



“Perchance to Dream”

a sermon by

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Proverbs 29: 7-14, 18
Hebrews 11: 1-16

Our New Testament lesson for this morning comes to us from the epistle to the Hebrews, chapter 11:1-16. Our author is offering a word of encouragement to the people to stay the course of faith and to remain strong in the Lord.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain’s. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and “he was not found, because God had taken him.” For it was attested before he was taken away that “he had pleased God.” And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old- and Sarah herself was barren- because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as innumerable as grains of sand by the seashore.”

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.”

The book of Proverbs, that we read from just a few moments ago, is filled with all sorts of pithy sayings that represent the collective wisdom of Israel, passed on through generations and compiled to inform generations to come. The author has a mind to instruct individual hearts and lives as they seek to live as faithful people in a complex world, and also to shape the leadership of the community as a whole. So the sayings are sometimes obscure, typically very specific, and always with an eye to the order of things that is going to be most pleasing to God. Admittedly, some of the wisdom is not immediately obvious in terms of its relevance for the life of faith per se. For example, one proverb reads, “If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, or else, having too much, you will throw it up.” This sounds more like the wisdom of a parent who gives their child free access to the candy jar until they get sick so that they could learn the wonders of moderation then it does anything else but, kids, there you have it, right there in God’s holy Word, don’t eat too much candy. There’s also a warning against the dangers of lethargy, quote, “A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior.”- Not exactly the scripture du jour for a lazy 4th of July weekend.

But the sayings we read from today are targeting not just the people broadly but the politicians and leaders of the community in particular as they seek to govern with equity and justice. “A fool gives full vent to anger,” the passage said, “But the wise quietly holds it back. If a ruler listens to falsehood, all his officials will be wicked. The poor and the oppressor have this in common: the Lord gives light to the eyes of both.” And then there is this, “Where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint, but happy are those who keep the law.” If you go to the commentaries on Proverbs, the passages around this verse- verse 18- receive just a few lines of description and unpacking each. But for this verse, interpreters dedicate nearly an entire page. One reason for this is because it is the only passage in the entire book that speaks of a prophetic revelation, a vision most specifically. And also because that strange language of the people, “casting off restraint,” is essentially another way of saying the people will come undone- they will fall apart because they will fall away from the goal. During the time of the Babylonian exile prophets had fallen

silent, visions were rare, and so were the voices of the leaders that would keep the people accountable to the law, the source of their identity and their life. And so this little verse, “Where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint,” has come to be most popularly translated, “Without a vision, the people perish.” A word to the leaders, without a vision, a thriving community will die on the vine.

The book of Hebrews also speaks of a vision for the people. Not a prophetic one necessarily, but a vision from God nonetheless that for centuries prodded the people up out of their comfortable existence and compelled them forward into a new reality at the summons of our Lord. And as with most visions, the people it speaks of saw the end product without having a clue as to what the steps between where they stood now and where they were called to be would look like. They only knew that they had to act. When a vision comes from God you cannot reason your way into it, you cannot map your way into a future that is unseen, you simply have to get out of your head and you have to go, and act your way into clarity as a friend of mine likes to say, which is why they call it faith. Says Hebrews, “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.” To get to what we know, the visible, we first have to travel through the unknown, the invisible. “By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain’s... By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death... By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark... By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going... For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” And then the punch line, “All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.”

