

Matthew 2:1-12

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Samantha Evans

January 3, 2021

Those Who Dream

Well good morning, my dear friends, and welcome to this Epiphany Sunday! We are still in the season of Christmas. So, any of you being told to take down your tree, you go ahead and tell those haters that Pastor Sammie says that Christmas is 12 days long, and at the very least, you may keep that tree up until January 6. And honestly, given the year we've had, I say go ahead and keep it up as long as it brings you joy.

Can I get an amen?

It is good to be back in this space, physically and mentally and spiritually. I have had a lovely few days of rest and I am feeling grateful and grounded and believe it or not: hopeful! I am feeling hopeful about the year that is to come. Which is not to say that I think this year is going to be any easier than the last.

But if I've learned anything in this past year, it is that we, WE, together, we can do hard things. And so, I am feeling hope that whatever this year brings, we've got this. Because we are together, not physically sure, but in our beings, we are together. We will not stop showing up for one another. We will not stop proclaiming what is good and just. We will keep doing hard things because we are in this together.

And this, my friends, gives me such a deep reservoir of hope. And I believe that as children of God, those who dream, and those who have hope in the face of hardship can and shall persevere.

I'm currently reading Bryan Stevenson's book *Just Mercy*. And in it, Stevenson gives some pretty horrific insight into our justice system, and its too often lack of actual justice. But at one point in the narrative, after an already long and difficult road, there seems to be a break in the case that he's working on.

And he says that at first he hesitated to have hope that this time would be different, because they had had so many unforeseeable and unbelievable setbacks, but he soon realized that the only thing they really, truly needed, the only thing that was going to get them through, was the ability to hope.

I want to read you a bit about what he says about this hope. About his realization, he says:

I'd grown fond of quoting Václav Havel, the great Czech leader who had said that "hope" was the one thing that people struggling in Eastern Europe needed during the era of Soviet domination.

Havel had said that people struggling for independence wanted money and recognition from other countries; they wanted more criticism of the Soviet empire from the West and more diplomatic pressure.

But Havel had said that these were things they wanted; the only thing they needed was hope. Not that pie in the sky stuff, not a preference for optimism over pessimism, but rather "an orientation of the spirit."

The kind of hope that creates a willingness to position oneself in a hopeless place and be a witness, that allows one to believe in a better future, even in the face of abusive power. That kind of hope [he says] makes one strong.¹

That kind of hope makes one strong. That's the kind of hope I am feeling drawn to. The kind of hope I want to cultivate and tend in the coming year. Because this is the kind of hope which we are called to embody...the kind of hope that has the potential to transform us and our world.

This kind of hope makes us strong. It enables us to persevere when things get really hard.

I am always moved by the story of the Magi. I'll be honest, they kind of come off as naïve to me.

These were outsiders, foreigners, whose religious practices were often demeaned by Jews. And they travelled all that way, following a star, into a kingdom full of people who at best misunderstood them and at worst hated them, and went around asking questions about a new king of the Jews.

Like, who in their right mind would enter the territory of the current king of the Jews and say: "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage."

Naïve? Arrogant? Just downright out of their minds? Maybe...

¹ Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*

Or maybe they possessed the kind of hope that creates a willingness to position oneself in front of a ruthless king, to be a witness to a star rising. To dare to believe in a future reign ushered in through the birth of a poor child.

Maybe they possessed the kind of hope that allowed them, even in the face of the abusive power of King Herod, to proclaim that the Christ child, the true King had been born, to present this child with precious gifts, and to return to their own country by another road.

Maybe, the Magi possessed the kind of hope that makes one strong and allows one to persevere in the face of hardship and injustice. These Magi had an audacious and sustaining hope in this child and what he represents. And maybe, just maybe, we can be moved by their hope, and seek to claim it for ourselves.

For the birth of this Christ child fulfills God's promise to Israel and to all of Creation: that all of God's people and all of God's creatures will be filled with the knowledge of God such that that justice will roll down like waters, the lion and lamb will live together, the peoples will beat their swords into ploughshares, and will learn war no more.

All will be called beloved children of God and given a place at the at the Table. Hunger and thirst will be no more. Mourning and crying will be no more. For all people will be restored to God and God to them. All people will know peace and joy and love.

Friends, this coming year will be hard. It is silly to think otherwise. But it is not naïve to have hope that whatever we face, we face it together, and yeah, we can do hard things.

We can believe in a better future, a more just world, a peaceable kingdom. We can work to make it so, because we have been gifted the kind of hope that makes us witnesses. The kind of hope that makes us strong. And the kind of hope that allows us to persevere.

I would like to end with An Epiphany Blessing from Jan Richardson called: For Those Who Have Far to Travel

If you could see the journey whole you might never

undertake it;
might never dare
the first step
that propels you
from the place
you have known
toward the place
you know not.

Call it
one of the mercies
of the road:
that we see it
only by stages
as it opens
before us,
as it comes into
our keeping
step by
single step.

There is nothing
for it
but to go
and by our going
take the vows
the pilgrim takes:

to be faithful to
the next step;
to rely on more
than the map;
to heed the signposts
of intuition and dream;
to follow the star
that only you
will recognize;

to keep an open eye
for the wonders that
attend the path;
to press on
beyond distractions
beyond fatigue
beyond what would
tempt you
from the way.

There are vows
that only you
will know;
the secret promises
for your particular path
and the new ones

you will need to make
when the road
is revealed
by turns
you could not
have foreseen.

Keep them, break them,
make them again:
each promise becomes
part of the path;
each choice creates
the road
that will take you
to the place
where at last
you will kneel

to offer the gift
most needed—
the gift that only you
can give—
before turning to go
home by
another way.

In the name of the Triune God, who creates, sustains, and redeems us all. Amen.