

## *Dreamers*

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*Preached at the Lower Merion Baptist Church*

*Sunday, November 5, 2006; Bryn Mawr, PA*

Isaiah 25:6-9

All Saints Sunday

*"Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all the faces,..."*

### *Movement 1 – The Despairing View of the World*

Is the glass half empty, or is it completely empty? Are you a pessimist, or are you living in a state of utter despair? Most of us wouldn't think about being darker, or bleaker than a pessimist. After all, how could one go further than seeing life in a negative light? Life isn't completely bad, is it? Even after the worst of days, things tend to turn around and get better, don't they? After all, there must be something good to find in life? We could imagine pessimist days. Maybe we could even imagine bleak days, but can we imagine living with that kind of bleakness? Can we imagine that the glass not just be half empty, but completely empty?

When I consider the state of the world, I can imagine falling to that point where there is little to no water left in the glass. I can imagine someone finding themselves in a place of utter despair because life just seems that bleak. Watch the news, read the paper and it doesn't take long to realize that things are not great with the world. We read about the atrocity at Darfur where 2 million people have been displaced, where no fewer than 200,000 have died and where men and women are brutalized just for searching for water and firewood. We read about this atrocity, and wonder what kind of world we live in that allows such terror to occur. Where is there any hope in such a story of violence and evil? We read about the atrocities that occurred in Chile under Pinochet, and wonder what kind of world do we live in where such evils are allowed to occur. We read and know about men mad with power, causing incredible political instability in parts of the world, while others stand by and watch. We hear about famine where thousands of people are dying, and the few in power still hold onto their power and fill their bellies. We would have thought that we would have learned the horrors of war after WWI and WWII, but our world is still a machine that creates weapons, rhetoric, and rage which all can, and very well may, lead to war. With all of this in mind, the glass seems to be empty of any hope.

Or think about our own country. On any given night, between 700,000 and 2 million people are homeless in America, and 36% of those are children. Violence, especially violence in schools, seems to be on the rise, causing us to change the ways we raise our children. Our political system has become a space and a platform for bitter bickering, modeling not reconciliation but rage towards those with whom we disagree. Natural resources are diminishing, the weather is moving towards extremes, and it seems that environment is falling apart around us as we continue to grow into bigger houses, bigger cars, and a bigger sense of individualism. Communities are becoming a thing of the past and we are losing the common sense of conversation, neighborhood, and companionship. Our country seems to be far from the model, utopia society that our Founders envisioned it to be. Some may look at the state of the country, the state of the world, the state of the environment, and say that indeed the glass is not just half empty, but completely empty.

It is easy to fall into the place of thinking that despair is all we have. It is easy to lose hope when we consider the state of things around us. It seems that the best thing we can do is take Stanley Kubrick's sardonic advice to stop worrying and just love the bomb. We can see from Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* how easy it would be to lose everything, we can see how precarious our lives are, and maybe we should just stop worrying, and accept the fact that life is bleak and can be ended in a moment. It is easy to lose hope. The philosopher, Rousseau, described the basic root of society as a "sad science" (describe by Simon Critchley). Rousseau, unlike Hobbes and Locke, did not believe society was based upon the good intentions of people, but needed laws and rules to govern individual's acts so that society would not break into pieces. The glass of human nature was at least half empty for Rousseau.

Read a few chapters before Isaiah 25, and you will also find a lack of hope. Isaiah is foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem, and it isn't pretty. The Israelites were surrounded by foreign armies. They were a weak military presence, and had little hope of defending themselves. They had watched or heard about some of their other kinsfolk who were already beaten and taken into exile. You can imagine that they felt fairly bleak about their present situation. They were waiting for their own destruction, where is the positive in that? Hope seemed to be a far off idea, out of reach and out of belief. They did not find much water in the glass if any at all. Maybe we can find ourselves standing next to the Israelites, surrounded by hostility, surrounded by violence, surrounded by death, waiting for our turn, waiting for things to get worse, and abandoning all hope. Maybe we can understand how someone can go beyond being a pessimists to one who just embraces despair. Think about the world, and maybe you can see the glass as less than half empty, it is almost empty.

