“Those Who Dream: Keep Awake”

Mark 13: 24-37; 2 Corinthians 1: 3-9

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Do you dream? I find people’s dreams fascinating.

Every night as I sleep, I’m at the movies—a 3D movie where the music is loud and things are coming off the screen at me. Like you, I have no control over what barrels through my brain while I’m asleep.

In one of my recurring dreams, my hands are tied above my head and I’m dangling just inside a large water tank. A tank … slowly filling up. I look down and realize the biggest threat isn’t drowning—it’s the shark, that is slowly swimming in circles in the rising water. And I think, “How high can I lift my feet and put off the inevitable?” Have you had dreams of sharks or rising water?

Another recurring dream is that I’m being chased, but I’m not particularly worried. Because I don’t have to deal with gravity! I can leap like the astronauts who take giant steps on the moon. I can float above whatever is after me, lingering in the ether, safe from harm, delighting in my freedom. What fun to have that kind of power. Have you dreamed of floating or flying?

What fun it would be to dream that kind of dream, to have that kind of power, when we’re awake.

Pleasant Hill’s Advent sermon series theme is “Dreams.” But our focus isn’t on what happens when we sleep. Though our nighttime dreams may be interesting, we can’t choose what we dream and we seldom have any sense of agency in them.

And this sermon series isn’t about daydreaming: spacing out, sleepwalking through life, ignoring anything unpleasant, turning away or pretending not to understand things we’d rather not face.

This Advent we are preaching about *daytime dreams*. Wide awake dreams that imagine what could be possible. Dreams of who we can be. Where we can go. What we can do. As individuals we dream of what is possible for us. As Christians, as members of the church, together we dream of what we can do as one body as we wait, as we stay awake (!), for the return of Jesus the Christ.

You can’t dream about where you want to go if you don’t first take stock of your present circumstances. So we begin by acknowledging reality, seeing things as they really are. Let’s take the next few minutes to focus on where we are as a nation and as a church and how those two realities intersect.

Undertaking an honest assessment of our current situation takes guts, bravery, and chutzpah. Staying awake, as scripture advises, means paying attention. Being on our toes. Noticing and then naming the threats to the kingdom: to our larger community and to Christ’s church. Christ calls us to bring those threats to humanity into the light, to face them down. The Gospel of Mark speaks clearly: We are running this place while the owner of the house is away. We can’t turn aside, glaze over, and pretend we don’t notice what’s happening on our watch: the yellow jackets building their nest in the wall or the slow leak ruining the foundation. Jesus says… Jesus demands, “Stay awake!”

Several weeks ago some of you joined me in listening to an interview with social scientist Robert Putnam and his co-author Shaylyn Romney Garrett. Their new book, *Upswing*, names difficult circumstances in the United States.



Nod your head if these sound familiar: extremes of wealth and poverty, racism and gender discrimination, demonization of those on the opposing side, anxiety mounting among the young, and nativism. Indeed, the authors describe it as “the worst of times.”[[1]](#endnote-1) When you add COVID 19, the verses from Mark 13 don’t sound like hyperbole:

*“The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”*

Yep, sounds about right.

But now for the twist. The time period Putnam describes in detail is not 2020. It’s roughly 120 years ago, around the beginning of the twentieth century.

Yes, we’ve been here before. And we got through it.

That gives me great hope. Do you hear the hope in those words, the anticipation of good things rounding the corner, the revelation that there is an already established good way forward?

People hear the good news: though things are dire, there is a way out!

What daytime dreams do Christian Americans dare to name in the face of so many problems? And how can scripture be interwoven into our daytime dreams?

The ancient words of Isaiah 11: *The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid.* In 2020 language could that be political compromise? Social cohesion? “The Democrat rests with the Republican, the CEO alongside the dayworker?”

Matthew 25: *For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was a stranger and you invited me in.* In 2020 language could that be, “Yes, wrote a check to Clifton shelter … and then I cooked, served, and sat and talked with my brother as he ate.”

