

“Hope for a Yearning World: Those Who Dream”

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and John 1:6-8, 19-28

December 17, 2023

The Reverend Kim Wadlington
Market Square Presbyterian Church
Harrisburg, PA

I’ve always struggled a little bit with John Lennon’s song, *Imagine*. I’m probably one of those people to whom he points singing, “You may say I’m a dreamer.” On the one hand, I do long for his vision of people living for today, living life in peace, sharing all the world. I’ve got no issue with his asking us to forget about a literal hell, I don’t believe it either. I get stuck on his call to imagine no heaven and no religion. He did say in an interview that what he meant was, “no my God-is-bigger-than-your-God thing” with which I can agree, but he was a humanist in the fullest and best sense of the philosophy and I don’t believe any of what he dreams will happen without God and without humans cooperating with God, but he had a beautiful dream that resonates with non-believers and believers alike. I was only 2 when he released the song, but I’ve read that it was received by the Vietnam War Protest movement with great joy, as a hymn for the movement. He was 31 when he wrote *Imagine*. He *was* a dreamer.

Writing generally about the text of Third Isaiah, my study Bible says “Third Isaiah is more pessimistic in tone than 2nd Isaiah and while new themes emerge, 2nd Isaiah and 3rd Isaiah are closely enough related that perhaps these chapters should still be attributed to 2nd Isaiah, now older and disillusioned.” While the portion we read this morning holds onto the expansive promises of God, other parts get mired in the disputes forming between those who return from exile and those who remained behind. When do we lose our capacity to dream?

You may recognize these words from Isaiah if you’re familiar with Luke’s gospel. In that witness, Jesus enters the temple in Nazareth to teach for the first time. Handed the scroll of Isaiah, he unrolls it, finds this place, and reads, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” He leaves out all the parts about God’s vengeance angering people. And then he says and “guess, what? It’s me, this text is talking about.”

But before him, there was another who had this responsibility, who wore this mantle. We don’t know who it was. Walter Brueggeman says, “we may assume it is a poetic figure who exercises immense theological authority, enough to transform...the community (WB, 213).”ⁱ A poetic

figure; a dreamer. So even as we understand Jesus to be the one who fulfills these words for all time, there was also one in *that* age whom God raised up and empowered as God's agent.

This dreamer, and Jesus following in the same footsteps, envisions a world in which the weak, the powerless, the marginalized, are restored to full function in a community of well-being and joy (WB, 213).” And when they are raised up, “*they* will be those who are strong in the Lord, builders of the cities. God will make covenant with *them*; *their* descendants shall be known among the nations and all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.” God raises up people in every age who wear this mantle in some way, working with, for, and from among the weak, the powerless, the marginalized for restoration. And these dreamers whom God raises up are often among the young. Those who haven't become weighed down by either the hardships or the privileges of their lives.

I don't remember learning about young people and their dreams shaping the world when I studied history in middle and high school. Everything was taught as ancient history or European history – framed as world history. Perhaps that was my youthful lens. I didn't learn about the Civil Rights Movement at all and consequently, I didn't know that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was only 26 when he stepped onto the national stage as a leader in the Montgomery bus boycott. I didn't learn about Ruby Bridges or the Little Rock 9 or the work of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And even before the civil rights movement, in 1942 it was 35 teenagers who protested the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII, and in 1917 it was a 17-year-old Mexican woman, who led several thousand demonstrators at a border bridge, to refuse to be doused with a toxic chemical bath which included DDT, imposed as a disinfectant on all Mexican workers coming into the United States. In the early 19th century, it was young people who were on the forefront of labor strikes in the newspaper and clothing industries, and it's estimated that 80% of those seeking freedom through the Underground Railroad were in their teens.ⁱⁱ

God raises up people in every age who dream of a different world in which the weak, the powerless, the marginalized, are restored to full function in a community of well-being and joy. Very often they are our young people. We pin a lot of hope on our young people in general. Consider if you yourself is one who has said, “our youth are our hope for the future!” Have you said it about this country? The world? The church? All the above? And yet in the fall of 2024 it's very likely that our two choices for president will be men older than or nearing 80 years of age, beyond the average life expectancy for men in the United States.

