

*Where Righteousness is at home...
or did I dream that?*

December 6, 2020

The Reverend Dr. Richard E. Spalding, Interim Pastor

Isaiah 40: 1-11

2 Peter 3: 8-15a

I have a very special sister, three and a half years younger, named Annie. Some of you met her when she came to Ann Arbor for a short visit last February. She's the apple of my eye. It's not really an exaggeration to say that the deepest spiritual preparation I ever got for my career was years of sitting in church, with Annie between our Mom and me, singing hymns together. And Annie still holds a place at the hub of my family in a heartwarming and slightly crazy-making way – not least because she calls each of us, her three siblings, every night (at least once), to tell us what she had for breakfast (her favorite meal) and to find out what we're having for supper and to tell us the news of her day. She works as a bagger at the local Stop-n-Shop (so proud of the 25-year pin she earned there a year or two ago), so sometimes the day's big news would be an applesauce spill in aisle 7, or somebody's lost earring found at one of the cashier's stations – until Covid-19 brought the curtain down on her job last spring.

Annie has an unusual sense of time. She needs to see things coming – but doesn't always grasp the length of time between points on the timeline. So, for instance, she's always restless to know when her next visit to one of us will be, asks us about it relentlessly on the phone – but once we've pegged a date on the calendar, it doesn't matter how far in the future it is; she relaxes when she knows it's coming. "Won't be long now," she'll say on the phone every night over weeks and weeks until the time of the visit is finally at hand. When I first started working at First Pres I explained to her that I was going to be here to help you keep things going in this church while you're looking for a new pastor. So now pretty much every night Annie says, "Did they find anybody today?" Like all the rest of us, she's been terribly impatient with the way this pandemic has constrained her considerable social buoyancy, especially since it stopped being safe for her to go to work at Stop-n-Shop or go bowling with the folks she lives with in her little community of care. The absence of a marker in the future is so hard. "This isn't going to go on forever, is it Bro'?" she asks – and some nights I can tell that the little apartment where she lives her sheltered but proudly independent life must feel like it's about nine feet square. So one night I tried to explain that we just have to wait until the scientists develop a vaccine that we can all take so we can be safe to return to the life we remember. Now, pretty much every night, Annie asks, "did we hear anything from the scientists yet?"

You're not really supposed to tell stories on your own family from the pulpit. (I did check with Annie, who gave me permission to tell you about her – encouraged me, in fact, though not until I read it to her over the

phone. A couple of times.) But... Jesus told a parable about siblings (an older and a younger) famously; and for all we know he may have gleaned some of the wisdom of that story from real people in his own life... So maybe this can count as a parable too. I'll give away the ending now to say that it's going to end up being about what an older brother needs to learn about grace and time. Here we are in Advent – talking about waiting, talking about dreaming, talking about how time works and what's coming and when and how and whether... So I've been thinking about different ways of looking at time. And what I'm learning with Annie's help is that, when you *know* something is coming, it might not actually matter so much exactly *when* it's coming as long as you can see the days between now and then as leading *somewhere* – as long as you have something you can lean toward. And I'm learning that recalibrating your anticipation each day to the eventual fulfillment of what you hope for can actually replenish the energy you need for your own sheltered but proudly independent life in the meantime – whatever its dimensions or constraints may be. And I'm learning that it's worth paying attention to the things that happen, one by one, day by day: the two buttermilk waffles for breakfast, the spill in aisle 7, the sparkle of the found earring, the news from the scientists when it finally comes – because it will finally come...

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Jesus had a fair amount to say, during his earthly life, about a time that was coming when everything would finally make sense – a time when you'd better finally have gotten yourself ready to sit at the banquet table at the feast of the betrothal of the world and God because, he said, that time was coming. He encouraged us to imagine a time when war and poverty and suffering would be over, and despots would slink away to wherever it is that despots go when their time is finally up, and the ashes of all of history's terrible ideas like separate-but-equal and one-true-religion and mutually-assured-destruction would end up as compost for a new earth and a new heaven.

For at least the first few generations after Jesus's earthly life, the people who chose to be a community together, following in his footsteps, were convinced that the time he'd been talking about was right around the corner – “soon and very soon,” as the old song has it. When that time didn't come right away – and especially when the suffering persisted under the powers and principalities of that day and the terrible ideas just kept coming – evidently it began to seem to them that time was dragging, that time was stuck.

