

“Race, Justice, and Dreams”
Isaiah 62:1-12
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2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Isaiah speaks in the *future* tense. I will not keep silent. The nations *will see* your vindication. You *will be* a crown of splendor. You *will be called* Hephzibah – My Delight is in Her, and Beulah – married. A wedding is all about the future. A future that comes about because of a promise. And Israel needed that promise. They had endured the destruction of their temple, the end of their freedom, 70 years of exile all because they had failed to obey God as measured by the wellbeing of the most vulnerable among them. Now in exile, serving time for the sins of the past, the promise came to them – the promise of a future they could not yet see. It must have seemed like a dream. We tend to think of those dreams as the very thing that sustains people enduring hardship or suffering: words that promise a future in the midst of a grueling present; words that paint possibility at a time when nothing seems possible; words that offer light when you cannot find your way.

That’s the way I’ve seen this dream. Dreams are the stuff of hope. Maybe that’s why Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech is the one most known by Americans. It’s the speech that looks forward, beyond the current racism that divides. It’s words promise a *future* of fairness and justice and familial love and peace at a time when we seem to have none of it; words that paint the *possibility* of a nation that judges people by the content of their character precisely at a time when so many of us observe or experience the judging that happens by the color of skin; words that offer light when most of us are unsure of whether the path we are on has a happy destination.

Because the truth of our present is marked so deeply by racial division. There is hardly a day that does not go by that the reality of that division is not present in our lives. 80 percent of black Christians believe police-involved killings are part of a larger pattern of police treatment of African Americans, while 70 percent of white Christians believe *the opposite* ... that they are simply isolated incidents.¹ How’s that for division? Almost everyone in this city knows that the mayoral election is likely to divide significantly and measurably along racial lines. There are countless examples in our public life. Maine’s Governor suggested recently that the drug problem in his state is caused by guys who enter from out of state, sell their drugs and leave. “Half the time,” he said, “they impregnate a young white girl before they leave.” It sounded like something a southern Governor would have said in 1956 not 2016. The Oscars are all white for another year while we wait

¹ The study, “Anxiety, Nostalgia, and Mistrust,” was published by the Public Religion Research Institute - <http://publicreligion.org/site/wp->

for the trials of officers accused in the death of Freddie Gray, and a federal investigation into our police department.

Meanwhile, closer to home, with the rash of crime breaking out across the city including in Bolton Hill, I read an email from someone who chose not to report 5 young black males who appeared threatening because this person didn't want to think of himself as profiling. When that same group of boys was involved in a carjacking later that day, an email from the neighborhood association encouraged people to report "these types of groups walking through the neighborhood in a 'rowdy posture.'" I thought about all the black male children in our city walking home from school who are now at higher risk for normal teenage rowdy behavior. Sometimes it's hard to know whether our fear is a legitimate reaction to possible crime or whether it makes some of us feel safer by making others of us more vulnerable. Weeks earlier I had forwarded an article to my own neighborhood social networking site documenting how social media had contributed to profiling of people of color in predominantly white neighborhoods.² The mother one of my kids' close friends, responded with a fear for her black child that still tears at my heart.

We need those dreams just as surely as those exiled Israelites needed their own. We need promises that our division and the injustice behind it won't last forever. We need hope that we, too, will one day be called "the City No Longer Deserted."

But I don't know if there are as many of us who still cling to Dr. King's Dream as some of us used to. His whole vision of the beloved community is being called into question for at least 3 difference reasons. First, it's being called into question partly because people in power who were once threatened by the movement, have learned to separate Dr. King's nonviolent strategy from his commitment to social justice. And so we march black leaders before tv cameras in the midst of our own social unrest in April to plead for non-violence, but keep those same leaders at bay when they call for systemic change. Secondly, Dr. King's vision is being called into question because violence seems to be more effective. I have openly wondered myself if Sandtown would be the focus of everyone's attention, if millions of dollars in youth employment, redevelopment money, and national attention would have arrived if the CVS didn't burn.

