

“Those Who Dream” / Psalm 126 / 18 November 2012

“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.” Those who dream? Who does dream, and what about? What dreams are good and worth pursuing? And do we pursue them wisely? Who dreams nowadays, you, me, us? Who are “those who dream”? Absolutely everyone. Some dream expansively big, while others dream tragically small.

Consider how our dreams drive us. I mean, they literally drive us! Phil’s a trucker for Wal-Mart. A big guy from the wooded hills of Arkansas. His truck route sends him from Little Rock to Pittsburgh and back, every single week. With two kids under the age of two and a frazzled wife in a trailer back home, Phil wants nothing more than to make his run, drop off his cargo, and get back home in time to help his wife get the place ready for Thanksgiving. This year, they’re hosting both sides of the family. It’s going to be tight, but they’ve got it all figured out. They can seat eighteen people in the trailer if they move the couch out to the shed and borrow two folding tables from the Baptist church and a bunch of folding chairs. Family is everything, and they’re happy to do it. Phil’s happy for a few days off. Most of all, Phil is happy that his little sister will be coming home from college for the first time since her freshman year began. No one in Phil’s family has ever gone to college before, and he’s so proud of her. He can’t wait to get back home. The speed limit on this crowded stretch of I-79 is 55, but he’s cruising north doing about 70. Can you blame him?

Judy, in the car in front of Phil, is going 45. Judy’s a retired music teacher. Actually, truth be told, she’d rather not be retired quite yet. But the school system was strapped, and the arts are always first to feel the budget cuts. Art, choir, band, they’re all feeling the pain. German classes got dropped long ago, and French is only holding on by its fingernails. A teacher is only safe if he or she is twenty-five years old and certified to teach both math and science. But Judy’s not a bitter soul. She’s finding things to love about being retired. She’s always loved trees, especially in the fall. And so, she’s off to the Raccoon Creek to see if there are any hardy beech trees still in leaf this late in the season. You can see that some yellow leaves are still clinging to trees alongside the road. It’s such a pretty day with nowhere to go, and no courses to teach or prepare. What’s the hurry. There’s a patch of gold over there. And could there still be a little orange the week of Thanksgiving? As she comes up on the Carnegie exit off I-79 north, she slows down to look for that big white church steeple, way off on the horizon. It’s such a pretty church spire, but she’s never been able to figure out what church it belongs to.

Jenna is an attorney who’s late for work; even so, she’s only doing about 85. Hers is one of those old, prestigious firms that tolerate no nonsense from the lower ranking associates. Every weekday morning, Jenna kicks herself with guilt and sadness as she rushes out the door, leaving a babysitter to give her three kids breakfast and get them on the school bus. Why did they have to build a place so far out in Cecil? But on the weekends, she remembers why. The huge grassy lots, the big trees, the country air, the quiet neighborhoods full of young professionals like her. She just might make partner in a few years...if she can tolerate the extra hours that that requires. And if she can start making it to work on time. Jenna wants the standard of living that this job gives her, but she hates what it costs her. She wants two things at once: a satisfying career and a happy, traditional family. Life is busy. Life is commutes, and meetings, the PTA. How does she do it all?

When flying Phil came up on slow-moving Judy, he switched lanes fast so he wouldn't have to hit the brake. He didn't see Jenna darting in beside him. The result was a 12-car pile-up in which nobody was killed...but which made a Presbyterian pastor named Brian late to a presbytery meeting, or to a pre-surgery hospital visit with one of his parishioners, or to a clergy meeting on the North Side. Actually, whatever I was late for, it was Phil's fault, and Judy's, and Jenna's. Blame them. Blame their dreams, too. Phil and his hasty dreams of being home for the holiday. Judy and her idle dreams of beauty. Jenna and her breathless dreams of a home in Cecil and a career downtown. Dreams! Sometimes they literally drive us. They dictate how we travel through this world. When one person's pursuit of happiness gets in the way of another person's pursuit, there's bound to be a collision.

