

THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

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Isaiah 2:1-4; 11:5-9

"It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the Lord
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it..." Isaiah 2:2

All highly important actions are risky. Dreaming is no exception. When people dream too much, they may lose touch with reality. They may turn into Walter Mittys, the brow-beaten little man in James Thurber's story, who repeatedly tuned out the real world with daydreams in which he assumed heroic roles.

Dreaming is risky. But then life itself is a risk and the people who live the most are the people who risk a lot. In order to stay alive as a person everyone needs to dream. Every people needs to dream. For the value of dreams is not simply that they make the present more bearable. They can make the future more livable.

Perhaps it will help us see dreams in their proper place if we distinguish between dreams and goals. People should be practical about goals. As Jesus observed in one of his parables, nobody with any common sense would build a tower unless he first estimated the cost. We should not establish goals for ourselves unless we are reasonably sure that we can obtain them.

But dreaming is different. Dreaming, or vision, as it is usually called in the Old Testament, does not give us a specific target to aim at. Rather it creates a whole new scene for us; it changes our frame of reference; it tells us not how things are, but how they ought to be. Dreaming stretches our minds beyond the point where we can make estimates. It is a kind of brainstorming in which three things are required: deep desires, imagination and hope.

In contrast to goal-setting, dreaming does not define for us what we are to do. Rather dreaming has to do with the way we are and the kind of people we become. You can tell a lot about a person once you know what that person's dreams are like. Some dreams are childish. There is an old folk song called, "Big Rock Candy Mountain," that describes a world in which gum drops grow on trees and sweet things to eat are just for the picking. It is a fun dream, but a childish dream.

The dreams that appear in the book of Isaiah are very different. At the time they were first written down they were probably unique. They were unique in their unselfishness and in their unreserved trust in God. They were unique in their vision of a world governed by righteousness and peace on a universal scale. In the first dream, or vision, that we read today, the prophet pictures all the nations of the world assembling at Mt. Zion to learn the will of God. We might see this as a nationalistic dream. However, it is not the nation of Israel, but God who is in the center. All nations, including Israel will be judged by God. Out of their acceptance of that judgment all nations will learn to live at peace. They shall beat their

swords into ploughshares and not learn war any more. It seems to me that what we have here is not a narrow nationalism, but rather the sort of patriotism that Thomas Hardy envisioned in the closing lines of a sonnet:

"When shall the saner softer polities
Whereof we dream, have sway in each proud land
And patriotism, grown godlike, scorn to stand
Bondslave to realms, but circle earth and seas?

The vision of world peace found in the second chapter of Isaiah reveals to us the character of the prophet, probably not Isaiah himself, who wrote those words. Though people have always given lip-service to peace, the prophet's dream was not typical of his time. Most ancient peoples looked back to an heroic age of military valor. Isaiah looks forward to an age of peace. In our day still, we associate heroism more with war-making than with peace-making. It seemed to me significant at the time of President Kennedy's funeral that all the escorts were military. Despite the president's role in establishing the Peace Corps, it did not occur to anyone to include a member of that Corps in the procession. The dream of the second chapter of Isaiah is still far out, not only because it remains so far from realization, but because its spirit still is remote from the dreams many people share.

The other dream we read today is part of a description of the messianic age that probably was written after the days of the Jewish exile. It depicts a situation of divine shalom, or universal harmony, which embraces not only human relations, but all creation. This too says something about the character of the author. Many dreams, such as the one about gumdrop trees, picture nature as something for us to use and enjoy. But here the concern is to live with nature in peace and friendship.

A dream expresses character. It tells us something about the dreamer. But I think dreams do more than that. They may shape and influence character, not only in the dreamer, but in others who come to share his dream.

These dreams in Isaiah seem so far out that it is hard to see how they could connect up with the real world. That is especially true of the one about the wild animals and the little child. A couple of years ago I awoke one morning with some of the words in that passage running through my mind. I got up and wrote a sort of stream of consciousness version of the biblical passage:

The wolf shall dwell without
precedent among all the fleecy
milkweed pillows, turkish towels
and cotton candy joys,
the wolf shall dwell with
the lamb.
And the leopard shall lie down
dozing hungerless, claws withdrawn,
lie down with the kid.
And the calf and the lion and the
fatling together without
precedent, the with yielding
an and, improbable issue,
and a little child shall,
and a little child shall.

For this is vision yielding
vision, and a child
shall lead.
And where is not
said and cannot be with
us. The vision goes to the edge
with hope. Beyond is without
even a dream's connections.

"Beyond is without even a dream's connections." That is to say, we know that even dreams, including the ones that happen when we sleep, have a logic to them. But this prophetic vision looks right over the edge where not even imagination can reach. For to put it very simply: we cannot conceive how the balance of nature could be maintained without predators.

So the dream is "impossible." Yet in a strange way it is also very relevant. For living at peace with our natural environment is a very important concern right now.

The dream of world peace based on divine law may also seem impossible. Yet this dream too has special relevance. International peace was needed desperately in Isaiah's day. In our time such peace is indispensable.

So even though they are far out, these dreams come very close to home. They help turn our spirits in the direction of ideals whose realization becomes a practical concern. The United Nations may not fulfill the prophetic vision, but without the ancient vision even so tentative a step might not have been possible. Yellowstone Park does not fulfill the prophetic vision. But without that dream of universal shalom, it might never have occurred to anyone to create a national park.

Dreams may not lay before us attainable goals. But they set us free from fixed ways of looking at life and give shape to our values and our ideals. Dreams inspire us and because they inspire us sometimes they are translated into goals. Down through the centuries people have come across these impossible dreams in the book of Isaiah; they have made those dreams their own and thus their own outlook on life's purpose has been changed.

Everyone needs to dream. Every people needs to dream. Even God, I think, needs to dream. Through the prophets God shares his dreams with us.