But there is a deeper reason Dr. King's dream of racial equality through solidarity is being challenged. Dreams seem to be those things that we disconnect from history. Ta-Nehisi Coates said it most eloquently. The only way forward is not through some quaint American Dream that looks forward without ever acknowledging the brutal past. That dream, he says, is tied to "whiteness" and "those who believe themselves to be white." "You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law," he writes to his son in *Between the World and Me*, "toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. They were people turned to fuel for the American machine. Enslavement was not destined to end, and it is wrong to claim our present

² <http://m.eastbayexpress.com/oakland/racial-profiling-via-nextdoorcom/Content?oid=4526919>

circumstance—no matter how improved—as the redemption for the lives of people who never asked for the posthumous, untouchable glory of dying for their children. Our triumphs can never compensate for this.”³

Hearing Coates’ poetic truth-telling, it’s hard to know whether to trust in our biblical dreams as the things that lead us to a better place, or reject them because they keep us from facing the truth of our past and present. It’s hard to know how we’re going to bridge our divisions when we can’t dream a common dream without treading on the graves of the slaughtered. It’s hard to know whether people are still willing like they were willing during Dr. King’s time to put their lives on the line for of dream of healing, and brotherhood, and unity, and justice that we seem dangerously close to embracing as fiction and fantasy.

And yet theologian Daniel Jose Camacho wrote recently that Coates’ atheistic vision might be exactly what the American Christians need right now. “Many Christians have calibrated their God and their faith to the myth of the American Dream,” he writes. “We have confused tragedy for providence, conquest for destiny, man-made policies for natural law. While the Bible repeatedly says that liberation requires memory of bondage and torture (e.g. Deut. 5:15; Luke 22:14-22), the Dream simply shrugs that America focuses on the *future* and transcends old sins. So, when Coates writes, ‘America understands itself as God’s handiwork, but the black body is the clearest evidence that America is the work of men,’ it is good news. If God is not the author of American nightmares, then people are. And if people are, then we can, in principle, change it.”⁴

I don’t think Dr. King would have disagreed. “Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability,” he wrote from a Birmingham jail in the document that white people need to learn better than we know the Dream speech. “It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of people [men] willing to be coworkers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation.”⁵

I don’t think Isaiah would have disagreed. “Pass through, pass through the gates!” He cries. “Prepare the way for the people. Build up, build up the highway. Remove the stones.” Isaiah believed that the people who had been oppressed by the oppressor would lead the restoration not only of their people but of all the nations. God is not the author of oppression, injustice, or inequality, people are. And hope is given not by erasing the sins of the past but by charting a path in the presence of them.

³ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, (New York: Spiegel and Grau), 2015, 70.

⁴ Daniel Jose Camacho, “The Social Gospel of Ta-Nehisi Coates: Between the World and Me,” *The Christian Century*, August 5, 2015, <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2015-08/social-gospel-ta-nehisi-coates-between-world-and-me>.

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, James White, ed., (New York: Harper Collins), 1986, p. 296.

And while I can't ever justify the suffering of people of color even suffering that leads to change, I can decide to give thanks for those – black and white - who endured it at the lunch counters, on the freedom rides, at the amusement parks, in the segregationist churches, on the Pettus bridge, at the voter registration booths because they believed that God's dreams wouldn't let them down. With respect, Ta-Nehisi Coates says of those movement warriors, "I think they are fastened to their god, a god whom I cannot know and in whom I do not believe. But, god or not, the armor is all over them, and it is real."⁶

My prayer for those of us who *do* believe is that our faith would keep leading us into the fray engaging white people to understand and reject our privilege, engaging people of all colors not to give up on King's Dream, lifting up each other when our hopes sag at the weight of the divisions that threaten all of our humanity; crying with the mothers of black sons who weep over the fear that racism attributes to them even as we reject violence of any kind; that we would have the stamina to cling to each other through hell and highwater, to cling to God's dream of the neighborhood just as tightly as God clings to us. Because that's the God we worship. The one who marries Israel. *Marries* Israel.

I used to hate that language because of the undeniably patriarchal associations. But marriage is the right metaphor. It speaks of a relationship of parties who know their deepest faults, their worst tendencies; their hard histories, their deepest sadness. It speaks of parties who know what's wrong with each other, every reason why a relationship shouldn't work. God knows all that about us, and loves us anyway. Chooses us anyway. Clings to us anyway. By "us" I mean all God's children.

And if our God loves us like that, then I just can't believe that the dream of loving each other across our division, in the presence of our history isn't one to be claimed, to be celebrated, to be trusted. I just can't believe the dream of that future isn't worth working for, bleeding for, dying for. A future that God promises is possible. A promise that is real. I can't let go of speaking in the future tense.

⁶ Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 142.