What do you dream about? Not at night when you're sleeping, but in your unguarded waking moments when your mind wanders across the possibilities of life. Do you dream about perfect health, security, beauty? Do you dream about being loved in a way that you've never been? Maybe you dream about travel, "faraway places with strange sounding names." Do you dream about forbidden things? We all have dreams, even if they're not all very lofty. We have visions of pleasures, and experiences, and perhaps even visions of meaning and purpose. As the happy man says at the beginning and at the end of the old movie *Pretty Woman*, "Welcome to Hollywood! What's your dream? Everybody comes to Hollywood got a dream, land of dreams. Some dreams come true, some don't. But keep on dreamin'. Always time to dream, so keep on dreamin'. What's your dream? Hey, mister, what's your dream?"

The Scriptures talk a lot about dreams, too. Most of what they say is a little less exuberant than the guy in *Pretty Woman*, but meaningful nonetheless. In Psalm 126, we read, "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy." Scholars find this Psalm is notoriously difficult to know anything about. But if we just take it at face value, it seems to be a song about the dream of home, or coming home. Some of the best songs in history have been about that old, old longing for home or the joy of coming home. "Homeward Bound," by Simon and Garfunkel. "Home, Home on the Range," "I'll Be Home for Christmas." In this particular song, the exiles have finally returned home to Zion after many years in captivity, and it's like a dream come true. The homecomers are like people saying, "Somebody pinch me, I must be dreaming."

Faith—if it's doing its job—will always have room for dreams. At least in part, the life of faith is a dream. It's dreaming of a world that ought to be, if it isn't. Faith is a dream about all the better possibilities for the human family. Will we, as a species, ever finally come to a day when we can say with those homecoming exiles of old, "Somebody pinch us, we must be dreaming"?

Dreams are the answer to all the world's ills, for everything good that was ever accomplished was a dream before it became a reality. But dreams get us into trouble, too. I mean, what was the Cold War all about? In fact, every war that was ever fought, what was the driving force behind them? Wasn't it two—or more—conflicting dreams of what life in our world should look like? Why are politics and religion such dangerous topics even among friends? Isn't it because those two things touch on our human dreams for how we should be living together and what things we should most cherish? Politics and religion are the domain of dreams.

Why are there red states and blue states? Why does it all come down to Ohio every four years? Why do so many couples fight like two cats tied together by the tails? It's all because of dreams, some expansively big, some tragically small. Of course, some few dreams are twisted and wrong, like Hitler's dream of some fictitious super race. Some dreams turn into nightmares. And some dreams are so lofty and idealistic that we can almost hear the ice cracking beneath them from the outset, like William Penn's dream of a holy experiment in the wilderness, where even the natives would be treated with respect. But be they good and noble or foul and misled, dreams are the driving force behind all of history, and every religious tradition, and every foolish risk ever taken by Wall Street. Even terrorist activities are someone's misguided attempts to force their dreams on the world around them. When the chicken crossed the road, she did it in pursuit of some small dream of her own. It all comes down to dreams! Most dreams aren't bad in themselves, but it's possible to pursue them in bad ways.

Across the political spectrum, many Americans were dismayed during the second presidential debate when the political writer Ann Coulter publicly referred to President Obama as "the retard." Now, I don't care if your politics are the same as hers. Politics, as I said, are just our dreams for what society ought to look like, and many good and faithful people share Coulter's political views. And yet, the majority of those people don't pursue their dream in the same unkind ways as Coulter. And their vision of society is not served well by her mean-spiritedness. No, I don't care if your politics look like hers, but if your rhetoric and your speech begin to sound like hers, then I start to get concerned. If a dream is noble and good, then it deserves honorable and life-affirming language. If a dream dares to claim the betterment of the human condition as its goal, then the dreamers who support that vision cannot make use of ugly tactics. In response to Coulter's ill-advised comment, a representative of the Special Olympics of Virginia wrote her an open letter, and this is what it said:

