

GOD IS DOING A NEW THING - IMAGINE IT!

Revelation 21:1-6

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Jordan Greenway grew up two hours from Lake Placid, New York, site of the 1980 Winter Olympics, and as soon as he could lace up his skates, he dreamt of being in the Olympics. This week his dream has come true, eight or even twelve years earlier than he thought it might. Greenway will become the first African-American man on the U.S. Olympic Hockey Team. He imagined it, he practiced, and now it becomes reality. Sports psychologists encourage athletes to use the power of visualization; it is an essential element in the mental part of their training, as important sometimes as the physical training. They create a mental image of themselves performing at their best. It is not only motivational, but a mental rehearsal that allows their minds and bodies to work together to perform the imagined skill.

Visualization is a recommended life skill for people other than athletes, too. Musicians and entrepreneurs are both coached to use the power of their minds, visualizing their goals and then working to achieve them.

Imagining something doesn't make it happen, of course, but numerous experts believe that it helps. Our minds are marvelous resources, with many more capabilities than most of us ever tap. There's so much we don't have control of in this life, but we do (most of the time) have control over our thoughts. We can choose what we pay attention to and focus on, and it's amazing the difference those choices can make.

When you look at the three-year ministry of Jesus, you can make a convincing argument that he had a central focus, which was to describe to people what the Kingdom of God was like. The Kingdom of God, sometimes called the Reign of God, is what Jesus describes in parables. It's life lived in its most abundant state. When you look at the way Jesus lived and the stories he told you can begin to put together, like pieces from a puzzle, what the picture looks like of this Kingdom, this Reign, this abundant life. It's a life that is balanced, the way Jesus balanced his - between activity and contemplation, plenty of time for reflection so that his actions were intentional. It's a life that is lived in the present moment. Jesus was neither nostalgic nor did he live in the future. He stayed grounded, very aware of who was around him, what their needs were, and how he could respond. The abundant life is the life centered around God, not centered around ego or material things.

The stories Jesus told helped people to imagine what the Kingdom of God was like - what life is like as God intends it. When we are closest to God's reign, these things happen: we pay attention to the people everyone else ignores, the people at the bottom rungs of the social ladder. We pay attention to the people who are in need and who are hurting. We call out injustice and corruption and abuses of power, whether by political officials or by the church. We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner.

We do these things, not to get into heaven, but to get closer to the kind of life God has in mind for all God's people.

Today is the last day of our six-week worship series we have called, "God Is Doing a New Thing", and the last day for the waterfall that has beautified our worship

space. I hope that these six weeks have helped you see that, as we like to say in the UCC, “God is still speaking.” We experience the living presence of God, just as we experience the life-giving power of water. Today’s passage, once again, mentions water. “To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”

I’m grateful for an email conversation this week with Lou Suarez, who writes such excellent commentaries each week on the scriptures; Lou points out that the author of the book of Revelation is describing not a heaven in the hereafter but a utopian place on earth where God will rule.

One interesting feature of this description of the new heaven and the new earth is that God makes a move. This is not some perfect place on a hill with harps and angels, a place to which we ascend, but a city, a city where God chooses to live. Listen to a few verses of today’s passage from the Message version of the Bible: “Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women! They’re his people, he’s their God. He’ll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone—all the first order of things gone.” I really love that phrase - “God has moved into the neighborhood.” Similar to the story of the incarnation, God has chosen to enter our lives, our cities, and live among us.

The author of the book of Revelation has a vivid imagination and encourages us to use ours as well. How would you describe the world as God intends it to be? Would it be like the vision Isaiah gives us, of a peaceable kingdom, lions and lambs lying down together, swords becoming plowshares, spears becoming pruning hooks - weapons becoming garden implements in a world with no more violence? Would your vision of

the world as God intends it be a story of deep forgiveness and unconditional love, like Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son?

I wonder if we have lost our ability to imagine a better world. We are surrounded by narratives of despair, dire warnings of doom and gloom. And we need them. We need realism. Jesus was a realist. He talked about the forces of sin and evil, the victims of oppression. I can't stop thinking about Cape Town, South Africa, a city of 3 and a half million people, due to completely run out of water this spring. Doug and I had dinner with a friend last week who said, "I think the world's next wars will be fought over water." Undoubtedly there are plenty of serious issues about which we worry. But as much as we need realism, we also need hope.

