

Dream On -- Proper 25C

“Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. The sun shall be turned to darkness, before the great and terrible day.”

With exceptions, it has always been the role of the young to dream, and the elders to prophesy and see visions about the outcomes of those dreams. Yet Joel makes it plain that God has plans to turn this progression upside down. For Christians, a “great and terrible day” did come, on what we call Good Friday. The world was turned upside down, the sky did groan and darken, and a young Galilean was tortured and killed for daring to speak truth to power, only to appear again, alive to his friends. Philosophers and logicians have insisted that too many people have believed this story for far too long for it to be fictional.

We note Jesus’ repeated assertion, like that of the fellow behind the curtain, that it is our faith that makes us well. Normal, everyday people like you and me, with our varieties of gifts -- of heart and brain and nerve -- will indeed be well, said Jesus, if only we will call upon the name of the Lord.

In a culture left to its own devices, it is the job of the young to dream dreams, and the job of the elders to see visions. The young come up with new ideas, and the elders predict how they’ll turn out. But when we call upon the name of the Lord, claims Joel; claims Jesus too, the World is turned upside down and inside out. Children become free to celebrate the bright new dreams of their grandparents, even great-grandparents, and those in turn can let go of their fears and judgements enough to be counseled, educated and enriched by the

startling, challenging and wondrous visions of their children. Anything is possible in this brave new world: the wolf lies down with the lamb, the lion with the kid, and a little child does lead them.

As we arrive at the end of his letters to Timothy, we hear Paul's summation of his life and work: "As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

This kind of life review exercise is a good one for anybody whose years on this earth are waning in number. We can reflect on our lives, however glorious or humble they have been. We dance to the music of time, no matter how graceful or clumsy our steps may be. So to name and celebrate the talents and skills we have possessed and developed, to forgive ourselves for our failures and release those who have failed us is the way forward. Tell our stories now. Look forward to wearing the crown of righteousness later.

It's all important and good. And it is incumbent upon those of us who still have elders to listen, understand and validate what it is they have to tell us about the past. How can we hope to find our own development without welcoming into our hearts the experiences of those who have gone before us? Soon enough, we will ourselves be the elders, with stories of our own that beg to be told.

However – and this is a big however – as important as the process of honoring the past may be, what we've come to realize is that it is not enough. For Paul, the phrase, "I have finished the race" is part of saying goodbye. Today, we are faced with a very different reality. With each passing year,

longevity is increasing in most of the world. Statistics abound. Life expectancy is now over 80 in 33 countries. Ten years ago, only 19 countries had achieved this. With one in nine persons in the world aged 60 or over, projected to one in five by 2050, population aging is a phenomenon that can no longer be ignored.

This reality comprises very real and present economic challenges, challenges that will have to be met if we are to avoid societal chaos. We cannot be like the Pharisee who stands proud and smugly self-righteous, saying 'the heck with everyone else.' These challenges demand the humility we saw in the Tax Collector, who knows how badly he needs help. As with most economic problems, there is a spiritual solution. To quote Oscar Wilde's Miss Prism, "Even these metallic problems have their melodramatic side." And this is where the prophet Joel can help us more than Paul.

Because although our elders have fought many a good fight, have danced, gracefully or not so, and their visions may be of sugarplums and other things our nutritionists now tell us are bad for us, they have not finished the race. They are here to stay, longer and longer every day. And to consider people who are aging to be a problem in need of solving is like complaining that it's dark outside: before the conversation gets too far, you are on the other side of the issue. The truth is, we don't finish the race, ever. We are part of a continuum, a relay team on the road to Zion, and we have to start acting like it. The dreams of the elders can provoke and nurture the visions of the young and transform bitter valleys into places of springs. They are our spiritual assets, not liabilities; they are our souls' treasure.

William Jennings Bryan famously said, "The Rock of ages is more important than the age of rocks." And we can hardly

argue with him if you have faith in God. But you can point out that we have learned an awful lot from the age of rocks, indeed from all of science. Increased longevity is perhaps the greatest of scientific achievements. As with all discoveries, it's what we do with it that matters, and all of us have to be held accountable for the results.

So it must be for young people: Wake up!" Don't just tolerate or smile at the quaint stories of your elders, listen to their dreams. Demand of yourself the experiment of faith that considers us to be partners with each other. 'Neither Jew nor Greek, Male nor Female' now we must now add 'neither Old nor Young.' They say that babies are closer to God, because they've haven't been away so long. The longer we live, the more apparent it will become that our elders are growing closer to God themselves. We call upon the name of the Lord by paying close attention to the vantage point they have: by seeing God's lovely dwelling place through their expanding dreams.

And we Elders must dream our dreams. Understand that we are integral to the vitality and imagination of our society. Our increasing awareness and expectation of death can illuminate and inspire the young, help dispel their denial and superficiality, open their hearts to the loveliness of faith. Increased longevity is not just a free pass to extended inactivity, it is a commission. As Thomas Cole puts it, "We have to push against the idea that learning and creativity are supposed to stop after a certain age. We have to try to grow, morally and spiritually all the way to the end." The longer we are here, the more there is for us to do. Hear what Mary Oliver asks of each of us:
"Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

