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“Dreams of Kingdoms and Kings”

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Christ the King Sunday

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2 Samuel 23:1–7; Revelation 1:4b–8

Have you ever had a dream so different, so vivid, so unshakeable,
that you knew it had to be more than a dream?

Have you ever dreamed in colors like a Target commercial?

Have you ever dreamed of a geographic location so specific that you could
pinpoint it on Google Maps?

Have you ever awakened still smelling the exhaust from the school bus that
was in your dream?

Have you ever sat straight up from a dream crying? Longing? Wishing? Hoping?

I had a dream like that once, about a year after my father died from malignant
melanoma.

I met him in my dream as he stepped off the yellow school bus
that had stopped at Tallulah Gorge, the lowest point east of the Mississippi
River, a name which means “peace” in Cherokee.

I met him as the young man he once was before I was even born:
healthy, hardy, whole and full of life, decked out in one of his classic
white oxford-cloth Brooks Brothers button-down shirts.

And even though I didn't recognize him physically in the dream, I knew him,
and I knew that he had been made whole again after his cancer
in that ancient place called “peace.”

I've had a handful of dreams like that: dreams so palpable that I felt compelled
to write them down so that I would not lose them,

so that I could remember them correctly
and analyze them in hindsight to ascertain their meaning.

John of Patmos had a dream like that, or someone who attributed their dream to John.
It was a dream/vision that someone thought went beyond the ordinary,
that someone thought came directly from God.
Someone found it a vision extraordinary enough to write down,
to capture in words, if that is possible,
and to share it with the seven churches in Asia
to whom he felt it was directed.

And the book of Revelation is the story of that dream/vision.
Was it a human dream that was accessed because of the strange displacement
and liminality of suffering persecution
or of being confined in exile on the isle of Patmos?
Or was it God's dream that someone like John happened to intercept
in his restless-legs sleep, like a Hail Mary touchdown pass?

It's a dream of Jesus coming again surrounded by clouds,
which are probably not your ordinary cumulus, nimbus, or cirrus variety,
but rather theological clouds of divine presence, clouds of divine purpose and guidance,
as in Israel's divine wilderness companion, cloud by day/fire by night,
God with them at their going out and coming in.

In John's vision, Jesus comes to us in the future enveloped by glory clouds,
and ALL look up to see him: not just some, not just believers,
not just the saints, but all, saint and sinner alike.

And the sight of Jesus emerging from the clouds evokes a collective wail
from all the tribes of the earth that failed to recognize him at his first coming,
that pierced his side, that participated in the death of an innocent.

And the dreamer, perhaps, was never able to shake that audible,
that sad outcry from his ears, waking or sleeping. So be it. Amen.

And so he pens his dream and arranges it as a letter, an epistle,

to the seven spirits representing the seven churches
to whom, perhaps, the dream was intended before it was humanly intercepted.
And in my way of thinking, it suggests two related themes:

the kingdom Christ has made and is making us to be,
and the sovereignty of Jesus Christ as Lord, of Christ as King.

John expresses doxology in his epistle to the one who "loves us and freed us from our sins
by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father."

That "us" is the church visible and invisible,
formed by Christ yet still malleable, to be a kingdom, fit for a King.

How so, I want to ask?

What might that look like for us, to be a people fit for a king like Christ, I wonder.?

Archbishop Desmond Tutu says it this way:

"Dear Child of God, do you realize that God needs you?

Do you realize that you are God's partner?

When there is someone hungry, God wants to perform the miracle of feeding that person.

But it won't any longer be through manna falling from heaven.

Normally, more usually, God can do nothing until we provide God with the means,
the bread and fish, to feed the hungry.

When a person is naked, God wants to perform the miracle of clothing that person,
but it won't be with a Carducci suit or Calvin Klein outfit floating from heaven.

No, it will be because you and I, all of us, have agreed to be God's fellow workers,
providing God with the raw material for performing miracles."

(Desmond Tutu. *God Has A Dream*. p. 59-60)

"Our God is a God who has a bias for the weak," Tutu says, "and we who worship this God,
who have to reflect the character of this God,

have no option but to have a like special concern for those who are
pushed to the edges of society, for those who, because they are different,
seem to be without a voice.

