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 Texts: Psalm 126; Joel 2: 28; Matthew 1: 18-25  
 December 20, 2020

“When I Waked, I Cried To Dream Again”

One of the curious features of the Christmas narratives in the Bible is how often important information is conveyed by way of dreams. In Matthew’s birth narrative, it is a dream in which Joseph is offered reassurance about his betrothal to Mary, a whispered promise that all would be well. Shortly after, we find the wise men following their star, a kind of waking dream, and then it’s a dream that offers them the realization that the preservation of their lives, as well as that of Jesus, means avoiding mad King Herod. Not long after that, Joseph dreams again, this time as a warning to flee to Egypt. Another dream lets him know that it’s safe to return, and another still directs him to make a home in Nazareth. Dreams are everywhere in Matthew’s story of Jesus’s birth.

In the Hebrew Bible, dreams and visions are used interchangeably. “Your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions,” is how the book of Joel puts it, and that’s exactly what we find in Luke’s account of Jesus’s birth as well. Everyone is having visions, which is another way of saying that they’re dreaming dreams. Zechariah has a vision of an angel, and then Mary has another. It leads them both to speak in poetry, not prose, as they seek to give voice to all they had seen and heard in their visions. And then of course there are the shepherds, who also receive a vision in the night, a waking dream, in which unseen beings, angels, speak in poetic phrases, using words such as “glory,” and “peace,” and “goodwill.” Later, there’s Simeon in the temple, himself the recipient of a vision that he would live to see the Messiah, and prose won’t suffice for him either: he praises the child in poetry, topping it off by giving Mary yet another vision, another dream, of what would soon enough unfold in the ministry of Jesus. There’s Anna, another seer, another visionary, lingering at the Temple in order to bless the young child and his mother. Christmas, in other words, is saturated with the language of dreams.

And not only Christmas. It’s true of the entirety of the Bible. Eve is fashioned from Adam while he sleeps, as if to say that she is his dream. Jacob dreams of a ladder extending to the heavens, and he wrestles with the angel of the Lord in a dream. Joseph is granted wisdom by way of his dreams, which causes his brothers to sell him into slavery in Egypt – it’s a dream in other words that kicks off the entire Exodus saga. The law itself is given in a cloud of deep darkness, which I would be bold enough to read as still more dream imagery. The Psalmist writes of a magnificent dream, when fortunes are restored and when laughter and joy flow like waterways.

It’s probably safe to say that, unless you’re in some form of Freudian or Jungian psychoanalysis, few of us pay great heed to our dreams. On the whole, I don’t put a lot of stock in mine. For better or worse, I tend to err on the side of rationalism, and anyway, I’ve seen how some people claim a dubious authority by appealing to dreams and visions. In the presence of such claims, I tend to want to grab my hat and head for the door. Still, dreams are a massive part of both the biblical tradition and of Christmas itself. In that, the birth narratives of Jesus have far more in common with certain indigenous traditions, like that of the Lakota people, whose way of life is wholly dependent upon dreams and visions. It’s also true that the birth narratives of

Christmas – at least as reported by the texts - share far more in common with certain African practices, where heightened, mystic vision is everything. By way of parenthesis, last year I preached a sermon on how very pluralistic our Christmas celebrations are, with Greek and Roman and Norse and Celtic practices existing just beneath the overlay of the Christian story. I would extend that now toward indigenous and African traditions, for when you pay attention to the details of the Christmas narratives, they stand in a much closer relationship to those practices than they do to understandings emerging from Europe and the Enlightenment. Still, the question remains: what are we to make of the appearance in these narratives of so many dreams and mystic visions? More to the point, what are we to make of the fact that the birth narratives seem to be written as if they themselves *were* a kind of dream? And how does that pertain to us, living through one of the strangest Christmases most of us have ever experienced?

