

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

The Rev. Dr. Scott Couper

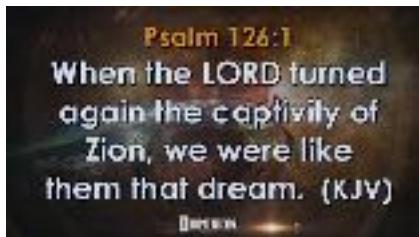
Sunday, December 13, 2020

Third of four in an Advent Sermon Series entitled:

“Come, O Christ, the Light”

Psalm 126

“Dreams Dreamt”



The Psalmist wrote that ‘when the Lord restored our fortune, we were like them who dream’. What an amazing opening line! In fact, as beautiful as the *entire* Psalm is, I can, and likely will, just dwell on this line: ‘When we were restored, we were like them who dream’. Will you, please, just lean into this phrase? ‘We were like them who dream’. Let us just soak in the Psalmists’ emotion: ‘like them who dream’.



Let’s just for a moment place ourselves in the Psalmist’s worldview. After the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar, the first deportations of Israelites to Persia (modern day Iran) took place in 597 BCE. It

was not until 539 BCE when the Persian King Cyrus defeated the Babylonians that the Israelites were finally permitted to return to Judah.¹ Folks, that is 58 years! 58 years of exile! (Depending in which deportation they were, some scholars calculate closer to 70 years). We have been under ‘house-arrest’ for, what, only ten months?!



Can you imagine being besieged, defeated, deported, and exiled for close to 60 years? That’s at least three generations of desperate dislocation. Can you imagine as a ten-year-old child being hauled away and held in captivity until you become a grandfather or grandmother, and only being free to return to your home country with your children and grandchildren? Just imagine that! Sixty years! No wonder, no wonder, they returned to the Holy Land ‘like them who dream’.

To return as if they were dreaming meant that they were gobsmacked. They were dumbstruck. They were walking around in a stupor. They could not believe what they were seeing upon their return was real. They pined for so long and hoped so hard that they could not remember how to express joy.

¹ Geoffrey, Grogan. *Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 203-204.

They could not remember what it was to feel comfortable, at home. They had long forgotten about security. They had forgotten how to feel blessed.



Yet, as the Psalmist recounted, they had returned. So, like numbed fingers and toes beginning to feel sensation again, they slowly woke-up to joy. Fists rubbed upon sleepy eyes, so cloudy sight became clearer. The people arose to find their long-awaited dream finally come true.

The time of Advent is the time of 'dreams dreamt' just beginning to become real. Yet, the pain of the past is so close that that the joy feels too good to be true.



I do not think in my lifetime, I will ever be in a time and place where I will ever feel the power of Advent more than I do now. Not all of you perhaps feel the

same way I do. Yet, I suspect that most of you do. This Advent I am on the verge of tears. And I do not know if they are tears of anguish or tears of relief or if they are both there intermixing. The intersection of 'what is not yet' with 'what is just now happening' is palpable.

Where are we? We are enduring in our world an assault on God's Creation with climate change. Yet, we are in the midst of a reprieve with the hope of a return to the Paris Climate Accords. We are experiencing in our country an assault on our democracy and the implementation of a 'soft coup'. Yet, we are relieved that a safe and fair election is now over and our system of government seems to remain resilient and holding fast. In our community, we are experiencing frightening levels of homelessness (close to two hundred in Brattleboro hotels) and hunger with the threat of evictions on the horizon. Yet, businesses and our very own church have lit-up our community all along Main Street showing great optimism and joy. And last but not least, every day we are experiencing the third highest death toll in American history, with over 3,000 people dying of COVID-19 per day. Yet, we are just giddy with the anticipation of vaccines being distributed this morning from Kalamazoo, Michigan to all corners of the nation so as to begin the end of our national nightmare. Friends, I ask you, when our national politics ceases to be daily chaos and when we can gather again as the people of God in our sanctuary, when God restores our fortune, will we not also be 'like them who dream'?



For those of us who are struggling with depression, hang-on. Like the exiled people of God, we will be restored and we will be 'like them who dream' as we become joyful again. For those of you like me who are struggling with loneliness having no family to care for nor anyone to care for us, hang-on. Love will come and we will be 'like them who dream' as we embrace someone tightly. For those of you who are anxious about COVID and are afraid of becoming ill (or who are currently ill), hang-on just a few more months. Come Spring and Summer, the virus will be gone and we will be 'like them who dream'. We will celebrate our Heifer and Fourth of July parades. But right now, I know, during Advent we are raw and we are on the edge.



One tear is of pain and the other is of joy. I am reminded of a song that encourages us, “Don’t wait until the battle is over to shout [for joy] now!”²

There is joy in the journey, even a painful journey.



While discussing his sermon preached last week, Matt Deen asked Gisela Robeck what her dreams were. Gisela began by stating that given her mature age (she’s in her early 90s), she is focused on ‘end of life’ issues. Yet, despite her own existential concerns, her stated dreams shifted to a post-COVID world. Gisela has been ensconced in her home since March, not even allowing me to come visit her. Yet, she has remained active and positive throughout her house arrest. Gisela spoke to Matt and I from the unique perspective of someone who grew-up in Germany during the 1930s and ‘40s. She poignantly told us how the Soviet Red Army was poised to invade her town the following day. Some of her teenage friends contemplated suicide. Yet Gisela, in a time of great hopelessness, marvelled at flowers, found hope, and made a crown of them in her hair as a symbol of joy.

Gisela told Matt and I that she has learned a lot during her life.

² Monica Coleman, “Third Sunday in Advent”, *Preaching God’s Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year B*, eds. Ronald Allen, Dale Andrews, and Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 26.



Gisela's post-COVID dream is for our nation "to put more attention to issues that are of concern".³ She mentioned three specific dreams. Gisela first dreams of better access to health care in our country. She compared the United States to Germany and commented that Germany has had some form of socialized medicine for close to a hundred years. She explained that the United States is a "third world country in many respects". And she's right if you look at many health indices, such as infant mortality. Second, Gisela dreams that our country would "pay more attention to the not so well to do and not [subsidize and coddle] the corporations". Third, and finally, Gisela indicated she dreams of "stemming the impending disaster caused by climate change".

Gisela, thank you for sharing your dreams with Matt and I. Your dreams are my dreams.

³ Sermon Discussion Group, Thursday, December 10, 2020.



Let us together with others in our church experience the impending joy of political stability and a post-virus life. Let us walk around Main Street, Brattleboro with our fortunes restored, full of joy, “like them who dream”. May your Advent be blessed.

This is the word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.