Doom and gloom may sound the caution bell, but they aren't motivating. When all we hear are stories of despair, we tend to become paralyzed. The problems seem overwhelming, so we just escape into apathy, or we content ourselves to do our small acts of kindness, not really believing that they will change systems, principalities and powers.

What has happened to our capacity for dreams, big, bold dreams? When is the last time that we imagined a creative solution to a problem, really visualized it, and then decided to make something happen?

If Martin Luther King had stood on the Washington Mall and described the state of race relations in the United States in 1963, told story after story of discrimination and lynching, do you think he would have lit a fire that ignited the Civil Rights movement? Instead, he said, "I can see it...imagine it with me... can you picture that in Alabama, little black children will one day hold hands with little white children as sisters and

brothers? I have a dream...dream it with me...that one day my four little children will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character..." People caught the passion of his dream.

There are people who are dreaming today, but their stories don't make the headlines. We need to find them and pay attention to them, so that all of us - but especially our children and youth - will believe that change for good is possible.

When Doug and I were in Seattle a year and a half ago, we wandered into the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Discovery Center. It is a tour of hope. You see the diseases that are being eradicated. You learn about long-term sustainable solutions to hunger and poverty. You leave inspired, not just believing, but knowing, factually knowing, that there are ways to make a lasting difference.

Bill Gates is a voracious reader. He regularly writes about the books he's read and recommends. His latest favorite is a book entitled, Enlightenment Now, by Steven Pinker. I haven't read it yet, but what Gates likes about it is that Pinker, a Harvard professor, details areas of progress, showing where and how and why things are getting better in our world. Here's an example. Extreme global poverty has been reduced from 90 percent 200 years ago to 10 percent today. It's still the case that 700 million people live in extreme poverty - they are real people who are suffering dramatically and we must not be complacent about them. But we can learn what is working. We can do more. We can stay motivated and enthusiastic about being a part of the solution. We need to find and pay attention to the stories of hope.

I want to encourage you to be a dreamer. Dream something big and bold. For your life. For your family. For our community. For our church. Don't be dragged down

by the voices that tell you it's too late, you're too old, you don't have time. The Christian story is a story of hope. If we are not speaking the language of hope, we are missing the abundant life for which we were created.

And I want to close by telling you a real-life story of a dream, a story I heard at the Senior Ministers' Conference in Florida last month.

This dream started on September 11, 2001, in Omaha, Nebraska. The local rabbi had the presence of mind on that chaotic day to think about who might need help. He called members of his congregation and they drove over to the local mosque. They held hands and surrounded the mosque in prayer, knowing that the mosque would have been receiving nasty threats that day. As you can imagine, that act cemented a relationship between the synagogue and the mosque, a friendship that has continued and deepened. As it happened, both groups were in the market for larger meeting places with more parking. They began to meet together to talk about the possibility of helping one another. The conversations deepened and gave birth to an unlikely dream: wouldn't it be remarkable if three Abrahamic faiths could partner to build three houses of worship on adjacent properties?

Fast forward several years. 35 acres of land are purchased. Temple Israel opens its new synagogue on the property in 2013. In 2016, the mosque opened on the same property. And this past fall, Countryside Community Church, a United Church of Christ congregation, broke ground. The last building to be constructed is an interfaith center. The four buildings will be joined together by an oval sidewalk, called Abraham's Walk. The project is called the Tri-Faith Initiative.

The pastor of Countryside church, Eric Elnes, was at the conference I attended and he told us a little about the project from his point of view. He became convinced that the church he serves should be the Christian partner in this tri-faith initiative. He took this dream to the congregation. He said to them, "We have an opportunity to be a part of something that can change the world. It's not just a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity or a once-in-a-century opportunity. It has literally never happened before in the history of the world that three faiths have come together intentionally on one campus to model cooperation and understanding for the entire rest of humanity." So Eric then had to say, "We need to leave our beautiful, paid-for building, in a lovely neighborhood, and raise 27 million dollars to build a new sanctuary on the Tri-Faith campus." And they did it. Eric showed us some press coverage - if you google Tri-Faith initiative, you'll find the stories. He also showed us some of their capital campaign videos in which his parishioners talked about why this project is important to them. Several young parents talked about their dream of their children growing up in the church home next door to Muslim and Jewish students, and what that can mean to them. It was a wild, improbable big bold dream. And I can't wait to go see it when it's all finished. I came home and told Doug, "We're going to plan a vacation to Omaha!"

God is doing a new thing - let's imagine it, visualize it, and make God's dreams come true!