

“The Impossible Dream”:  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for December 1<sup>st</sup> 2019 (First Sunday of Advent)  
by Foster Freed

Isaiah 2: 1-5

Way back in 1965 or 1966, my parents picked up four tickets to what was—at the time—the off-Broadway production (eventually to be transferred to Broadway) of the musical *Man of La Mancha*. I would have been in my mid-to-late teens, and I honestly can't pretend that I recall it having been my most cherished of evenings spent in the theatre. Possibly it was a little slow-paced—both musically and dramatically—for a teen more accustomed, by then, to listening to music from the Beatles, the Stones and Motown. But also—quite possibly—as a young man “coming of age” in what were still the heady days of the mid-sixties, with so little life experience under my belt, perhaps it was simply too much of a stretch to have expected me to identify with...

...to identify with Don Quixote: the absurdly idealistic Knight, chasing windmills, mistaking a common tavern girl for a lady of rare virtue and yes—as the show's most famous song would have it, eternally questing after “impossible dreams.” That's why it took me a wee bit by surprise earlier this week...as I pondered a title for this morning's sermon....

...that's why it took me by surprise, when the title upon which I settled was none other than the title of that most famous of show tunes. The **impossible!** The impossible **dream!**

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Right off the bat...right off the bat I had better make clear that I am no stranger to that most beautiful of New Testament sayings: the one Christ speaks to his disciples when they wonder how anyone will ever be able to enter the Kingdom. His response? “With God all things are possible.”<sup>i</sup> All things! And so please...please don't think for a moment that I have forgotten the immensity of God's power...any less than I have forgotten the immensity of God's love. Nevertheless!!

It is hard to deny the poignancy of Isaiah's prophecy: especially its seemingly impossible promise of peace.

*He shall judge between the nations,  
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;  
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war anymore.*

A prophecy so breathtakingly bold in its sweep and its immense vision, that it is hard—based on our own lived experience, having lived through a time in which none of us will have ever truly experienced even one day...even one brief 24 hour period...when there has not been at least one violent conflict raging somewhere in the world...

...a prophecy so breathtakingly bold and yet seemingly still so distant and yes—so seemingly impossible—that it is hard to resist echoing the words of another Biblical prophet, Habakkuk, whose own book of prophecies begin with this cry from the heart.

*O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,  
and you will not hear?  
Or cry to you "Violence!"  
and you will not save?*

How long, O Lord? How long?

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Welcome to Advent: season of hope which, by definition, is first and foremost a season of “longing” since we do not hope for that which we can already call our own. For that reason this Advent season is also the season, *par excellence*, for hearing the words of the prophets including those “written on the subway walls and tenement halls”<sup>ii</sup>: which is to say the words of those whose mandate includes the mandate of noticing the things most of us would just as soon not see, the things from which most of us would just as soon avert our eyes. In that regard, Isaiah and Habakkuk are very much singing from the same hymn-book, despite the very different moods they express. Isaiah’s is the voice of persistent hope, confident that the day of God’s peace is drawing nigh: offering hope, but a hope grounded on unblinking realism that will not pretend that the day of peace has already arrived. Habakkuk, whose words appear to be drenched in despair—in the face of a world that seems so far from the one God created “in the beginning”—nevertheless cries out to this very God, certain that God will not only hear, but will respond to his heart-cry, hopefully sooner rather than later. But what neither Isaiah nor Habakkuk are tempted to do, is to pretend that the status quo is acceptable; that things must be “tickety-boo” since whatever **is** must, by definition, be the way they were **meant** to be.

And that, good people, ought to be **our** starting point as well. As Christians—as those who bear the name of “Christ”...

...a Greek word which translates the Hebrew “Messiah”...

...we are committed to the view, unlike our Jewish sisters and brothers, that the Saviour has already come, the belief that the One we await has already paid a house-call. The challenge for us, however...

...the particular challenge we face as a Gospel people, is that of celebrating the redeemer, without pretending that the work of

redemption is yet complete. It is, you see, one thing to chase a dream...it's quite another to become so detached from the actuality of the world in which we live, that we are not only chasing dreams, but shadow-boxing with windmills. And yes: while it is most certainly the case that part of our mandate in the midst of an at times excessively cynical culture includes the work of noticing the miracles that surround us—if only we have eyes with which to see them and the time to take note of them—it most certainly is **not** part of our mandate to avert our eyes from those things that are simply wrong...those things that cry out to be noticed, even when it hurts to see them. Trust me on this!

In the midst of a culture in which so many regard Christian faith as nothing more than make-believe, we do no disservice to the Gospel when we acknowledge that the world is not yet fully redeemed. On the contrary, we thereby demonstrate that in order to become a believer, you need not become a card-carrying member of the happy-idiots club. Which is why...

Which is why it is so right and proper and fitting that we begin the year...that we launch into a new year in the Christian calendar right here. Not with merry-making and frivolity....but with the sober recollection of the gap...the gap between the world God spoke into being at the beginning of time, and the at times glorious but at times gruesome world in which we live. In short we begin with yearning...and with the hope that comes with having caught a glimpse of the Christ: who was...and is...and evermore shall be, world without end! Amen.

Will you pray with me?

O God of grace...O God of glory.  
We come before you this day  
as those who have tasted of your love,  
as those who have caught a glimpse of your majesty  
and the majesty of your created realm,  
but also as those who are prepared to see  
and to participate in the life of a world  
that so often breaks the hearts of its children.  
Help us to nurture, O God, a lively hope in—  
indeed, a fierce expectation of—  
your advent:  
and inspire us as we watch and as we wait,  
to join in the work of bringing good news to your world,  
not only with our lips but with our lives.  
Through Christ! Amen!

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<sup>i</sup> Mark 10: 27 & parallels

<sup>ii</sup> Paul Simon, "The Sound of Silence"