

Those Who Dream...Prepare the Way
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Mark 1:1-8 Common English Bible

The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son, happened just as it was written about in the prophecy of Isaiah:

*Look, I am sending my messenger before you.
He will prepare your way,
a voice shouting in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight."*

John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

If there is anything that I have learned about Meridian Street United Methodist Church and the wonderful people who call this community home, is that you are the most task driven people that I have ever met.

I don't say that as a criticism --- instead it is just an observation of what I have seen over the last few years.

You love to set goals and then check off the boxes to make the goal happen.

On August 15th, 2010 --- the day before my 50th birthday, I set, what seemed to me at the time, the most ambitious goal of my life.

I was overweight and out of shape --- having given up playing softball a couple of years earlier since all I ever got was injured.

But on that day --- in the midst of worship --- I announced to the church that I had set a goal of completing a marathon during that 50th year of my life.

Nancy was scheduled to run her 10th marathon in just a couple of months --- having qualified and completed her second Boston marathon earlier that year.

The thrill of being her support team for all those marathons inspired me to give it a try.

On Labor Day weekend, 2011 --- I completed the Marquette Michigan Marathon in a whopping 6 hours and 20 minutes.

I missed my goal of finishing a marathon by 2 weeks.

Undaunted, I signed up for the 2012 Chicago marathon and cut my time by 1 hour and a half.

Since then I have run on average two half marathons each year.

But over these last 10 years, one goal has alluded me

Each year I start the year with the goal of running 1,000 miles over the course of the year

That is only averaging 85 miles a month --- or 20 miles a week.

I do great for the first half of the year --- but then at some point I always seem to fall behind – and by the time October or November gets here --- the goal is out of reach.

This year --- I think I can do it!

With 5 weeks to go --- I am already at 940 miles --- just 60 miles from the finish line!

Obviously, the last month of the year makes this a challenge --- but . . .

The key to achieving any dream or goal is preparation.

And a willingness to do the work necessary.

What dreams do you have?

Jonas Salk, the inventor of the polio vaccine said:

I have had dreams and I have had nightmares, but I have conquered my nightmares because of my dreams.

And

Hope lies in dreams, in imagination, and in the courage of those who dare to make dreams into reality.

What are your dreams?

John the Baptist, according to Luke, a cousin of Jesus --- had a dream of a more just, more equitable world

A world that resembled the long sought kingdom of God

Mark's Gospel begins with John in the wilderness of Judea along the Jordan river inviting people to be baptized.

The reason we are told that he wanted people to be baptized was as to demonstrate a symbolic way of showing that their hearts had been changed.

And Mark reports that many, many people came down to the Jordan River to confess their sins and be baptized by John.

But Luke adds an interesting addition to the story. He has John saying to some in the crowd who had come down to the Jordan River.

“You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives.” . . .

The crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”

He answered, "Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same."

Even tax collectors came to be baptized. They said to him, "Teacher, what should we do?"

He replied, "Collect no more than you are authorized to collect."

Soldiers asked, "What about us? What should we do?"

He answered, "Don't cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay."

The dream that John had was not to see how many people he could baptize --- but to see how many lives could be transformed --- who would then work to make the world more just.

John also knew that he would not be able to see the dream come to its fruition, that was the job of the one for whom he was preparing the way.

Jesus would not just baptize us with water as a symbol of a changed heart --- Jesus comes to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and give us the tools to change the world.

So, who are the John the Baptists today?

Who are the ones calling us to be transformed?

I think back just a couple of months ago when we saw thousands of persons protest peacefully in downtown Indianapolis reminding us that black lives matter.

In July and August we saw downtown Indy transformed

And some of us acted just like some of those that heard John's call 2,000 years ago

We came downtown to lend our voice, our feet, our bodies to proclaim that without justice there can be No peace.

But some of us also stayed home --- because we were frightened or not motivated enough --- and let others vocalize the reality that not all people are treated the same in our society.

And others of us got angry and mad that THEY had the audacity to challenge the system that is in place.

All that took place 2,000 years ago as well.

Today we lit the candle of peace in our Advent wreath --- but my friends --- as long as injustice continues to be normative in our society ---- there can be no peace.

I have been slowly working my way through David Garrow's Pulitzer Prize winning book on Martin Luther King called Bearing the Cross.

I am really struggling with the book --- because I have told myself over and over again how much better things are today than they were in the 50's and 60's. And the more I read, the more I realize NOTHING HAS CHANGED.

People of color,

people whose sexual orientation is different from mine,
people who are immigrants
are all still looked at with an attitude of distrust if not hatred.

Martin stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28th, 1963 --- almost 100 years after Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

Martin spoke for a little over 16 minutes

And he offered us the dream of a better world.

He said:

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

He went on:

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of "interposition" and "nullification" -- one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."

Five years later --- Martin was murdered.

60 years later we still yearn for that same dream.

The question is ---- are we willing to do the hard work to make that dream come true.

Because it will not come true just by us wishing for it.

Alan Paton has reminded us:

It is not "forgive and forget" as if nothing wrong had ever happened, but "forgive and go forward," building on the mistakes of the past and the energy generated by reconciliation to create a new future.

John --- and Jesus --- have told us what is required if we want to make that dream our own.

Not only do we need to stand up and be counted --- but our very hearts must be transformed.

We must be willing to do the hard work of justice and peace.

We have been baptized by the Holy Spirit and have been called to be messengers of God's kingdom.

To prepare the way for a just peace is a choice that we must make daily.

We know that what we see is not all there can, will, or should be.

Are we willing to face the troubles of the world

receptively,
perceptively,
and attentively

as we join the dreamers as they join with all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics,

joining hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:

Free at last! Free at last!

Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!

Are you working to prepare the way?

Are you willing to let others show you the way?