A young person recently shared with me that she was introduced by one of her elders at a family event as “one of the young people who is going to fix the mess we're making.” She gave me permission to share this and also asked that I be very clear that she didn't want to be responsible for fixing our mess. Even as we pin our hopes on young people, the next generation, how often do we make space for their voices, their ideals of justice and equality and liberation? How often

do we allow them to lead without arguing with them about their ideals? How often do we allow their ideas and ways of moving forward to take center stage even if they fail? We say there's too much at stake for untested ideas, we focus more on what we might lose than what we might gain. Yet our ways aren't working so well if we say we're hoping they'll clean up our mess. We like to laud young people in general, but when it comes to following their lead in specific ways, we'd prefer not to.

John the Baptist, another dreamer, came onto the scene as “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘make straight the way of the Lord.’” John himself and then Jesus were both present to those who were marginalized by their society. Where do we see our young people doing that and how much are we willing to risk, to follow their lead?

An opportunity to practice what I'm preaching arose on Friday as I was preparing this sermon. I understand how hard it is to make space for the ideals of the young, because my first response was to grumble and my first inclination was to ignore the opportunity. You may have read about recent student sit-ins at Haverford, Swarthmore, and Brown colleges with students protesting the war in Gaza and asking their administrators to publicly call for a cease-fire. Students at Haverford are especially mourning the shooting of one of their Palestinian classmates in Vermont. They want Palestinian students in the United States and Arab people in general to know that there are people in the US who are heartbroken, by what the government of Israel is doing in Gaza. One of those Haverford students has family in this congregation and the student and his father asked, “is there any Christian witness crying out in the wilderness in support of the Palestinian people?” And while there is, it's often drowned out by other voices. So they've asked us to pray today. To pray for the Palestinian people publicly and specifically, to pray for a permanent cease-fire. I still feel the need to acknowledge all the ongoing complexity of the situation, but we cannot deny that since we raised our voices together in lament on October 18th, some 19,000 people have been killed and thousands more wounded by the bombs rained down on Gaza, many of them women and children. That's nearly 1% of the population and the risk of starvation and serious medical issues grows daily. Palestinian people deserve to hear us say that their lives matter. In this situation, God is on the side of those who suffer, without regard for nations and borders of human design. As a congregation you have affirmed that Black lives matter, and LGBTQ lives matter, and Jewish lives matter, today we affirm that Palestinian lives matter. May our prayer be a witness in the world to the need for dreamers, the power of poets, the ideals of the young and the young at heart, and God's own longing for a world of well-being and joy. Let us pray:

God before you we hold the Palestinian people who live in Gaza and the West Bank, and all around the world in our hearts. Through the eyes of our hearts conjure up the images of the people we've seen in the media, conjure the image of friends we have there. Enable us to see them: elders, mothers, fathers, youth, children – smiling, laughing, mourning, crying. Enable us to hold them in our hearts because they are already held in your heart. May our hearts be moved

to love and may the movement of our hearts translate into calls for a permanent cease-fire for the protection of Palestinian lives. We pray for their safety; we pray for just governance in Israel and Palestine. We pray for the release of hostages, release of all people's unjustly imprisoned, for the land to be released from bloodshed, for peace. "Great liberating God, we pray for all who are oppressed. May those who long for what is right with justice now be blest. We pray for those who mourn this day, and all who suffer wrong' may seeds they water now with tears sprig up into a song."ⁱⁱⁱ Amen.

i Breuggemann, Walter. *Isaiah 40-66*. John Knox Press, October 1998. Westminster Bible Companion Series.

ii <https://www.civilrightsteaching.org/framing-movement/and-the-youth-shall-lead-us>

ⁱⁱⁱ Duck, Ruth. *When God Restored Our Common Life (v3), Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*. Westminster John Knox Press. 2013.