

“Dreams and Other Edibles”
Revelation 21:1-6a
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All Saints’ Day
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There are some dreams that you wish would never end. Some visions that you wish you didn’t have to wake up from. The dream I had went like this: I saw a new church and a new church house coming down out of heaven. It had plaster that would never crumble, plumbing that would never fail, heating and cooling systems that never had to be serviced. It had a diamond roof that would last forever. Underneath was a parking garage with reserved parking for the pastors. There were no stairs – only ramps and elevators. Then I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying,

“You wish. Wake up, fool.”

I suppose those kinds of dreams only really happen when things are not going the way I want them to which seems to be quite a bit lately. If I’m honest, I probably have these dreams every stewardship season when I’m worried over whether we can count on money to do all the things that I truly believe we’ve been called to do.

Though I have no hard data to back it up, I don’t believe I’m the only one who’s been harboring some worries, not necessarily about stewardship. I sense that many of us are more stressed out than usual. Maybe it’s the economy. Even if you haven’t lost a job a lot of you are working harder to prove that yours shouldn’t be next on the block. Maybe it’s the time of year with everyone working on school and work projects before the holidays set in. Maybe it’s the swine flu alarm bells which make everybody feel a little less safe. Whatever the reasons, I hear from some of you and sense from others of you heightened anxiety. A worry over the future. A discomfort with the present.

Maybe, like me, you’ve been dreaming like John. I suppose it’s not uncommon in stressful times to start dreaming up fantasies of rescue. Dreams that our future desires would be handed to us from heaven. Dreams that the gap between the lives that we live and the ones that we long for would be closed for us. Dreams that we’d have more resources in our pockets and in our common purse. Dreams that God would come and fix it for us.

I could almost hear myself, like Martha, at the tomb of her friend saying through tears, “If you had only been here, the roof would not have leaked.” “If you had only been here, the economy would not have tanked.” “If you had only been here life would not have gotten so complicated.” “If you had been here our dreams would not have died.”

It’s easy to see how John of Patmos had his visions of the world to come. When things aren’t going like you want them to, come and save us Lamb of God. When the

church, or your work, or a relationship, or your life isn't going like you hoped it might, come and save us. When the present doesn't appear to be headed in the right direction, come and save us Alpha and Omega. It's easy to imagine that God will come and rescue us.

Scholars used to think that this text was produced by people desperate to be rescued. They used to think that this was a community of persecuted Christians frantically trying to hang onto their faith in the midst of persecution. It was so bad that an apocalyptic rescue was the only way out, the only good news, the only way to hang onto faith.

But newer scholarship says these weren't Christians who lived under the daily threat of persecution. These were Christians with one foot in the church and one foot in the world around them. Trying to live out a theology of abundance while participating in a culture terrified of scarcity. Trying to live a life of gratitude while participating in a world that claims you get what you earn. Christians tempted to believe that their best interest might not be in the church. That the future might not be headed in a direction sanctioned or predicted by the church. Christians not convinced that the church is the best place for them to put down roots, to invest their lives, their money, and their time.

Sometimes I can identify with their skepticism. When 85% of our neighbors are sleeping in on a Sunday morning, football fans firing up their grills right about the time we're processing into worship, it will make you think twice about the church. When support for nationalist wars, or opposition to the gay and lesbian people you are or you love comes mostly from people in churches, it will make you think twice about the church. When the place where you go to meet God is also the place where you end up tussling with people over how to worship or how to get something done or what the church ought to do or to say in the public square it will make you think twice about the church. Most of us have our other foot placed squarely in the world around us. We can withdraw the foot that's here anytime we choose. If push comes to shove we can get by without the church.

In fact, John's vision of the future doesn't need any church either. There will be no need to comfort those who are crying. There will be no need to mourn with those who grieve. There will be no need to struggle for justice and for peace. John's vision of the future doesn't need a church. The church isn't needed in the future.

It's not even needed in the present for anyone who just wants to live in the world exactly as they find it. If you're satisfied with the world as it is, you don't need church. If you're completely fulfilled working the week, relaxing on the weekend for the rest of your life, you don't need the church. If you're not bothered by hungry people in our cities, children crying out for a future, you don't need the church. If you're okay with the disparities between nations or races or neighborhoods you don't need the church. Most of us can get by just fine without it. If you don't mind the loneliness of our culture, you don't need the church. If you never wonder what lies beyond the grave, or why

something as beautiful as love can be so painful, or whether there is a purpose to your life, then you don't need church.

The church offers another perspective to the one we drink in just by living when and where we live. It offers another story – an alternative story for people who crave a different kind of world. People struggling to follow God's way in the world. People who care so much about the poor that they stress themselves out worrying over them. People who fret over whether they are making a difference in the world. People who hurt when a child they know hurts, who suffer when a neighbor or a friend suffers. People who realize that even if they were full of the stuff they want or need, they'd still have an empty heart. People who know that they won't sleep well as long as others don't have a place to sleep. They won't feel well as long as others don't have medical care. They won't live well unless all souls have the possibility to live and love work. The church speaks to those people. People who need a different vision.

That's really the main thing that the church has to offer us and our world - not the bricks and mortar that worry me from time; not the budgets that I worry over; not the institutional demands of an organization. The main equipment of the church is bread, wine, and a book of dreams and visions. Dreams of where things are headed. Dreams for anxious people who long to know that God is healing.

It's a place where, in the midst of what threatens to look like a crumbling city, or what threatens to look like a life that is out of your control, or what feels like a rising tide of anxiety, you can get a little taste of the world that is coming. A place where you can catch a little taste of the justice that is near. A little taste of the peace that is near. A place to exhale the stress of the world and inhale the grace of our God. A place to touch the holy. A place to be comforted by the knowledge that you are part of something larger than yourself. A place where you can find the hope that you need to take another step, to dry another tear, to tend to another wound, to shoulder another bit of pain. The church isn't an end unto itself. It is a community called to share with each other, and with the world a little foretaste of the coming reign of God.

And though I worry over bricks and the mortar that house this community of faith. Though I worry every year over how to keep it up, though I stress over committees and budgets, and the economy – I stress over the future of this place – dreams about the church as an institution are not what drive me to serve here. That's not what drives me to come here. That's not what drives me to give the first and best gifts of my money, my time, and my heart here. It's that alternative story and the people who share it together that bring me here. The chance to taste and see the goodness of God in the story as it lives in each of you. The opportunity to breathe in another bit of hope to carry me through the journey, to be a part of God's dreams that don't end.

I can live in this world without a lot of things. But visions of where this life is headed, visions of the poor, well off, the oppressed, free, the naked clothed, the hungry fed, sick made well. Assurances that God's dreams for the future are alive and well and

that I've got a personal invitation to join in. Assurances that every time you witness for peace, every time you struggle for justice, every time you reach out to a hurting brother or sister in need your work is not in vain. That's not something I would ever want to live without.