**Those Who Dream: Keep Awake**

**Mark 13:24-27**

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When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,

    we were like those who dreamed.

These are the opening words of Psalm 126, a beautiful psalm of hope and gratitude God restored Jerusalem and brought home the people of Judah from exile. “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.”  These words are also the source of our Advent theme and sermon series entitled, “Those Who Dream”.  Advent is a season of waiting and anticipation, and the scripture passages we read during Advent, like the Christmas story itself, are full of dreamers.  The prophets, the psalmists, John the Baptist, Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph, Simeon, Anna, the shepherds and the Magi—they were all dreamers. Some had dreams in which God came and spoke to them.  Others painted pictures with words and stories of God’s dreams, or their own, for Creation.

 Of course, we are dreamers, too.  Our dreams give us hope; our hopes become our dreams.  So, as we start our Advent journey, let me ask you - what are you dreaming of?  What do you hope for?  What are you waiting for?  It seems, somehow, an especially relevant question this year as our whole world waits for a vaccine and effective treatments for Covid-19.  As we wait, we dream of the day when we can be reunited with family members we haven’t seen for months, when we can return to our church and to the church family we love, when we can leave our homes without masks, without fear.

 These are new dreams born of new circumstances, but this year has reignited old dreams, as well.  The impact of Covid-19 on people of color coupled with the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and so many other African Americans at the hands of the police have sparked a renewed conversation about systemic racism and civil rights.  Many of us have begun to dream, or to dream again, of a country in which all God’s children are safe, respected, have access to health care, and have the food, clean water, and shelter they need to live healthy lives.

 At the same, we are just completing a presidential election which has only served to exaggerate the deep divisions between Americans.  As people of peace, we dream of the day we are able to lay down the swords of hate and anger and create, instead, a human family of mutual respect.

 Dreaming, by its very nature, leads to hoping.  Hoping for the end of something difficult or painful.  Hoping for the start of something new.  As I’ve been working on this sermon series, one of the things that has struck me most powerfully is how often our dreams are exactly what God dreams for us.  God, too, hopes for us to be healthy and safe, for all of Creation to thrive, for all of God’s people to live in peace and abundance so they might flourish in love and dignity.  These hopes of God’s, the dreams of God, are what we mean when we speak of the kingdom of God.  And, of course, the Christ child we are waiting for in these weeks of Advent is the one God sent to usher in that kingdom - to teach us who God is and how we are meant to love God and care for each other.

 This brings us to our scripture reading from Mark.  This passage is sometimes called the “little apocalypse” as it speaks of end times - of a second coming of Christ.  But, unlike the books and movies we think of today as apocalyptic, this passage from Mark isn’t intended to invoke fear - but rather, hope.  Jesus is describing what will happen to those who follow him when he returns and the kingdom of God is fulfilled.  He acknowledges many difficult things may happen. “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken…”  That sounds a bit like 2020 has felt, doesn’t it?  But, then he goes on to say, “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.”Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”

 Mark doesn’t paint a picture of Jesus destroying the world - there is no fear tactic at play here.  Rather, he speaks of Jesus coming to gather his followers together, to bring them from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven to be the Family of God living in the kingdom of God.

 With these words from Jesus, Mark carries us back to the first coming of Christ, to Christmas, to a country and its people who had been overthrown by one empire after another, struggling and fighting to keep their identity and their connection to the Holy.  Jesus was born into this place, among these people, as they were again controlled by outsiders - the Roman Empire.  They had little food, little work, little power, and lots of fear.  Then Jesus came with healing and hope, lifting the lowly, challenging the powerful.  He came once, and Mark promises that he will come again.

 And so it is for us.  Yes, we are living in some difficult times.  Yet, when we celebrate Christmas, Jesus is born anew year after year to revive our hope, to stoke our dreams, to show us again the promise of God’s kingdom.  That is something worth waiting for, something worthy of our dreams.

 That said, Mark doesn’t ask for patient, passive waiting.  Rather, he says, “Beware, keep alert.  Keep awake.”  Mark believed a second coming of Christ was imminent - that Christ would return within his lifetime.  Of course, still today we have people who announce when the second coming will be and wait for it.  But, Christ didn’t return during Mark’s lifetime nor has he come during ours.

 So, what does it mean for us to “keep awake” here at the end of 2020 as we anticipate Christmas?  If we share the dreams that God dreams, dreams of justice and equality and health and wholeness, perhaps to keep awake means to look for where there is some force at work against them.

 I love what Dr. Marcia Riggs of Columbia Theological Seminary says about this text.  “We are being reminded that to be the people of God requires an ethical posture of attentiveness, to “keep awake” (v. 37). The text charges us to “keep awake” because we do not know the day or the hour when the fullness of “God with us” will be realized. To keep awake means we are being charged, in the vernacular of BLM, to be “woke.” Being woke means being aware of, enraged by, and willing to protest in solidarity with people who are pushed to the margins of society because of systemic oppression manifested as racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia—any and all forms of objectification and dehumanization we enact upon one another.”

 Yet, I believe that to “keep awake” requires holy attentiveness, as well.  As we wait to see dreams fulfilled, as we hope for all the potential and light of Christmas, Advent is a time to seek out where God’s kingdom is already at work.  In a column he wrote for Christian Century, Dennis Sanders says, “Advent isn’t just about waiting for the baby in the manger. It’s about expecting Christ here, in our own messed-up lives, right now...We are called to be on the lookout for the big return, but we are also to be aware of the many ways Christ appears in the present. Are we alert to see where Christ arrives, breaking through time and space to be present in our lives and the lives of others?”

 While 2020 has been horrible in so many ways, this year we have also seen moments of humanity at its best - moments when Christ has led us to embody God’s kingdom.  Do you remember, when the pandemic first started, how Italians across their country sang from their balconies during lockdown as a way to connect with each other and boost morale?  Or how Lin-Manuel Miranda and Andrew Lloyd Weber had a musical playoff online by making recordings of themselves at home playing and singing songs from their musicals just to entertain us while we were all staying home?  Did you know that charitable giving went up across the country this year?  And people did things like continue to pay for housecleaning or haircuts they couldn’t receive just to help support their cleaner or barber.  Many of us have intentionally ordered from local businesses and restaurants in hopes of saving them.  People have gone grocery shopping for older folks who don’t feel safe going out. We saw massive voter turnout for the election and people helping to make it possible for everyone to vote.  Signs of hope surround us every day if we open our eyes and our hearts to see them.

So, as this season of waiting begins, I invite you to intentionally “keep awake’ with both ethical attentiveness and holy attentiveness.  Stay alert to when and where oppression and injustice are at work thwarting the kingdom of God and be conscious of when and where the kingdom is flourishing.  The first reveals where there is work to be done.  The second gives us hope that it will be.  And it is hope that fuels our dreams.  Dreams of a better future, a kinder world.  Dreams of reconciliation and unity.  Dreams of justice, compassion, and joy.

In the words of Langston Hughes,

Hold fast to dreams

For if dreams die

Life is a broken-winged bird

That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams

For when dreams go

Life is a barren field

Frozen with snow.

May we always be those who dream. Amen.