

Malinda Clatterbuck
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Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126, John 12:1-8

“...like those who dream.”

Our Scripture verses for today paint a very clear picture. The Isaiah passage reminds us of the slaughter of Pharaoh’s army as the Israelites left Egypt. The Good and the Bad People. The Right and the Wrong. Those who will be rewarded, and those who will be punished. Those who are pleasing to God and those who are not, and will be destroyed for it- or have been destroyed for it. We are reminded of the people God delivered from evil and pain, and those who were destroyed because they got in the way... and I find myself resisting- questioning... and disturbed.

As a pacifist. As an Anabaptist, I wonder, what do we do with these stories in our sacred texts that justify the genocide of those declared the enemy of God or the enemy of God’s people. As I have been grappling with these questions, and these stories, I keep coming back to a line from our Psalm- when God was good to us, it says, we “were **like those who dream.**” (slide- read verses)

“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.

Then it was said among the nations, the Lord has done great things for them.

The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.”

Who are these people- those who dream? And how can we become like them?

As some of you know, I traveled to Africa last month. (slide of map) I got an education on the history of Ethiopia and Eritrea, a smaller country to the north of Ethiopia, which separates Ethiopia from accessing ports on the Red Sea.

The history of both countries is intertwined, and wrought with stories of famine, unrest, and war- as perhaps is the history of any country in the world, including our own. But in Ethiopia, the main figure that rises to the top is Haile Selassie, (slide of Selassie on a horse) born in the late 1800s, believed to be a direct descendant of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon- he was known during his reign as “the lion of Judah.” He was the last Emperor of Ethiopia, overthrown by a coup from his military in the early 1970s and later executed by the leader of the coup, Mengistu, (slide of Mengistu, with bottle of blood) who went on to establish the Derg government. The Derg terrorized the country, in a killing known as the Red Terror, where he murdered all involved in Haile Selassie’s government, as well as over 500,000 (half a million) civilians (slide of faces of 500,000) protesting peacefully for freedom. There were walls full of the faces of those killed in the national museum. Anyone who wore glasses, who had soft hands, who had an education- doctors and teachers, journalists and artists. Torture and executions would define the landscape in Ethiopia for the next 20 years, and would spill over into Eritrea, because the Derg decided they needed the port of Massawa and attacked their neighbor, occupying the land and terrorizing the people. (slide of artwork of the red terror- slides one and two)

In the early 90s the Derg was overthrown, the people voted for leaders and courts were set up to hold those responsible for the killings accountable, --51 cabinet members of the Derg were executed, and numerous more imprisoned. In 1991, just after world leaders helped to broker peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea, giving Eritrea it’s sovereignty back, Ethiopia went on a revenge bombing of the Eritrean capital city of Massawa. (slides one and two and three of rubble and buildings)... and this is what it still looks like today- nearly 30 years later. Nothing has been rebuilt.

War with Ethiopia would continue until just this past year, when peace treaties were signed, and Eritrea opened its doors to the outside- which is how my sister and I were able to get visas and visit.

As I have been sitting with more and more details of this history, uncovering layers and contradictory stories, I have been overwhelmed by the violence in their world- in our world- in my lifetime, and I have

come to feel almost guilty for my privilege of staying outside of that violence- at least my physical body. Many of you know that I had my own kind of violence in my personal life as a child with a violently abusive stepmother, but walking the streets of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, and Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, I realized that systemic violence that rips away the human connections of families and communities is a violence I am not familiar with- I walked past people missing limbs and missing eyes, with scars on their faces and arms and hands whose origins I would never dare ask to know- People whose only possessions are the clothes on their back, and a metal lean-to under which they sleep at night. That kind of violence and that kind of poverty are things most American cannot understand... and I wonder how do **they** continue to dream? After all of their loss and pain?

I took the scripture readings for this sermon with me on the trip- reading them on a regular basis- to allow the words of restoration and hope to intermingle with the history I was learning, and the people I was encountering and the stories I was hearing- The two verses that moved constantly in my mind were firstly, the one I've already shared from the Psalm... "we were like those who dream." and secondly, the words of Jesus from the gospel... (slide of John) "the poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me."

And I've wondered what this means. Is Jesus saying to not be concerned with the Poor? Certainly not- for everything his life has exemplified for us is to side with the poor and marginalized in all situations. But I wonder about these words. They seem paradoxical- right? Because don't we tell our children that God- or Jesus if you will, is always with you- in you, you are created in Gods Image, and Jesus is always right there when you need him. But in this story, Jesus is declaring that no- indeed, he tells those who have dedicated their lives to him that he will NOT always be with them.