The author of Hebrews, writing to the people of a tiny new religion in a big oppressive Roman empire that had formed around a man Jesus who had been crucified as a criminal by that same empire, takes a spiritual issue and he frames it in earthly terms. The people- these heroes of the faith like Noah and Abraham- were seeking a homeland. Like the proverbial promised land the vision of God that was set out before each of these faithful could be seen as if from a distance and greeted. And while the material vision would vary from person to person- for Cain it was the vision of a sacrifice, for Noah, the vision that God was going to hit the reset button on humanity so get ready, for Abraham, the vision of a nation that was to spring forth from him despite his old age and lay claim to a land yet unseen- while the material substance of the vision would vary from person to person the spiritual vision was the same and that was the vision for a better country, a heavenly one, a life, a home, a community, a nation, a world whose foundations are rooted in God as the architect and builder of all. The author of Hebrews takes a spiritual desire and puts the language of earth and soil and city behind it. The call is to a visionary allegiance to God’s kingdom, that leads us to take concrete steps toward its building up in our world today. To understand ourselves first and foremost as citizens of a kingdom that calls us to step out on behalf of the values of faith and hope and love and the gospel of Jesus Christ despite every trial and tribulation and persuasion in the culture and world around us, because while that kingdom is transient, God’s is eternal.

Easy to say. Hard to live out. At 30,000 feet pledging allegiance to a heavenly kingdom sounds great, but what about here on the ground- what does that even mean? To the people who would receive this epistle- it meant a great deal. They were dealing with great hardship at the time on account of their faith- they were aliens in the midst of a dominant culture as Jews, but even then in isolation from their Jewish culture as new converts to Christianity- strangers in a strange land as it were who were perhaps now having second thoughts about the commitment they’d signed on to. When Christ was resurrected, those who’d heard and believed the story probably assumed that it was just a matter of time before everyone else came to believe in this good news too. But that was not the case. Quite the contrary, the early Christians became an oddity. If you were among them kids made fun of you at school. Colleagues forgot to invite you to join them when they went out to lunch. Everyone was suddenly a better candidate for that promotion. There was social isolation, slander, economic disenfranchisement, poverty. Perhaps it was time to just call it a day and go back to the way things had been before Jesus. You may have felt closer to God, but now you felt farther away from everything else you value in this world. A later reference in the letter indicates that the people

had started to fall away from the community and stopped gathering together regularly for worship perhaps because of their discouragement.

Without a vision, the people perish. And so the author of Hebrews holds up a vision. It is a vision of a spiritual ancestry- a lineage of people who set out in faith based on promises that could not be seen to further a cause that would run contrary to all that they had known. Had they looked back he argues, they could have returned to the way things were in a moment. The lure of the transient security of the world is always waiting to welcome us home. But as it were they were compelled as those who are seeking a homeland. And so like pilgrims on the earth who see a vision of how God is calling them and the world to be, they risked pursuing it in faith that what was promised was more permanent, more abundant, and more real even though it was unseen than anything they now knew. And in exchange, the one who promised was faithful. "If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them."

Without a vision, the people perish. Backsliding into contentment with the familiar status quo regardless of its shortfalls and sins for fear of stepping out into the unknown and forging a new way in reliance upon God. Of course on this fourth of July weekend I have to believe that this was something the founding fathers of our country knew by faith quite well some 234 years ago yesterday when they ratified the Declaration of Independence. Schisming from the ruling empire of the time, and risking their security and place in relation to the rest of the world in favor of a higher calling. The illustration is timely not only because of our celebration this weekend but because it is a reminder that the birth of our country required the labor pains of many who, in their walk through the kingdom, found that they could no longer reconcile the principles that they believed were natural or 'self-evident', as in given by God, with the realities of their time. And so by faith Thomas Jefferson wrote the famous words that would deliver our nation, with bombshells and bloodshed, into a new vision that the people believed better reflected the kingdom they were called to emulate, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. (and) That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it."

By faith, circuit rider Francis Asbury rode some 5,000 miles a year as the revolution began, ordaining hundreds of preachers, and preaching some 17,000 sermons a year in the name of religious freedom, growing the Methodist Episcopal Church in America from 1200 to 214,00 in the course of his ministry at that time. By faith, in 1775 Patrick Henry made a fiery speech in St. John's church in VA proclaiming that, while he had held his tongue in the past, if he did so now he would consider himself guilty of treason to his country and disloyal toward the majesty of heaven, which, he said, "I revere above all earthly kings...I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!" By faith Thomas Paine picked up his pen and began to publish hundreds of thousands of pamphlets to persuade people to overcome their fears and take up the cause of independence from Great Britain, whatever the cost, saying, "These are the times that try men's souls" and, "We have it in our power to begin the world anew."