### *Movement 2 – The Despairing View of the Church*

We look to the church for hope and help and what do we find? Do we find an institution that stands against the despair of the world, or do we find that the church (which is supposed to be the light to the world) is also holding a half empty glass? Is the church spiraling downward as well into the darkness that already seems to be surrounding the world? It may have seemed that way to the Israelites, who were being backed into a corner. They were under siege, surrounded and wondering if hope was at all available. Slowly, they found themselves in the temple. They found themselves hiding in the halls of the sacred place crying for, praying for, and dying for some kind of help and some kind of hope. Yet all they received were empty prayers that held little significance and offered little pastoral hope. They received empty rituals that offered little substance. They received twisted and bewildered prophesy that seemed to prophesy nothing at all. Even when they turned to Isaiah, they initially received prophesies of destruction. What happened to the hope that the temple was said to offer? What happened to the promise and the covenant with God that the temple was supposed to protect? Where were the strength and the conviction of the temple in this time of distress? Maybe they found the priests of the temple cowering beside them in fear, also waiting for the end to arrive. Maybe they looked to the temple, the place of religion and found little to no support or help, but only despair.

Maybe we find ourselves backing into the sacred corner as well. We find ourselves looking at the despair of the world, considering the despair, and crying out for

something different. We are crying out for some kind of hope, some kind of promise, and we look to the church for that hope and that promise. Yet we find an institution with a nationally dwindling membership. Over at least the past five years, main line denominations have been losing members on an annual basis. More than one “expert” has claimed that the church is dying. Some argue that the church has become an unnecessary part of the local society, pushed aside as a place where people suspend reason for an hour or two and then return back to the real world. Stanley Hauerwas argues that people care more about their health and life now; they place more faith in medicine than in God and faith. He claims that the way Pastors are trained and treated versus the way Doctors are trained and treated says volumes about the priorities of our society. It may seem that the church as a necessary institution is crumbling and is becoming obsolete.

And if this wasn’t enough, many churches seem plagued with bickering, with back-biting, with passive-aggressive behavior about fairly small issues. If churches have a reputation, it is that they are places where people are shallow, where people are critical, and where people will fight. Abraham Lincoln’s parents were members of a Baptist church in Indiana that went through a vicious fight. It is very likely that Lincoln’s experience of that church fight turned him off to institutional religion. People my age and younger do not see any future or need for the church. Ministers who are a generation ahead tell me that churches are dying and there is no hope for the future because they have lived through the change in the church. This week I read a poem that talked about:

The church that doesn’t have parking problems  
The church that enjoys peace and quiet  
The church that doesn’t need to change anything  
The church that has nightmares  
The church that plays it safe and never risks anything  
The church that thinks charity begins at home  
The church that uses people to serve its traditions and building  
The church that worries  
The church that seldom makes mistakes  
The church that looks for problems and dangers  
The church that fossilizes

This is a dying church (taken from “Milton & Blandford Deanery Doings” – see the end of the sermon for the whole poem)

Here is the scary thing; I bet you could relate to some of those descriptions. While not all apply to us, some of them do, and maybe we need to wonder if we are a dying church. Even if we aren’t, some of you can remember back to the days when you wondered. You can remember back to the moments when you had almost no one in worship. You can remember back to the days when bickering broke the church and left it to rot on the roadside. You remember what it was like to look at this church, just as many of us look at different churches, and assume that the church was almost finished. It wasn’t an issue of the glass being half empty, but of the glass being almost empty. Is this an institution where we can find hope? Is this an institution where we can find a light to shine in the darkness of our lives? Or, in this bleak world, do we only find a bleak and dying church?

*Movement 3 – With our Head in the Sand, all we see it Mud*

With so much despair, why have any hope at all? With such a bleak view of the world and of the church, where can we find any light? Where can we find any hope? Where can we find anything that will pull us out of this spiraling cycle of despondence? Maybe we feel like we should just put our head in the sand and pray that all the bad things go away. Maybe we should all go out into the cemetery, and dig holes to place our head in, that way we would no longer have to watch the despair of the world and of the church. Maybe all we would see would be mud, but what is the other option?

I am reminded of Eeyore, from the delightful writing about Winnie the Pooh. In one moment in the book, Pooh and Piglet were looking for Eeyore.