That, we think, is what prompted one of those followers of Jesus to write what has come to be known as the Second Letter of Peter. It doesn't seem likely to have been Saint Peter himself, who as far as we know didn't have much of a literary career and who probably came to his end (at the hand of one of those despots) in Rome not too many years after Jesus. But somebody who had enough of a voice in the early church to be heard in the wilderness of struggle and disillusionment that things were seeming likely to stay pretty much as bad as they had been indefinitely – somebody was moved to write this letter acknowledging that there are different ways of seeing time, and different ways of living in relation to it. The letter that that somebody wrote is full of the kind of fiery images of the end of the world that were typical of the first century mind – and they certainly have an eerie quality of prescience to them in the nuke-saturated twenty-first century. Not knowing what's coming, or when, but with our longings and fears and loves and hopes all hooked by expectation, we do tend to default to the kind of images that our subconscious distills into the dreams we call nightmares.

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But I don't think the writer of that letter was particularly interested in promoting those spectacular stock images of what the end of time would be like. I think that what the writer really wanted to promote was faithfulness in the meantime – to shake up people's ways of experiencing the between-time, and to persuade them to lean into the grace of that time. New Testament scholar David Bartlett summarizes the reassuring message of the letter: "What seems like a long delay... is really God's gracious way of saying to us, from generation to generation, it is not too late."¹ It's not that God is taking too much time; it's that God is *making enough time*, giving time, opening time – and that leaning into that time, living toward that time, is, not an annoyance, but a gift.

So here's the one thing I hope we can hear in this scrap of someone's letter that speaks across a timeline of twenty full centuries to us who find that we're still wondering when the time will come, and what it will be like. The key question is, "what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming day of God?" How might you live in the time between now and what's coming? Advent brings that question right to the surface. And this year, at First Pres, Advent says – you might try living like those who dream.

What direction are you looking in when you dream: forward? back? inward? outward? All of the above, I think; dreams coalesce in our subconscious, where directions are more than a little interchangeable, and where telling hope and reality apart isn't really the thing – where how things have been and how they might be are much more permeable to each other. The Second Letter of Peter encourages us to wait for "a new earth, where righteousness is at home." To which, of course, the disillusioned ones, like the recipients of the letter, will always reply, *yeah, in your dreams!* – and to which the writer might then say (and I think Jesus would certainly say), *yes, exactly!* Did you dream a world where righteousness is actually at home? Yes? – well then, just watch yourself leaning toward that world, and you'll learn something new about what's real.

When I first read the biblical texts appointed for this Sunday, saw the familiar words of Isaiah, "Comfort, comfort my people" and tried holding them in the context of this Advent idea of dreaming, I thought – well, are dreams real, or not? Is there really comfort, or did I dream that? But then I learned that the verbs in that beloved passage from Isaiah are actually plural imperatives: this is God saying to us (through the prophet), *give each*

¹ David Bartlett, in his exegetical essay on this text in Feasting on the Word [YearB, vol 1]; (Louisville, Westminster/John Knox, 20080, pp. 41-43.

other comfort, because that's how to live your way through the wilderness between now and then. Tell the people of the besieged, pillaged, but still-beloved city that there *is* a time pegged in the heart of God for the completion of its ordeal, for the reunion of its families and communities, for the mending of its broken hearts, for the consummation of its vision of justice and peace. Use the time that has been made for you, given to you, to live in that direction – toward the place where righteousness is finally at home. No, you didn't dream that. Wait – wait: yes, you *did* dream that! And those who dream prepare the way.

Oh, it may look like a long way through the desert between here and there – but off you go, and don't be surprised if you find on the way that the road rises to meet you, that the wind is at your back, and that the rough places seem smoother than you thought they'd be. Comfort, comfort each other: say to each other (and when better to say it than in Advent??), *Behold: your God – with a time to meet you at the banquet pegged out there, ahead!*

So as you gather around this Table to keep this feast, take comfort in this little foretaste of the banquet you're on your way to, at the betrothal of the world and God. Yes, the grass withers, the flower fades; there are indeed signs of the passage of time all around. But in the midst of all that, and the constant murmur of disillusionment and impatience, if you listen carefully you might begin to make out a voice in the distance (or maybe it's in your dreams) preparing a way for you – calling you on right through the valley of time. If you think you hear such a voice, then get yourself ready with whatever holiness and godliness you can scrape together, and strive to be at peace. You may not be able to make out what the voice is saying at first; but keep listening, keep leaning. Here's what I've learned to think it might be saying:

Won't be long now.

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