By faith, 87 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Abraham Lincoln would risk setting forth and pursuing a vision that the values and victories of the revolution were to be for all people as he fought to abolish slavery. By faith 100 years later Martin Luther King Jr. would stand before a vast multitude and proclaim his kingdom vision for the people now, saying "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day. Let freedom ring." People who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desired a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

Today, on a weekend when we celebrate the birth of our independence and yet in a time when we are surrounded by constant reminders that so much about our lives, our city, our country and world is still so incongruous with what we know to be God's design for peace and justice, for equity and love, we need the reminder that in the not so distant past, overwhelmed and busy people like us who were just trying to make a life for themselves and their families, who were bearing up against the threat of war and the strain of poverty and the fear of isolation and even assassination, once stepped out in faith over and against great powers and cultural tides to advance the causes of their heavenly citizenship here and now. People like us who stood at that critical juncture between how the kingdom of the world was and how the kingdom of God was calling it to be and recognized there a new vision for the people and a call upon their own lives to act. This is our heritage in so many ways. And this is also our call. To look at the world around us and hold it up prayerfully to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and answer the question, what will you do by faith to shape our world according to the vision of God's kingdom today?

In Shakespeare's Hamlet, Hamlet, consumed by the misfortune of his life, contemplates ending it all. And in this soliloquy Shakespeare takes the opportunity to expound upon life and death and the great frontier that stretches out before each person as they move closer to the edge of the known of their lives and contemplate stepping off as we all one day will into that great unknown. In it, he pens that famous line, 'To die, to sleep; to sleep, perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub; for in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil must give us pause...' On this side of eternity that phrase, 'perchance to dream', I think, entails the vast possibility that stretches out before us when we venture out into the unknown in faith. Perchance to dream- who knows what is to come? The prospect terrifies us. But as a people of faith we do not step out into mystery, we step forward into the promises of God.

But by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith Noah built a ship in the desert. By faith the people for centuries have been called up out of their comfortable existence and compelled forward to forge a new reality for themselves and generations to come at the summons of our Lord. By faith, what will you do? After our text for today, Hebrews goes on to say, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

These are the times that try men's souls. And in a time of tremendous anxiety and instability without a vision the people will perish. As Christians we have a legacy of great pioneers of the faith. We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses that testify to the power of a vision for a people and for a life. Who suggest that, yes, it is more difficult to step out in faith, but only in doing so will we receive the blessing that awaits. And in his sacrifice Christ stands ready to perfect our faltering faith along the way as the one who can testify that even when our greatest fears over the future are realized, he who has promised will remain faithful. Is it possible then that in these troubled times we could set aside our perpetual longing for the false security of the past and instead direct our energies to pursuing a vision of God for what he has in store? Perchance might we dare to dream that with God in uncertainty there is also possibility- consoled as we are by the inalienable rights and privileges of our heavenly citizenship that says we may be fully at peace and fully confident in the face of the future because it belongs always and only to God? When our own kingdoms falter we have the opportunity to hold up the gospel and look at our world with fresh eyes- and to put forward a vision for a better country, a heavenly one, a holy city built not on the same premises of the past, but on the promise of the love of God for all people that we are called to make real today.

We stand at a critical juncture between how the kingdom of the world is and how the kingdom of God is calling it to be. And what we are willing to see at this perpetual crossroads will define how it is that we are being called to act. Are you willing then, perchance, to dream? To come alongside your fellow pilgrims, risk looking at the world around you, holding it up prayerfully to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and answering the question, what will I do by faith to shape our world according to the vision of God's kingdom today?

Let us pray. God grant us your vision that we would be a holy people, pioneers and prophets of the future that you have prepared, living according to and in reliance on the gospel of Jesus Christ. For we know that your world needs you now. And that to your promises you are faithful. Amen.