“Hallo, Eeyore,” they called out cheerfully.

“Ah!” said Eeyore. “Lost your way?”

“We just came to see you,” said Piglet. “And to see how your house was. Look, Pooh, its still standing!”

“I know,” said Eeyore. “Very odd. Somebody ought to have come down and pushed it over.”

“We wondered whether the wind would blow it down,” said Pooh.

“Ah, that’s why nobody’s bothered, I suppose. I thought perhaps they’d forgotten.”

(from Winnie the pooh as taken from *The Tao of Pooh*, pg. 17)

Eeyore had such a bleak view of the world, that he was expecting someone to push over his home. And when no one came, he read assumed that his house was so miserable, that no one would even want to knock it over. This is bleak.

We can fall into this state of mind, where we are expecting the worst to happen. We can live as if we are expecting it to rain tomorrow; we can live as if we are expecting the distressing news with each and every phone call. We can live and worship as if we are expecting the church to fail, and we can no longer see any hope at all. I can imagine that the Israelites found themselves in this point, expecting to loose their identity. They were expecting to loose their temple; they were expecting to loose their beloved city. All hope was lost.

Can you see us heading to this place as well? Can you see us falling in so deep that all hope is lost? Have you been their as well. It is easy to get stuck and lose any and all sight of hope.

*Movement 4 – The Hope of Isaiah*

But Isaiah gives us hope! For a moment, Isaiah stops his discourse of doom and gloom and paints for the Israelites and for us, a picture of hope. It is a picture that starts with a hope for Israel and Jerusalem, but one that expands. It is a picture that increases in size with each stroke of Isaiah’s prophetic brush. Isaiah gives us the picture of the banquet on Mt. Zion. It is a banquet that is similar to the covenant banquets which the Israelites had previously, in Exodus, when all was right with the Lord. Yet the invitation to the banquet goes beyond the chosen race to the entire human race. This invitation is not just for the despaired of Israel, but for the desperate of the world. It is a banquet of the finest foods, of the finest drinks, and of prosperity from the blessing of the Lord. But Isaiah does not stop with a restored covenant with the entire world. No, Isaiah adds another layer of paint with another stoke, and offers an even deeper hope. The shroud of death, the shroud of despair, the shroud of hopelessness that is plaguing you, that is

holding you down, that is clouding your sight – God will lift that shroud. God will swallow the hopelessness and death will be no more. God will wipe away the despair and the darkness of living will be no more. God will wipe the tears from our face, God will wipe the mud from our eyes, and the disgrace of the church will be restored to glory. This is the hope, this is the promise, and this is the picture that Isaiah gives to his people as all hell gathers around them. This is the hope, this is the promise, and this is the picture that Isaiah gives to us as all hell breaks loose around us. Gather around that picture and imagine the praise we will cry out to the Lord on that great and glorious day. Gather around that picture and be glad in the salvation which the Lord has granted.

This is a dream-like picture that gives us hope. It is the dream of Esmeralda for which Don Quixote was searching. It is the dream of a land of grapes with the Grandpa was searching in *the Grapes of Wrath*. It is the dream of America that you could see in the naive eyes of Mr. Smith as he toured and experienced the sights of our nation's capital; taking in the story of America. Isaiah is not just telling us to look at the glass as half full, instead he is giving us a glass that is completely full, even to the point of overflowing. Isaiah gives us hope! We hear this hope in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, claiming that death has been beaten, challenging death to show its sting, and it has no power. We hear this hope in Mary who ran to Jesus, tripping over the despair of grief from her brother's death, and naming the lost hope she had in Jesus' healing powers. This is a profound, a powerful hope of a promise yet to come. Isaiah gives us hope!

#### *Movement 5 – The Dreams of the Saints*

The people we call saints have lived into, towards, and embodied that hope. The promise itself is not enough. We can paint the picture, we can offer a dream with pretty words and great flourishes, but life is still difficult. We are still surrounded by despair, and a pretty picture hanging over the mantle will not change the circumstances. What are we to do with this hope? What are we to do with this promise that we are told will come to fruition at some time or another? After all, any rational person will claim that such hope is fleeting and we should abandon it for reason.