To answer that question, I wish to enlist the aid of another theologian who wrote through a series of cascading crises. Over the last several weeks, I've turned to the words of those thinking about Christmas from a prison context, first with Dietrich Bonhoeffer and then with Karl Barth, both of them giants of modern theology. Today, I wish to make it a trilogy. But it's not a German theologian I would have us turn to. Instead, it's no less than Shakespeare that I'll summon, and in particular what is thought to be his final work, *The Tempest*. I understand Shakespeare to be one of our finest theologians, and I consider that play to be one of the most powerful preachments available to us. It too is a prison narrative, set on a remote island, where individuals struggle against many forms of captivity, each of them reaching toward their own form of salvation, their own manner of grace. And though there's nothing of Christmas itself within *The Tempest* itself, it's imbued with the sort of holy wonder that is also stirred by the birth narratives of Jesus. While it might feel unlikely to run the two together, I wish to contend that *The Tempest* might be read as a piece of Christmas good news for a world benighted and beleaguered by so many of the challenges we face at present.

Caliban is the character in the play who feels most contemporary. He's also the figure who provides the greatest insight into the dreams of Christmas, when Christ is born into the night of the world. Of any of the characters in the play, it is Caliban who experiences the greatest degree of imprisonment. Half human and half spirit, he is deformed and thought to be monstrous. Not only that, he is maintained in captivity by those who are themselves captive, and he seethes with resentment. Caliban is unquestionably an African presence within the play. That's why it's important that Caliban, the supposed monster, receives the most stunning lines of the play, lines that seek to awaken the power of dreams and visions in his listeners and in the audience alike. When Caliban attempts to explain the mysteries of the island, his description becomes something more. It becomes a description of the world itself, even a world laboring under various forms of captivity. Listen to his words:

*"Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,  
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices,  
That if I then had waked after long sleep  
Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming  
The clouds methought would open and show riches  
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked  
I cried to dream again."*

Somewhere behind those words, we might catch a glimpse of Shakespeare himself, who was well acquainted with the night side of the human experience, one who had himself been startled by the “noises” of the world. Like us, he lived in a period where outbreaks of pandemic shut down his country for years at a time. Like more than a few people this year, we know that he lost someone precious to him as a result of the pandemic that swept through England in 1596 - his eleven-year-old son, Hamnet. We know of the grief that ensued. And as in our day, so in his: political intrigue, mistrustful factions, and even terrorist plots were a part of his lived reality. It was a dangerous time to be a writer and a public figure – a single misconstrued line could end a career. A perceived disloyalty or slight against the crown might lead to hanging. Shakespeare was acquainted with the night side of the human story, with the “noises” of the world, and he explored it all the way down to its bitterest conclusion. He knew that sometimes, we are all of us the “poor naked wretches” of *Lear*. He knew, with *Macbeth*, that some stretches of time do indeed resemble a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. If Christ is born at night, then Shakespeare gave full expression to the dark into which he was born.

But it's almost as though at the end of his life, Shakespeare emerges on the far side of tragedy, where he finds something else, something other, something magnificent and good that speaks into the terrible and the tragic without being submerged by it. If *Macbeth* and *Lear* and all the rest testify to a dark truth about the world we can all recognize, *The Tempest* speaks to something that is also true, which is an intuition of the splendor pervading the world, the sense that on the far side of our tears there exists an unspeakable joy which escapes our words and concepts, but that haunts us nevertheless, refusing to leave us alone. It's what Caliban alone can best articulate: that somewhere, as if just offstage, there is a mysterious magic at work; that strange noises, “sweet airs that give delight” come to melt our sadness; that after the storm subsides, there exist “a thousand twanging instruments,” meant to fill us with gladness; that voices who mean us well whisper such truths that our hearts are quickened and our spirits are revived; that on the far side of tragedy there exists in the world that which, instead of frightening us, lifts us up, ennobles us, filling us with an unshakeable hope. It's a part of the human drama that's easy to dismiss, for unlike tragedy, which is all too verifiable, these feelings, these intuitions, seem too good to be true. And yet Shakespeare, like the birth narratives themselves, insist that this too is a part of the human drama that we must recognize. On the far side of tragedy there are sweet airs that give delight. On a dark night in Bethlehem, perhaps, Christ himself comes into the world.