We must speak up on their behalf, on behalf of the drug addicts,

and the down-and-outs, on behalf of the poor, the hungry, the marginalized ones,
on behalf of those who because they are different, dress differently,
on behalf of those who because they have different sexual orientation
from others tend to be pushed away to the periphery.

We must be where Jesus would be, this one who was vilified for being
the friend..." of all.

(Desmond Tutu. *God Has a Dream*, p. 66)

Christ has made and is making us to be a kingdom by forming us as a people
fit for serving all of God's children,
priests, not afraid to get our hands dirtied or our reputations sullied in service.

I found it interesting that when our Confirmation Class attended Mass last week
at Immaculate Conception Church here in Durham,

Father Dan McLellan prefaced the consecration of the communion elements
with words that sounded something like this:

"Whenever we eat this bread, and drink this cup,
we proclaim *the serving love* and saving death of our risen Lord,
until he comes again."

He added "*the serving love*" of Jesus to the words of institution, which I really
liked and thought was a brilliant tip of the hat to the life of Jesus
and to the life of the church as well.

I am grateful to Father Dan for reminding us that serving, as Christ served,
the least and most marginalized is one of the ways Christ has been made,
is making, and continues to make us into a kingdom fit for his kingship.

I am also reminded of one of my favorite 19th century theologians, Friedrich Schleiermacher,
who wrote a book addressed to the cultured despisers of religion of his day,
to those who thought that things of faith pertained only
to the simple-minded,
saying that what he considered to be a mark of the kingdom
is a universal feeling of *absolute dependence* upon God.

Schleiermacher defined true piety as being radically dependent upon God's grace.

Although he was not terribly popular as a theologian,

I have always thought that Schleiermacher was on to something significant concerning this concept of absolute dependence.

When I watch the top of the news and see the residents of the coastal areas of Staten Island, Long Island, the Rockaways, Breezy Point, Pleasant Point, and the Jersey shore, I can't help but notice how vulnerable we all are to the forces of nature.

Depending upon the direction and velocity of the wind, the fullness of the moon, the severity of the falling barometric pressure, the timing of the tides, the depth of the earth tremor, the angle of the tsunami, the Fujita rating of the tornado, the height of the volcanic plume, any and all of us might be adversely affected by the forces of nature at any moment.

As the Psalmist says, "we are dust... our days are like grass... we flourish like the flowers of the field; the wind blows over us and we are gone." (Ps. 103:14–15)

We are, all of us, all the tribes of the earth, fragile, vulnerable, susceptible, and mortal to climactic slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or misfortune.

It's part of our common humanity that binds us together.

It should be also, I think, part of our common humanity that binds us in absolute dependence to God.

Old Crow Medicine Show sings a great song called *We're All In This Together*, which says in the chorus:

*We're all in this thing together,
walkin' the line between faith and fear.
This life don't last forever
when you cry, taste the salt in your tears.*

The collective wail that went up as the sun rose on the east coast the day after Superstorm Sandy I'm sure was not much different from the wail that will rise from our lips when Christ comes again, a cross between a groan and a gasp, a lament and a surprise, a failure to grasp that we are all in this thing together

and have been since the beginning of time,
and a regretful sigh that we should have leaned more upon the arms
of the King of Love.

Christ has made us to be a kingdom absolutely dependent upon God
and absolutely bound to one another in *philos*, brotherly and sisterly love.

And what might it look like to be made a kingdom, a place fit for Christ the King, I wonder?

I'm currently reading an interesting book by Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf

called *Moving the Mountain: Beyond Ground Zero to a New Vision of Islam
in America*.

Imam Rauf has served as the Imam of the al-Farah mosque in New York City
since 1983, a mosque just a dozen blocks from Ground Zero on Manhattan Island.

As a result of the cataclysmic events of 9/11 and its aftermath,

Imam Rauf has fostered a dream of building bridges between the Muslim,
Christian and Jewish faiths.

He has named his dream the Cordoba Initiative, based upon a social experiment
in Cordoba, Spain, spanning the 8th – 11th centuries, during which
Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived in what was then
a highly enlightened, pluralistic and tolerant community.