Dear Ann Coulter,

Come on Ms. Coulter, you aren't dumb and you aren't shallow. So why are you continually using a word like the R-word as an insult? I'm a 30-year-old man with Down syndrome who has struggled with the public's perception that an intellectual disability means that I am dumb and shallow. I am not either of those things, but I do process information more slowly than the rest of you. In fact it has taken me all day to figure out how to respond to your use of the R-word last night. I thought first of asking whether you meant to describe the President as someone who was bullied as a child by people like you, but rose above it to find a way to succeed in life as many of my fellow Special Olympians have. Then I wondered if you meant to describe him as someone who has to struggle to be thoughtful about everything he says, as everyone else races from one snarky sound bite to the next. Finally, I wondered if you meant to degrade him as someone who is likely to receive bad health care, live in low grade housing with very little income and still manages to see life as a wonderful gift. Because, Ms. Coulter, that is who we are – and much, much more.

After I saw your tweet, I realized you just wanted to belittle the President by linking him to people like me. You assumed that people would understand and accept that being linked to someone like me is an insult and you assumed you could get away with it and still appear on TV. I have to wonder if you considered other hateful words but recoiled from the backlash.

Well, Ms. Coulter, you, and society, need to learn that being compared to people like me should be considered a badge of honor. No one overcomes more than we do and still loves life so much. Come join us someday at Special Olympics. See if you can walk away with your heart unchanged. Signed: A friend you haven't made yet,

*John Franklin Stephens
Special Olympics of Virginia*

Ah, dreams! Everybody's got a few. John Franklin Stephens has one, and so does Ann Coulter. But do you notice how graciously Stephens pursues his dream, drawing even Ann Coulter into it? Dreams entail a responsibility to act generously. I recently attended a wedding at St. Stanislaus Church, down in The Strip. You probably know that St. Stanislaus is traditionally an ethnic Polish parish, and so it has its own unique feel to it. Lots of icons, and statues, and rounded arches, all painted gold. There were more statues than breathing humans in the church, and all of them wearing these grimly beatific expressions that I've never seen out in the real world, where I believe the true saints can be found. It's more ornate than most Catholic churches, but ornate in a distinctly Polish way. There's probably not a square foot of plain white wall space in the whole building. And as I sat in that unfamiliar environment, I thought, "So this, too, is someone's dream of God." It's not my dream. Some dreams can appear silly or trite to outsiders, but even those are usually expressions of something noble and good. And this Polish Catholic vision of the spiritual world expresses a dream that elevates human nature and instills a sense of reverence.

Sometimes I believe that it's the silliest, the most farfetched dreams that do the best service to God and humankind. The psalmist says that "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream." And perhaps if-and-when the Lord restores the fortunes of the human race, we'll be like waking dreamers again. Maybe we'll wake up to a world where John Franklin Stephens' dream of being treated with kindness and respect will be a reality. Maybe we'll wake up to a world where all the best dreams for the human race will be realized. It's not the silly, lofty, unrealistic dreams that get us into trouble. It's not the seemingly unachievable things that lead us astray. It's the self-involved, self-interested dreams that benefit one person—or one group of people—at the expense of others; those dreams must expand to include the well-being of others. The recurring nuisance here on planet earth is all the little, ingrown dreams, and all the unimaginative, self-centered dreamers.

And what do dreams have to do with Thanksgiving? Today's life is always the stuff of yesterday's dreams. Our luxuries were once a dream, as our freedoms, our families, our lifestyles. We didn't entirely earn these things all of our own effort. No, we are living in the realized dreams of those who went before us, and indeed the dreams of our own previous selves...the individuals that we were decades ago. Are we dreaming dreams that those who follow us will be grateful to inherit? And our lives with all their worries and cares would be a waking dream to most other people on the globe today. And so, let us gratefully pursue our dreams in quiet and in peace, but let them be dreams not only for our own benefit and happiness, but dreams for the well-being of our world: the stranger, the alien, the enemy, the seemingly undeserving. Only then will that great dream known as "The Kingdom of God" finally be realized. Amen.