



December 30, 2007

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Matthew 2:13-23

“Nightmares & Dreams”

Walking down the hallway of a public building I spotted a poster that caught my attention. The poster first showed a photograph of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. The caption below the picture said simply, “The dream”. This referred, of course, to his famous “I have a dream” speech he delivered during the Civil Rights March on Washington. In that speech he dreamed of children of many races playing happily together, and of a human community in which a person is judged by the “content of his character”, not the “color of his skin”.

Just below the picture of Dr. King was a photograph of a young thug hiding behind the corner of a city building, holding an automatic weapon pointed toward whoever might come around that corner. Below this picture was another caption: “The nightmare”.

These pictures sum up the reality of our world. There are dreamers dreaming positive dreams, and there are nightmare visions lived and acted out in tragic ways all around us.

In Native American culture there is a talisman called a “dream-catcher”. I’m sure you’ve seen them in craft shops or on a necklace somewhere. They look like a spider’s web decorated with a few feathers and beads. The dream-catcher was hung over a newborn’s cradle, so that the web would catch only the child’s good dreams, letting the bad dreams slip through the spaces in the web’s strands.

It's not hard to see why this symbol would have some popularity in today's world. We might like to see the web catch the BAD dreams, actually, and imprison them forever, so that they can't get loose and pollute our world.

But we don't need a dream catcher, friends, because we have Jesus. I believe our faith gives us the power to deal with and face any nightmare. Our sacred writings are filled with accounts of dreams and dreamers. Our Scripture for today tells of Joseph's dreams, and his response to them. Let us consider what we might learn today from his story.

First, it is essential to recognize that nightmare realities are not unique to our particular time and place. We are tempted to become nostalgic for the "good old days". We look back and think life was so much better then. People were kinder; there were fewer horrors and tragedies. Well, Joseph and Mary and the infant Jesus were back in some "old" days, but they sure weren't very good. Herod's behavior, in killing all boy babies under the age of 2 in Bethlehem, surely qualifies as a nightmare reality.

We have to stop thinking there was some magic formula in the past that made for a perfect world. The world was never perfect. Human beings have always been terribly prone to sin. I remember seeing a photograph once- I believe it was taken during the 1930's. It shows a large crowd of folks out on a summer day. They look like they're enjoying themselves. One handsome young couple is pictured in the foreground—I think they were eating ice cream cones. The special event that had brought these folks out for a good time? A lynching. In the background the ragged form of a black man's corpse can be seen hanging from a tree. For some reason, when people start longing for the "good old days", that picture comes to my mind. Those days weren't so good for EVERYONE. There are things about past times that were better than situations of our present day, but the reverse is true too. Holy Scripture tells us nightmare realities are part of all human experience, and that pining for some magic old lost time is not a faithful way to live.

So- that's the first step in learning how to be a people of faith, equipped to face any nightmare. We must face the truth about human sin and stop thinking we can find some magic wand to wave it away.

The second step in dealing with nightmares and dreams is to proclaim and trust this truth: GOD is NEVER that one who brings about the nightmare events we encounter in life.

Joseph had a bad dream. It was sent from God. It was not a PUNISHMENT, but a WARNING. It pointed to a nightmare reality that was being wrought by human

sin. Joseph did not have a bad dream and run away to Egypt, you see. He had a HOLY dream and immediately implemented God's rescue plan.

We need to know that there are nightmare realities wrought by human sin in all times and places. We need to trust that God is not the AUTHOR of nightmare suffering; God is our helper, defender and friend. And we, like Joseph, need to embrace the positive vision of evil foiled.

Joseph BELIEVED in his dream, and ACTED on his dream. Those are the next two steps we are called to take: we need to embrace positive dreams and see them as essential in countering the nightmare visions around us. THEN we need to put our positive dreaming, thinking and attitudes into action.

Dr. John Maxwell tells the story of being in a small plane with a pilot friend and noticing the "attitude" indicator. I would have misread it and assumed it was an "altitude" indicator—but he was sharp and asked the pilot how an aircraft could have an attitude. A plane's attitude is in relation to the horizon. When the nose is pointed up, it is called a nose-up attitude, and when the nose is pointed down it's called a nose-down attitude. The attitude of the plane directly affects the performance of the plane.

It may seem trite, but friends, our attitude, like the plane's, affects our performance. You may have heard of Daniel Goleman's writings on the subject of what he calls "emotional intelligence". His thesis is that we have over-fixated on being "smart" as the be-all, end-all of existence. Studies show that high I. Q. does not predict who will do well in life. Psychologists theorize that I. Q. contributes only about 20% of the factors that foster success. The factors that make up the other 80% are what Goleman calls emotional intelligence. The majority of these factors are, in one way or another, related to positive imaging and thinking, which in turn influence behavior.

