

It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time

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Isaiah 11:1-10

“...for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

Have you ever found yourself wishing that you were a superhero? Maybe not in your mature years, but when you were a child, did you wish and hope that you could do fantastic things? I remember when I was a child I would watch Saturday morning cartoons about normal kids having extra normal experiences, and believed that it could happen to me. I tried every possible method to bring super powers to fruition, or to find elves in my closet, or search for little people in the vents, or to get my parent’s car to come to life and talk to me. Nothing worked. We find such belief in the imagined laughable and harmless, but don’t we also miss it? Do you miss the idealistic hope, the uninhibited vision? We all find ourselves at one time or another looking wistfully at dreams possible but not achieved, hopes lost, and ideals yet to be obtained in one way or another. Even after childhood, we have idealistic and hopeful dreams. That first day of college, the dream of that first day of married life, the dream of that first job, or the dream of the new home. It was a dream of potential, of possibility, of hope, and of happiness and we were ready to achieve it. Can you relate to this idea of the dream? The time when your imagination would work its wonders and your vision became tainted with the rose colored lens. We all have hopes and dreams, and often, like a child reaching for a cookie jar, we find ourselves reaching for our dreams, hoping that we will be able to taste and see that our lives can indeed embrace our imagination. We all at one time or another, look wistfully at our dreams possible, and ideals yet to be obtained.

We look and hope, and then we try to reach our dreams in our own way and through our own devices. This is when dreams can become a positive or negative force of motivation in our lives. Sometimes the motivation to reach our goals and our desires is good; it is the extra carrot, it is the lifestyle that we try so hard to achieve. It is a goal we strive for. Yet sometimes our dive to obtain our visions and ideals can be misguided, controlling, and harmful. Think about commercials. They give us an image, and we think – that could be me? And then we try to capture that image no matter what the cost! Even if we go into debt, alienate our friends and loved ones, and deny our true self we must achieve the ideal created by the commercial. There was a time when the Sprite commercials pointed out the tension between the ideal of advertising and the reality in a clever way. They even made fun of the people who would focus on every little minutia of their clothing for the sake of image, expecting that the image would change the person. There was one particular commercial of a young man looking into the window of an “urban” store when he saw the latest “Hip Hop” style in the window – he dreamed that could be him. So he bought the shirt, the pants, the jacket, and the hat, everything so that he could become the paragon of Hip Hop in that mall and obtain his dream of coolness, hipness, and popularity. Yet through a comedy of errors he ended up losing his pants, jacket, and looked like a fool. In a brilliant move, the Sprite commercials were telling people not to obey the mandates and dreams of the commercials, but “Obey your thirst” or deeper, your dreams, your personal ambitions. The great philosopher, Machiavelli, wrote that one should control ones destiny towards one’s dreams

in a violent, misogynistic way in order to reach one's dreams, and that is the danger that we can face – that we take Machiavelli's advice seriously. We can become obsessed as we chase our White Whale, ignoring all reality around us. We can try to control our lives like a bit controls a horse or a rudder a ship, steering directly towards our dream. We can force our own reality, our own existence in order to obtain our dreams and desires. We look and hope, and then try to reach our dreams in our own ways and through our own devices.

Well, today we are given a dream. The vision offered in Isaiah is one of those dreams that we are drawn to with a glimmer in our eyes. This is the vision of the Advent season at its best. This is a dream of salvation for all creation. This is a hope of a ruler who will bring peace and righteousness to the land. This is the ideal of the messiah whom we await this Advent season. Remember, Isaiah is talking to a people who have seen kings fail, run, and turn away from God. Isaiah is talking to a people who have been besieged, conquered, and are currently under threat of further violence from foreign countries. Isaiah is talking to a people who need to remember that God is with them... all of them. A king, an anointed one, and a leader from the line of Jesse the father of David shall come and be that wise and just king you so desire. A ruler, anointed by the Holy Spirit will come and will judge according to truth, not by corruption or hearsay. A leader will come and bring back to the land the way of the Lord so that Israel will stand tall as God's people once more. What a dream, what a vision! But it does not stop there – not only will the political turmoil of the land be justified and made right, not only will a king bring Israel back to its proud heritage, but creation itself will find wholeness! This is apokatastasis – the ordering of all creation. This is the salvation of the entire world, with no holding back. The same Spirit that was present when the world was created is present now to bring back the world to order. “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.”

All of a sudden, in one swift move, the vision moves from the amazing to the improbable! We can imagine the political, the social renewal, but now God is reordering natural creation, bringing together predator and prey. There is a famous picture of this event by the Quaker, Edward Hicks. He shows the animals with a sense of serenity and peace together with children playing around them. Isn't this inciting? Isn't this a place where we would want to live? After all, can't we assume that if the animals will no longer be eating each other, then humans will also treat each other with peace and love? No longer will this be a dog-eat-dog world, but a world of peace, love, and harmony. That is the important key – harmony with everything. What a dream, what a vision! And we look at this dream, this vision with a glimmer in our eye, but with reality holding us back. Wouldn't we have a better chance finding elves in our closet before we bring the lion together with the calf? This is the idealistic, peace-loving, pie-in-the-sky hope that we just cannot obtain. But like children drawn to the music of the piper, there is something about this dream that attracts us – what if... what if it were possible? What if it could happen?