It's hard to state that outright. It's hard to convey it in prose. It's too easily debunked, ridiculed, or dismissed. And yet I think we all know something of what Caliban, and behind him, Shakespeare, gives voice to. I think we all know something of the dreams that appear in the birth narratives of Jesus, the dream that the birth narrative itself most fully is. For the likes of us, it doesn't arrive in a mystical vision, not usually. Instead, it's something like this, given in fragmentary moments across our lives: we awaken from sleep, having dreamed of something so lovely, so tender, so wholesome and freeing that it pervades the remainder of the day, even if we can no longer remember the content of the dream. But the feeling remains. Where does such a moment come from? How does it arise? Or maybe it's this: you're listening to a piece of music, Bach's Cello Variations, say, and for a time you're transported, lifted out of yourself, dwelling on an alternate plane that both is and is not of this world. And when the piece concludes, when the applause begins, it's as though you're disoriented, rudely awakened, yanked back into yourself, longing to dream again. Where did you go? And what did you learn while you were

there? Could you speak it if you tried? Or still again, maybe it happens like this: you're absorbed in a novel, describing the most interesting events and characters that you have ever known, and it's as though you know them, can touch them, can converse with them about your own dilemmas and desires. And upon turning the final page, you feel bereft, cut off from an intimacy you hadn't expected. Still, those characters, however fictional, begin to inform your own relationships, and to structure your own decisions. To what secret room of reality does that experience belong? Where, precisely, do you live when you are so absorbed? Or maybe it's like this: the snow, absent for years, suddenly returns, awakening in you the near forgotten delight of a child, and in the quiet of the night, while the snow pelts your face, you walk in the middle of the road with those you love the most, chilled but happy, the cares of the season, of the year, temporarily suspended. It lasts but a moment, but it creates in you a feeling, a dream really, that you wish to dream again, and again after that. Or bring it right on home now: it's Christmas Eve, and you're in the practice of showing up, year after year, even though, if you were pressed, you don't believe a word of what is spoken or sung on that night. But you wouldn't dare miss it, because for a few minutes that night you can almost believe that it's true, that all is calm, that all is bright, and that in some way beyond our words to explain, a hushed and holy joy really does come into the world. It's all as evanescent and as misty as a dream, and yet we can't stop dreaming it. When we wake, after it's all over, there's something within us that longs to dream again.

The news of Jesus coming into the world is like that. Like a strange dream we cannot shake, like a piece of music that carries us away. It's like a novel whose characters are so rich we can't stand to leave them, like a snowy night awakening a child's delight. It's like Christmas Eve, when all is calm, and all is bright. I must have read dozens, if not hundreds, of theological accounts of how it all works. I've listened to or read the sermons that attempt to explain it all, as if nailing down the furniture of heaven. But none of it convinces me the way Caliban does, the way *The Tempest* does. None of it convinces me the way I'm convinced by the stories themselves, which go out of their way to signal that these are dreams to haunt our waking life, visions to steer our lives by.

In the age of Covid, to come upon the Christmas story once again is to hear the music of the world as if from afar. It is to hear, even in the dead of night, sounds which give delight, and hurt not. It is to hear a humming, and sometimes voices, who speak to us gently: "Be not afraid: I bring you good news, of great joy, for all people." To come upon the Christmas story in a year such as this is to know the darkness, yes, but it is also to know also that on the far side of tragedy there is a love that binds us, that holds us. To come upon the Christmas story in the time of Corona is to recall the sweetness of a dream emerging from God only knows, insisting on a reality deeper and truer than whatever tragedies may befall us, and whatever injustices we may have unleashed. To come upon the Christmas story in a year filled with such bitterness and recrimination is to sense there are deeper, more binding truths that hold us together in a shared vision of human belonging. It is to sense that there is something within and without us that is trying to get our attention, that is trying to win our hearts, that is trying to show us the goodness that is born, even into the night. It comes as if in a dream, with the sound of a thousand twangling instruments, such that, in waking, we cry to dream again.

Who can say but that such dreams aren't the truest thing of all? Who can say but that such sounds aren't the very reality of the world? Who can say but that such voices, whispered and shouted from the pages of documents now thousands of years old, aren't proclaiming the very truth of our lives?

And who can say that in the moments that we experience delight, in the moments in which unbidden tears of joy stream down our faces, in the moments in which a lump forms in our throats, in the moments when laughter catches us unawares, who can say but that our hearts aren't whispering their own responses, gigantic affirmations that slip through the patrols of our rational selves, letting us know that we never grow too old or too jaded, too cynical or too lost, for the Christ child to be born anew for us.

"Be not afeard," says Caliban. The world is full of noises, sounds that give delight and hurt not. "Do not be afraid," says the angel. For I bring you good tidings of great joy.

It's meant for you. It's all of it, all of it, meant for you.