This is where we look to the saints. The idea of the saints is not just a Catholic phenomenon. The idea of the saints is not just a way of putting some on a pedestal, but remembering the people who could dream and who could live into that dream. The saints were dreamers. They were individuals who could see this vision, and then lived life in a way to achieve this very vision. The theologian Karl Rahner, once said in a sermon, "if you have meet faith, hope, and love, then you have meet the men and women whom your heart meets when seeking God." These are the people that Rahner calls saints. The saints are people who lived life with the faith, the hope, and the love that comes from God. These are people like Francis of Assisi who gave all he had to the poor, and lived a life of simplicity. These are people like John and Charles Wesley who had such a passion for the church that they were willing to push for change and love as they experienced it. These are people like the Indiana Baptist Isaac McCoy who had a passion to reach out to the Native Americans in a way that held compassion and justice. These saints saw this painting that Isaiah painted. They saw the holy banquet, they could almost taste the action of God removing the shroud of despair, and they felt God wiping away their tears, and they were not willing to wait. They saw this painting and committed to living into, toward, and embodying that vision in any way possible. They lived with the kind of love

and compassion that all will have at that banquet table. They lived with the hope and the peace that God grants at that final day. They would not let the darkness of the world cast a shadow upon their hope, their peace, and God's glory.

When Martin Luther King claimed, "I have a Dream," he did not just let that dream hang in the air, a nice idea. No, King pushed to live that dream. King exemplified that dream, and for a moment became that dream. No longer judging people by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. No longer singing with his people, but singing with all the people, "free at last..." King did not let that dream hang as a far off hope. Even in the darkest night King would not let go of that dream, but reached for it, claimed it, and lived it.

We have people in this church who are and who have been dreamers. Llylan Tyson was someone who saw the dream of the heavenly banquet and extended that hospitality in her own life. Phil Shank devoted his life towards creating the table, and the space for all people to gather and be a part of God's presence. Pastor Faith pushed to create the love and kindness that is a part of Isaiah's dream. Bob Matherly was a dreamer. This church is full of dreamers who have gone beyond the limitations of this building to the possibilities of the Lord.

You remember the difficult times. You remember the times when things seemed hopeless for Lower Merion Baptist Church. Who were the dreamers? Who were the ones who could see the church that might be, and pushed to make it a reality? On All Saints Day, we remember those who have gone before us, who dared to dream. We remember those who dared to challenge, to push, and to live the life and the ethic that is the vision of God. The saints saw the picture that Isaiah painted, and dared to live into that picture.

#### *Movement 6 – Praying for Dreams*

Can we also claim that hope? This is the challenge for us all, to name and to claim that hope, that vision, and that dream. The world is a difficult and dangerous place. There are times when we can realistically say, things are getting worse. Yet even as the waves of despair loom over us, can we claim the vision and the hope that is offered to us in scripture? Can we stand up and say, "I shall not fear, because I know where I am going." Can we return love for hate, peace for violence, and grace for retaliation because that is the community the Lord calls us to become? Can we claim that hope? Can we dream?

Because when we join the saints in dreaming, we no longer ask why, but why not. When we join the saints in dreaming we do not explain why we can't do something, but we consider how we can. When we join the saints in dreaming, nothing that the world throws at us can bring us down. Not diminishing numbers, not financial hardships, not irrelevancy, because we have the hope, and the dream of the Lord.

When we dream with the saints, we live knowing that there will be a time when God will call us to the banquet table – how can we despair. We know there will be a time when the shroud of suffering will be lifted – how can we despair. We know there will be a time when every tear will be wiped from our face – how can we despair? We will become a community of dreamers, of people who embrace life which Tertullian claims is the opposite of death. We either live life dying, or we live life living. God's hope calls us to live.

My brothers and sisters, I am asking you to dream. Dream about your own life, about who God is calling you to become, and where God is calling you to serve. Dream

about this church. Not about the struggles, but about the possibilities. Dream about where we are going and who we can be. Dream about the world. Dream about the world that can be and live into that dream. Lets be a community of dreamers. Let's be a community of the absurd and live into the hope that God has promised. The day is coming, the banquet will be set, let's live as if it is here and now!

AMEN