The Cordoba Initiative incorporates discussions, seminars, and multi-faith and
multi-national projects in order to improve relationships and break the
cycles of mistrust and misunderstanding that arise between faith and fear.

One sub-project of the Cordoba Initiative was to be the Cordoba House,
which Rauf, ironically, had modeled after the Y's: the YMCA, the YWCA,
the WMHA and YWHA, which were originally religious institutions
but which now serve a truly diverse population in New York City
with programs, lectures and concerts.

According to Rauf, "... when people of different faiths can experience educational programs
and basketball leagues and cultural events together, they forge bonds
that make harmony possible."

(Imam Faisal Abdul Rauf. *Moving the Mountain*, p. 18)

But the Cordoba House became inaccurately labeled “the Ground Zero mosque,” and Rauf's dream of a place for all of God's children has yet to materialize. Christ, who knows us and freed us from our sins by his blood and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving His God and Father, is not bound, I think, by **our** religious designations.

We like to think that we Christians are the dreamers, but as I said before, perhaps it is God who floats up a Hail Mary of the dream, ready to be caught by anyone with open hands and a willing heart.

Last week, my husband and I had a delightful tour of the Lincoln Community Health Center on Fayetteville Street in the heart of Durham.

Lincoln has been in operation as a center for the primary health care of Durham County's underserved populations since 1971.

It's a wonderful place of caring, concern, healing, hope, wholeness, and shalom—all things which we should recognize as kingdom values.

Our hospitable host and tour guide was Howard Eisenson, the new medical director at Lincoln, who gave up his job at Duke to come over and direct Lincoln's medical services.

Howard is the husband of Beth Eisenson, a member here at FPC; Howard is also Jewish.

But Howard was quick to tell us that much of the inspiration for his call to take on the leadership of Lincoln Community Health Center at this point in his life has come from sitting in the pews here at FPC.

He was proud to show us some of the things they are trying to do at Lincoln but also honest to admit how under-resourced they are for the patient population they serve.

How can we help them, I want to know? How can we provide more resources to help you, Howard, realize your dream of providing adequate health care to Durham's poorest citizens, children and adults?

I'm personally moved by the knowledge that 200 children from low income, uninsured families cannot afford eye exams and corrective lenses to allow them to SEE and LEARN and READ and go to school.

How can we expect them to participate and excel if they can't even see?

How do we translate the vision – the dream – to children who can't see?

Please help me flesh this one out!

If Christ has made us a kingdom absolutely dependent upon God,

then Christ has also, I would hope, made us a kingdom *absolutely interdependent*

upon one another – even upon those outside the Christian faith,

to incarnate this kingdom – to make it a flesh and blood place.

The vision, the dream of being kingdom-like does not have to come from a Christian

to be embraced by Christians. It does not have to come from a Christian

to be Christ-like and of God.

Our task is one of discernment and one of participation in the dreams

that weave us together in caring and loving ways that only God might imagine.

The kingdom dream, the kingdom dreamer, is bigger than any and all of us.

“We're all in this thing together, walking the line between faith and fear.”

Jesus Christ is the King of Love:

the cloud-riding liberator of whom John penned his alpha words

and the sovereign ruler of whom King David whispered his omega words

on his death bed;

the one whose pure love and justice would illumine the world like the light of morning,

like the sun rising on a cloudless morn, gleaming from the rain on grassy land.

We pray for this dawn of pure love and justice every time we pray the Lord's Prayer:

“thy kingdom come; thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”.

I have asked Pat Dillon and Brent Curtis if they would sing a song written by Chris Martin

of Cold Play, which I think captures the longing, hoping, wishing and yearning

of every human heart for **perfect love**, which is what I think

the kingdom is ultimately about.

Whether it is the “already” yearning for perfect love that one once had but lost,

or the “not yet” yearning for perfect love that one hopes and waits to experience,

or the perfect love of Jesus coming with clouds to set us free,
or the perfect love of Jesus bringing all the tribes of the earth into harmonious living,
that is the yearning and is the dream for which all human hearts wait
and for which Jesus taught us to pray... 'til kingdom come. Amen.