All this may seem like just plain old common sense- nothing new really—but we are called to take it VERY seriously. Our Scripture invites us to dream dreams, to see positive visions, to believe they CAN and WILL come to pass with God helping us, and to act on that belief.

No one's life or influence is insignificant in this process. We are all crucial elements in the equation, necessary ingredients for the recipe, required pieces of the puzzle.

Daniel Goleman shares an example of a person with a very high emotional intelligence. I think this is what God has in mind for us as dreamers whose dreams have the power to counter nightmare realities all around us. Goleman writes:

It was a steamy afternoon in New York City, the kind of day that makes people sullen with discomfort. I was heading to my hotel, and as I stepped onto a bus, I was greeted by the driver, a middle-aged man with an enthusiastic smile. "Hi, how're you doing?" he said. He greeted each rider in the same way. As the bus crawled uptown through gridlocked traffic, the driver gave a lively commentary: there was a terrific sale at that store... a wonderful exhibit at this museum... had we heard about the movie that just opened down the block? By the time people got off, they had shaken off their sullen shells. When the driver called out, "So long, have a great day!" each of us gave a smiling response.

I met a bus driver like that at a ski area once. Snow was falling, the road was winding and treacherous. The tired and sweaty skiers were fogging up the windows. The driver pulled over, jokingly asked us to "stop breathing" if we could, and took the time needed to clear the windows. He kept up a humorous running commentary as he made the rounds dropping off skiers at the various hotels.

In Mundelein where I served as pastor for seven years, there was an employee in the post office who always was upbeat and cheerful. ALWAYS. People visibly brightened as they left his counter.

At this point we might all think, "Ok, yes, this kind of thing is good and all, but when REAL tragedy or nightmares strike, there's no way we can have a positive attitude or dream positive dreams.

Gordon MacDonald, writer and pastor, went with his wife to minister to people at "ground zero" in Manhattan in mid-September of 2001. He kept a journal, portions of which were published in the Nov-Dec. edition of "Worship Leader" magazine.

On Sept. 21 he wrote:

There is a man at our corner whose job it is to record the trucks as they leave the pit with their load of rubble. He is from Jamaica, and he has one of the most radiant smiles I've ever seen. He brings a kind of spiritual sunshine to the entire intersection. ...He brightens men up.... Occasionally I go out to him and bring him some water. At other times he comes over to chat. We always laugh when we engage. I said to him last night, "You're a follower of the Lord, aren't you?" He gave me an enthusiastic, "Yes. Jesus is with me all the time." ... He represents to

me the ...ideal follower of Christ: out in the middle of the chaos, doing his job, pressing a bit of joy into a wild situation.

MacDonald reflected on his experience overall:

...more than once I asked myself- as everyone asked- is God here? And I decided that He is closer to this place than any other place I've ever visited. ...Everyone- absolutely everyone- is everyone else's brother or sister.... Everyone talks; everyone co-operates; everyone does the next thing that has to be done. ...No church service, no church sanctuary, no religiously inspiring service has spoken so deeply to my soul or witnessed to the presence of God as those hours last night at the crash site.

Here we may find ourselves thinking, “All right. Maybe it is possible to embrace positive attitudes even in the midst of a nightmare. But what if Pastor MacDonald had lost a close loved one in that horror. How could he be positive then?”

There is an incredible video that circulated during the months following the terrorist attack on 9-11—of an interview with Lisa Beamer, whose husband Todd was among those passengers who rushed the hijackers before crashing to their deaths in a Pennsylvania field.

It is incredible. She talks of Todd praying the Lord's prayer on the phone before the crash. She talks about how he prayed, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” She speaks of hoping to be able to forgive those who caused his death. She talks about how difficult it is to go forward into life. She says, “I can handle the next five minutes. I look forward to seeing Todd again in heaven. It's the long stretch in between that overwhelms me. But when it gets to be too much, I LOOK UP. I look up to heaven. That's become a mantra for me – LOOK UP.”

Lisa Beamer began dreaming positive dreams. She discovered how we can, with God's help, face nightmare realities. Like Joseph, she is embraced the positive vision of evil foiled.

Friends, at all times, in all places, there are nightmare realities. God is never the author of nightmare suffering, but acts as our helper, defender and friend. He will give us the ability to embrace positive visions, and to act on those visions, to bring them to realization.

What dreams do you have for this New Year that is coming? Are they filled with the presence of the Holy One? Have you offered yourself, your attitudes and

actions, that they might become reality? O Holy Spirit, come, fill us and shape us, make us people who dream YOUR dreams and offer ourselves as your instruments. Amen.

The following was printed in the bulletin as “take home” reflection:

Identify a struggle in your life. (Nightmare)

Seek a positive way to deal with that struggle (Dream)

Trust God will guide you.