And this, for me, has become the point, the crux- of the whole passage. Yes, we will, on this earth, always have the poor, we will always have wars and famine, and natural disasters, and greedy leaders who make decisions that benefit themselves more than the people they are supposed to be representing. Here in America, we can get so

overwhelmed- and in this congregation, we can get so caught up in naming the evil that we see around us- and being outraged, even rightly by it- corrupt politicians, poverty in our Lancaster city Streets, immoral leaders who condone bigotry, religion that hates in the name of God, discrimination against people because of how they identify or who they choose to love, or because of the color of their skin- yes indeed, these things you will have with you always, Jesus says.

But you will not always have ME- in this time, in this space, when Jesus knew he was facing execution- he knew that Mary had chosen rightly. Not to be caught up in trying to change some unjust nebulous problem out there in the world beyond her reach, but to open her eyes and see the need right in front of her- the need for Jesus to be prepared for his own death and burial- this troubled, hurting, dying human being whom she could bless ...-...I wonder - - did she even know what she was doing? And I'm not sure it matters. Jesus used her compassion and love to remind all of us that it is not the problems out there in the world that we can really have an effect on through our actions- but it is the person, the need, the possibility to Dream for a different future for what we see in front of us- right here and right now- and sometimes, I'll suggest, that means what we see when we look in the mirror.

In Isaiah, we have an example of a true chiasmus- right?- this poetic way of making a point by repeating certain concepts in reverse. The author points out that Yahweh had delivered Israel, the former things are passed, new things are to come, and Yahweh will deliver Israel again in the Return. Scripture is full of such masteries of using words to make a point, to give hope to a hopeless people- The people of God knew that in the past, as they were fleeing Egypt, God delivered them by turning the sea into dry land- but in the coming deliverance, God will do the exact opposite by turning the desert into rivers of running water. Now the people of God are wandering in a wilderness (with 900 miles of dry and dangerous desert terrain between themselves and their promised land)- God, our author promises, will now turn the dry into water and deliver Yahweh's people from their predicament.

What a dream to hold onto for those wandering in the wilderness? To see rivers of running water... not somewhere else in the world- but right here and now where there is no water- and exactly where they need it.

Our Psalm today also is reminiscent to times past where God delivered and came through for God's people. "We were like those who dream" the psalmist declares. Like those who dream.

What does a person look like who dreams?

Well, we have our population of "dreamers" (god protect them) in our country seeking a better future from war torn countries of origin.

We have the day-dreamers among us, who lose track of the sermon, and look out the window to the sunshine, and see the singing bird, and the blooming spring flowers- and who can blame them for looking to a hopeful vision.

I am not a day dreamer myself. I live in a stark reality of requiring myself to see all the ugly in the world, so I know what I am dealing with. But I am challenged, and I am challenging myself, and I am challenging all of us- to try to dream this week. Not pie in the sky, irrational fluff- but to open our eyes to see what is right in front of us and to imagine what it could become with a different vision- and with vigor and resolve to live into that vision.

The Eritrean people on the streets today have a community that I have never seen anywhere else. There are people maimed and limping from the war, who walk down the street and are called to the edge of the sidewalk café for a cup of Shai (tea) by total strangers. Men walk down the streets holding hands- really- like couples in love, so great is the affection between them- and when they greet, they do this hand shake, right shoulder bump, sometimes nuzzling their necks in shared affection. Women walk arm in arm. There is a love and pride of a people looking to rebuild their future and move forward. When you ask them of the war, they say they don't want to talk about it- there is peace now. Look around. What do you think of Asmara? They ask. It is beautiful and peaceful. Enshallah- it will last- Enshallah....

And oh my - it is...beautiful (slides of pics of beautiful asmara)....everywhere you look as you walk down the streets is a postcard ready picture. And the People....

I rode beside a woman named Afrah (slide of Afrah and me) on a tiny bus for four hours around hairpin curves as we traveled from the port of Massawa on the Red Sea back to the capital of Eritrea, Asmara. Her

English was not good, but it was better than my Arabic or Tigrinya. She obviously had little money- but when we stopped for tea in a little town, she insisted on paying for my tea, and before we parted, she gave me the ring off her finger so I would remember her and wish her a good future and Eritrea a good future. (Hannah is wearing it) It was Mary's gift of perfume. Touching the person in front of you with love and kindness- with true goodness.

In all of my western money and clothes and possessions and excesses, I was fully aware that she was the one who was rich, bestowing upon me the greatest gift of humanity- love. And to be a dreamer, to dream for a future worth living for---and as Jesus did, worth dying for, we must dare to see the beauty that could be, not only the painful reality that is.

To see the beauty even in that which has been damaged (slide of damaged building- one, two...) - because we have a vision of what could be done with that damaged, building (slide three of beautiful damaged building), or street, or shop, or person....

Dreamers- day dreamers, night dreamers, gay dreamers, love dreamers, beauty dreamers- all dreamers-

Will you be... ***like those who dream***... with me?

Enshallah- So be it.