This improbable dream of the messiah, we try to obtain it through our own devices. We try to force it, or create it. Our intentions may be well placed, and our heart may be set right, but there is a danger when we try to create this ideal time through our own efforts. This is when we force the hand of God to our own desires. For example, the idea of the “spirit of Christmas” can be seen as a yearning to the vision we find in Isaiah. The Spirit of Christmas is the way people can be Christians without actually admitting that they are Christians, and maybe that is a good start toward obtaining this Messianic vision. After all, don't we see people taking care of each other? After all, don't we see people giving to each other? After all, don't we see people offering gifts to the needy in this time of year? And this is a step that is comfortable for most people. Maybe it is the best way to introduce the radical nature of the Kingdom of God to the world. If we just let it happen. Yet when we force it, the dream becomes sour. Last year someone was

trampled to death in Wal-Mart because people had such an urgency to find gifts for each other. Tempers fly as people look for good thing to give to their loved ones. Saturday Night Live has a classic sketch of the real Christmas – stress, pretensions, and false smiles so that the dream of the Christmas Spirit, while contrived is at least experienced in one way or another. What is the “spirit of Christmas,” but societies attempt to claim a Christian understanding of creation (Isaiah’s vision) and use it without claiming to be Christian. Trying to be a good person is not bad, but only scratching the surface of a rich and deep faith leads to misunderstandings and misinterpretation of what the baby really means. Hence we have the commercial drive of Christmas taking the place of the drive for the divine.

Let’s face it, it is a vision that is beyond us – it is outside of our grasp and we can’t make it happen through fancy sweaters or well-cooked hams.

Still we look at this vision of a time when justice will reign over the land, we imagine what will happen with the reign of Christ, and again try to force it into fruition based upon our own imagining. And maybe as Christians, in response to the secular world we try even harder to make this happen. This is when a church or preacher stands up and claims one thing or another as the key issue for the moral salvation of the world. If we just get this thing right, then the world will be ready for Christ. It is suggesting that the return of Christ hinges upon one moral issue. Anytime a church claims an agenda, an issue, or one area of focus, be wary – that church is forcing the hand of God. How dare we attempt to set the tone for a moral debate in the name of Christ – let us instead be focused on Christ! How dare we attempt to define the “important” issues of salvation – let us instead be focused upon the movement of the Spirit and the Lordship of Christ! Do we think we can ignore the fantastic aspects of the vision offered by Isaiah in hopes that a sliver, a taste of the possible will be enough? We’ll deal with that animal stuff later? God gives us the whole package, and that is what we are waiting for. All creation will be saved, and that is beyond our moral dictates or our personal agenda. In a recent article about the role of God in the past election, printed in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, one evangelical scholar mentioned that whenever someone claims that God is on his or her side, he or she is probably wrong. Yes we want to claim this vision for the world, even for this church, and we want to bring it to fruition. But we cannot do it – it is too much, we are not the messiah but limited, sinful people. We cannot be the anointed one, but expectant ones – waiting. That is a theme of Advent – waiting. This is God’s vision, God’s time, and we can’t control God. We cannot obtain the dream of the Messiah that Isaiah offers through our own devices.

But don’t despair, for the hope will occur through God’s guidance and action. This means that we have to give up control, this means that we have to let go of ownership and wait and listen. Think about your own life; you may say, “God I need to read scripture more, so I am going to read scripture, and I expect that you will help me with this endeavor.” But maybe God wants you to spend more time in prayer than in reading. Or maybe God wants you to spend more time in service. You have to leave it to God, and allow God to lead you. Or think about this church. I have a lot of ideas of where this church could go, but in the end, we need to stay focused on God’s will and go as God leads. Did you know that there is a new church movement in America called the church “emergent”? This movement is anti-growth, and is focused on being a church. This movement claims that the church which is most authentic and honest to its calling is the most attractive church. It is not the music, it is not the videos, but it is the authentic, personal, and interactive worship with makes a church. It is the church that isn’t trying to be an institution, but is trying to be a community of people following the will of God through Christ. This means that we have to relax our grip on the reins; this means that we have to open our minds and our hearts to the movement of the spirit and allow God to lead us. Remember, we cannot save the world, only God can. Remember that we cannot save this church, only God can.

Remember, we cannot save our loved ones, or even ourselves, only God can. This is scary and it is liberating. All we can do is to ask God if we can be a part of salvation. St. Gregory of Nazianzus claimed that we have to leave the answer to God, trust, and open ourselves to the movement of the Spirit. This is a big part of the passage – the spirit. It is the Spirit that anoints the Messiah; it is the Spirit that is a part of creation, so perhaps the Spirit will lead us towards that wonderful reordering of creation – to that wonderful time of salvation.

So what are we to do? Always start with worship, for in worship we as a people are saying, “here we are, Lord, ready to follow.” Experience the presence of Christ, know that God is with you, and feel the Holy Spirit in your heart. Stay there in your prayer and your life and as a church. Remember that the Christ we are expected is crucified because he is not what was expected. Let go of your expectations, let go of your visions, let go of your dreams, and ask for God’s. Like sending a child to college, realize that they are not yours, but your Lord’s and only through the movement of God can we obtain salvation. Don’t reach for the Christmas Spirit, but reach for the Christian Spirit – a waiting people ready to be saved and be a part of salvation.

AMEN