

St James United Church

Message for December 11, 2022

Third Sunday of Advent



“Dreaming and Discerning”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 1:18-25; Excerpt from Howard Thurman, *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations*. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1973, 1985, p. 3.

So far this Advent we have talked about how this time of year is characterized by waiting and seeking. Another motif is dreaming. We dream of being at home for the holidays, sing about a hoped-for white Christmas, read about sugar plums dancing in children’s heads, watch Scrooge experience a series of night-time visions that result in a change of heart. It shouldn’t be a surprise really. So much of the season centres around anticipation, especially of what a jolly old elf is going to put in our stockings in thirteen nights’ time as the children are sleeping in bed.

Many of those examples are dreams in a metaphorical sense, akin to the hope we named on the first Sunday of Advent. We need those kinds of dreams, the visions of Isaiah that are such a big part of this season. They brought encouragement to the people in their circumstances, like today’s message given to the exiles in Babylon dreaming of going home. It said that their waiting wouldn’t be in vain, and invited them to look for where God was present as they waited, helping them transform what felt like a hopeless wilderness into something new, abundant. It paid off. The seeds of the Judaism that grew after the Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. were planted centuries before in Babylon, far from the Temple, the centre of their spiritual lives.

That vision also spoke to the first Christians centuries later. I’m sure they heard a resonance between the promise of a way through the wilderness and their new faith not yet referred to as Christianity but as “The Way”. Isaiah spoke of the blind given sight, the deaf able to hear again. They experienced that kind of healing but more often they experienced a healing of the heart that in turn brought healing to the wider community. They felt Jesus living through them, still “God-with-us”, through the Spirit helping them see the world differently, hear the cries of others in a new way, live with compassion and seeking justice, a movement of life in defiance of death as Howard Thurman put it, trusting “that love is sturdier than hate, that right is more confident than wrong, that good is more permanent than evil.”

This is the “saving them from their sins” Joseph was told Jesus would bring, not just forgiving our individual actions but liberating us from the shared narratives that perpetuate injustice, like the social contract that gave Scrooge license to disparage the poor. It’s a saving though that calls us to not simply wait for a transformed future but to reshape the world around us by the choices we make. This is not always easy, as we hear with Joseph. He was questioning the assumptions of his own time. Was it right, he wondered, to accuse Mary of infidelity in public, even though it was expected of him in Mosaic Law, when doing so would result in her being

stoned to death? He went to bed questioning what to do and as we heard, didn't just have a metaphorical dream, but a literal one where an angel came with a solution he hadn't even considered - to accept what Mary had told him and to adopt Jesus as his own. Though riskier than what he came up with, it was the more loving choice, one that saved Mary, and Jesus, not from her "sin" but more truly from the sin of the community.

Joseph's situation reminds me that as we wait and seek and dream, we need to discern how best to respond in our situations. As I shared last week, part of that is being aware of our unconscious biases and unspoken assumptions. But in addition, we also simply need to be aware of what is at play within us - hurts, fears, memories - and how they influence the choices we make. One way to get in touch with this is to pay attention to our dreams, to write down as much as we can remember when we wake up. We may discount them as just our brains defragging but as we heard in Joseph's story, they can reveal possibilities our conscious mind otherwise blocks. That was the case when I went for counselling. The therapist told me to write down my dreams. I resisted but it was enlightening. At first my dreams showed me where my issues were, then over time reassured me that healing was happening. Two decades later I prayed over a big decision. I sought the help of an Indigenous elder and once again was told to pay attention to my dreams. I had very lucid ones. They helped me see what I was afraid of, and what I most needed. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised at how helpful they were. Both in the Bible and in the broader Christian tradition, dreams have been seen as a way that the Spirit speaks to us, especially in the vivid ones.

Whether we're asleep or awake, discernment is about being open to the Spirit, trusting that God is not far but with us, helping us make sense of the world, not just in the patterns of history but in our particular circumstances. In this I'd like to share another prayer practice, called *lectio divina*, divine reading. If you've attended some EvenTide services you may have practiced it. You take a bible passage or other text and read it very slowly, not for what it may mean as a whole, but rather for what words or phrases catch your attention. When they do you pause to ponder what it is about the word or phrase that speaks to your heart, or more to the point sticks in your gut. As you prayerfully sit with the word, you let the Spirit speak through it to what-ever situation you are discerning. Then as that feels complete, you move on in the reading until another word or phrase brings you to stop. Like interpreting dreams, this prayer process is not about the rational mind but intuition. Whenever I practice *lectio*, I'm amazed at the insights that come and with it the clarity I need as I discern how best to respond in a situation.

In the world today it can feel difficult to know what to do in any given moment, be it in deciding the right course of action in the climate crisis, or simply facing the inevitable shift in the climate of the conversation at the holiday table when family comes together. But we aren't alone in our decisions. The message of Advent and Christmas is that God is with us, profoundly in the life of Jesus but not only then. God has always been with us, and always will be, planting in our hearts a dream of what the world can be when love is sturdier than hate, through the Spirit giving us the courage to be more confident in the right than the wrong, and giving us wisdom to more often choose what is good. May we trust that God is with us, not just as we wait and dream of what could be, but seek to live out God's dream for us. Amen.