer that he is, he simply set up a new ten-year dream, and the energy came back to his life. He's probably the biggest dreamer that I know personally.

Do you ever dream about something on a broader scale? People have dreamed about institutions and founded a great hospital, or a college, or maybe even a congregation. Do you ever dream about a different world? Does your dream ever extend that far? How about when the television screen flashes pictures like in the

year or two past, the tragedy of the former Yugoslavia, when you see the old women in babushkas and leather faces, with the tears over the death of a husband or a son? Or the atrocities of Rwanda? So far in the past. Or Haiti? Poverty. The Middle East, when a terrorist has just exploded human bodies? Do you ever dream of a different world then? Are you ever overcome with the fact that it doesn't have to be that way, that it could be different? That the world could be other than it is?

Last week there was a conference in Denmark or Sweden on children who have been traumatized, and their little faces, their little beings were on the television set, little children who have stood and watched their parents being gunned down, who have watched such horror that you and I could hardly conceive of, horror at their little lives, scared, wounded souls. Do you ever feel something stir within you and say we could dream of a different kind of world?

Israel's prophets were dreamers. In the Advent season we heard the voice of what the scholars call Second Isaiah, the one who begins "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, says your Lord. Make a highway for the King. Get into the mountain and the cities of Judah and behold your God, a dream of salvation." These people in exile had a dream of their return to Jerusalem. And they did return, but they returned not to the glory of the dream - they returned to grinding poverty. They returned to political intrigue. They returned to walls torn down which remained torn down. They began laying a few blocks for a second temple, but finally it got to them. You know, it does after a while. It can wear you down.

And then there was another voice. The scholars call this voice Third Isaiah, Isaiah 56-66. Another voice and another singer, and he enunciated another dream. He said "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and God has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captive, to bring a garland instead of ashes, to bring joy and rejoicing to God's people, to bind up the wounded." And he enunciated his dream because the earlier dream hadn't been realized and people had lost the dream. And then the dream sounded again and it wasn't realized, either, wonderful dream that it was, but a different kind of world.

Five hundred years later Jesus came to his home synagogue and stood up in the midst of his own people and said, "I have a dream." Jesus declared his dream, and it was the dream of Third Isaiah who had brought to life the dream of Second Isaiah, the dream where the wolf and the lamb lie down together, the cow and the ox and the bear are all at peace with each other, and where no one hurts or destroys on all God's holy mountain. Jesus stood up in his own hometown and he said, "I have a dream. Let me declare my dream to you." And they said, "Wow, what amazing wisdom! Where did this man come from? Isn't this Joseph's son?" Then he must have begun to draw out the implications of the dream and that amazement of the people turned to anger. Isn't it strange that a dream like that should elicit anger from people? It was a wonderful dream. Isn't it a wonderful dream? A new world where wounds would be bound up or broken hearts would

be healed, where people in despair would find hope, where people, the prisoners of their guilt, would be told of the forgiveness and the grace of God. Isn't that a wonderful dream? Why would they grow angry?

Well, from the biblical references that he made in his defense, he went to their own scripture. He said, "Look, let me quote your own Bible to you." He said, "What about the days of Nahum and the Syrian? It was he who was healed of leprosy. What about the widow of Sidon? It was she to whom Elijah brought food. Don't you see, the God of Israel, our God is a God for whom there has never been any outsiders? Don't you see that the God of Israel is a God of mercy and compassion?" Their amazement at his wisdom and power turned to anger. They wanted to kill him! Isn't it strange?

We probably know more about his dream today than we've ever known before because there's so much data available - cross-cultural studies, the context of Jesus' life, the political and religious and social conditions. We know that Jesus' own family was at the lower end of the peasant scale. Jesus' family had been dispossessed of their land, which was the case of so many in that day. The occupying Roman power demanded a tax. And then the collaborating temple cult demanded a tax. And the whole temple system was organized around social categories of purity and impurity. You know, folks, poor people can't keep all that ritual up. They can't pay the temple tax, let alone the Roman tax. These folks didn't have a prayer. They were simply out. They were excluded from the temple and the sacrifice, and they were just outsiders. And Jesus had a dream. He had a dream of a world where there were no outsiders. He had a dream of a world where the wounded were healed and the hopeless given hope and the saddened given joy. And when he declared the dream, they wanted to kill him. Doesn't that strike you? How do you explain that? Jesus wasn't violent. Powerful, I think, but peaceful. And what he dreamed - isn't it wonderful? Wouldn't that be a great world? Can you dream of a different kind of world where nobody is excluded and where everybody knows that with God there is mercy and forgiveness?