For we Christians waiting for the owner of the house, the savior of this world, to return, we keep awake with hope in our hearts. We recognize that our call to follow Christ, to be prepared for His return, does not end each Sunday at midnight. Our work is to roll up our sleeves and infuse the secular with the sacred, comingle the American Dream with God’s dream for us. We are the keepers of holiness, hope, and hard work. We are the ones watching for the fig leaf to sprout, for the vaccine to be effective, for that first sign of good things to come. We are the ones who love our neighbor as we love ourselves: our neighbors who differ from us in almost every conceivable way.

What has Christ given us so we can do this work? Dream these dreams? Alondra read from 2 Corinthians: *“For in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind…so you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

We are equipped. Equipped for the work of ushering in God’s kingdom. Equality. Compromise. Cohesion. Compassion. Those are all solid Christian dreams—daytime, real, eyes-wide-open dreams.

And remember, we aren’t just dreaming as individuals. We are the church. So if you’re feeling overwhelmed these days, the person in the next pew or the next car has got you covered right now. And when you’re rested and ready to project love and light into the world, you can give them a breather.

How do you know the person next to you has you covered? Because as a church we know ourselves and one another. The process of pastoral transition ensured that we are wide awake. We’ve named our priorities and defined our identity. We embrace who PHPC is in this particular part of the world at this particular time. We called a new pastor, Rev. Katie Day, who boldly showed up in the midst of a pandemic to inspire with her sermons and call us to hope. Folks, we have done and continue to do the hard work of staying awake!

We are trusting the leaders we called to PHPC …and trusting the word the Lord is putting in their hearts and on their lips as they minister to us and with us. The leadership of this church is here to remind us of hope, to comfort us.

And the good Lord knows we need a lot of hope and comfort these days.

Our leaders—pastors, teachers, elders, committee chairs—are also called to challenge us, to bring God’s word to us in a new way, to have us look at who we are through a new lens. All this newness is infused with hope. We’re introducing new concepts, trying on new words, asking new questions of one another-- to challenge, to cajole, to grow in our faith. To grow—together.

Franciscan Friar Richard Rohr wrote recently, “2020 has been an unprecedented year, unlike anything I have seen in my 77 years . . .. I’m convinced that the root of our divisions can only be overcome by a unitive consciousness at every level: personal, relational, social, political, cultural, and spiritual. This is the unique and central job of healthy religion (re-ligio = to re-ligament or bind together).”[[2]](#endnote-2)

And so to the daytime dreaming of Pleasant Hill. We are awake and awaiting Christ’s return with hope. We know our nation can become again what Putnam describes as a “we” society.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Our church, a single unified body with many parts, can define our role in working toward the “we,” toward bringing the American dream closer to God’s dream for America.

Shall we dream of using Rohr’s description of religion: re-ligio, to bind together in this church and in this world? Shall we dream each of us commits to giving of ourselves—our time, our talents, our treasure? Yes, but in a world so full of strife and stress, and somehow poised on the brink of something new, shall we also dream of an abundance of patience, a widening of vision, an embracing of humility, a broadening of acceptance and understanding? Can we dream that when we identify any agitating force—in conversation, in study materials, in sermon content, in Session decisions— we will listen carefully, and ask how this agitation might move us, in some way, toward Isaiah’s dream of the wolf and the lamb lying down together? How that particular agitation might shift our vision from inward to outward, toward those Matthew 25 imperatives, where those on the margins are more than cared for, they are respected. Can we dream of what Putnam calls a “we” society?

Putnam says the way out and up does not arrive via leadership from above. Instead, the way forward is by listening to the voices around the youth campfire Sunday evenings, by empowering the grass roots ideas. Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church, we have done and will continue to do just that.

As much as I want to hear about what you dream at night, your leadership team is even more interested in your daytime dreams. For yourself. For this country. For this church. Let’s explore how those three dreams can be woven together.

Let’s stay awake. Let’s dream. And let’s wait for the birth of hope itself, just around the corner, born of Mary in a stable, in the town of Bethlehem. Amen.

1. Robert Putnam, *Upswing*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020, p. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Rohr’s daily blog is at https://cac.org/category/daily-meditations/. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Putnam, p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)