It's a miracle that people still can dream. Because it's dangerous to dream. If the dream goes beyond your particular retirement, if it extends too far beyond the circle of your family, if you start dreaming bigger dreams, if you should dare to dream about a world transformation - it's dangerous to dream. And it's a tricky thing to dream, too. Is the dream maybe just one's fancy? When someone says, "I have a dream," someone else might say, "You're on an ego trip." And how do you separate those threads in the tapestry? I don't think you can. How does one defend oneself who feels compelled to declare a dream about a different possibility? One needs a lot of courage because to declare a dream is to create the possibility of being shown to be a fool. To declare a dream is to create the possibility of suffering rejection. To declare a dream can put one in jeopardy of one's life. And how does one know, how do I know the things about which I dream - whether they are of God or simply a matter of self-interest and self-promotion?

It's a miracle that people still dream. After all these years and all these generations, through all these centuries, people still dream. Isn't it a miracle? Do you suppose that it's because God won't let the dream die? Do you suppose that there's something that God continues to cultivate in the human heart and imagination and that God won't quit? That God won't let it rest? That God won't let it die? The prophet who declared that Judah would go back - the dream wasn't realized. The prophet who announced 500 years before Jesus that this wonderful new world would be created - this dream wasn't realized. And yet, that dream - doesn't it get you, doesn't it move you? It moved Jesus, you see, so that he picked up the words of one 500 years earlier and he said, "I have a dream." I wonder if it's because when dreams die, God finds another dreamer. I wonder if God is in those moments when we know it could be other than it is.

Well, this is true - to dream is really to live. It may be a tricky business and a dangerous business, but I'll tell you, to dream is a wonderful thing. Have you ever lived with a dream? Have you ever felt the enthusiasm rise within you? Have you ever been captivated by something that just made all the juices flow? Have you ever been just ripped out of yourself, done with self-absorption and self-interest and self-preoccupation, and self-introspection, and just gotten lost in something wonderful? To dream is really to live. I think that's what Jesus meant when he talked about the seed falling in the ground and dying in order that it might bear fruit. You know, if you clutch your life and preserve your life, you lose your life. But, if you invest your life, if you'll lose your life, you will find your life. It's the paradox of the Gospel. And to dream is really to live; it's to live with enthusiasm. It's to be able to be free from all boredom and numbness and all of that that makes life so vacuous for so many! To dream is really to live, it's to live with passion, it's to live with hope, with expectation, to be alive, really alive!

But, this is true, also. Dreamers die. Dreamers die, and that's so sad. Last week I mentioned the biography of Gandhi that impressed me as a young person. Gandhi, who brought passive resistance into our world, who led the Indian nation in that resistance that led to the removal of British rule so that India could be for Indians, only to find out that that nation, once on its own, was being torn apart by religious strife, war between great religions, hunger fasts. Willing to die in his appeal to people to say, "Don't do this. Come together." The movie of a few years ago showed it vividly. The dreamer Gandhi cut down by an assassin's bullet. And I suppose "I have a dream" will always be synonymous with Martin Luther King. The dream of a different world where little black children and little white children could play together, color blind. Where the color of a person's skin wouldn't be a deciding factor about anything but rather the virtue and integrity of a person's life would count. Dear God, isn't it a good dream? Isn't it a wonderful dream? Can't we dream of a world where that really could be true? But the dreamer, Martin Luther King, cut down by an assassin, and Jesus looked at those around him and saw the masses like sheep without a shepherd - he was moved with compassion and declared a dream of another kind of world, and they crucified him.

Dreamers die. Dear God, isn't it sad? It seems that the more wonderful the dream, the greater the reaction. Why, I wonder, the anger? Why do we kill dreamers?

But, thank God that's not the last word. Because dreamers die, but dreams don't die. For somewhere in the human heart a dream will be reborn and someone will feel moved by the Spirit to say, "I have a dream." Jesus, the night before he was crucified, gathered with his friends and broke bread and said, "Remember me, and don't let the dream die." And down through all these centuries when so little of the dream has been realized, so little of the dream has been realized, but I still dream it, don't you?

I have a dream. I have a dream. I had only a very little part to play in the first 100 years of this congregation. It's always a fine congregation. But I came back in the wake of the celebration of the centennial, and now this year we are in the celebration of our 125th year, and on that March Sunday of 1971 when I returned, I declared a dream. For I had learned at that point in my life that I could not win the world or change the world. Couldn't change the Church, but determined that we could create here an oasis of grace. That we would center on the grace of God for the healing of persons. That was the dream. On the local radio station at one point we even had a little jingle - *Christ Community Church, the church that cares about people*. That was the dream. That was all it was about. The grace place. God's emergency ward. The place for people like me, broken. And the dream has been consistent all these years. There are times when you complain that I take you into ethereal flights of theological speculation, but I want you to know that to think theologically is not in order to satisfy some speculative curiosity, but it is to uncover the foundations to make sure that a community of compassion is rooted in Jesus who is rooted in the heart of God! That's what it's all about. Theology is not an end in itself. It's a means to an end, which is to create here a place where the dream is embodied. Dream of Jesus. Dream of God. Dear God, it's a good dream. Will you dream with me?