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Advent 1A
Peace, Seattle
December 1, 2013
Isaiah 2:1-5

HOW BIG IS YOUR DREAM?

The Laura Ingalls Wilder series has been our family's nighttime reading for some months now—
- Little House in the Big Woods, Little House on the Prairie, Farmer Boy—8 books in all—and we just finished book #6 – The Long Winter.

In The Long Winter we follow the Ingalls family to the Dakota prairie, where they've staked their claim on 40 acres near Silver Lake. Excitement is in the air as new settlers arrive daily and little towns spring up along the railroad line, which is continually being pushed further west.

Warned by a Dakota Indian elder that the coming winter would be the worst in many years, the Ingalls move from their claim shanty into town, and much of the book is about how they endure seven months of blizzards when the days between successive storms could be counted on one hand.

Each new blizzard blasts the town with a ferocity that borders on the demonic; shrill winds and roaring fury beat at the cold, dark house and ceaselessly scour it with ice-sand. With trains unable to run, essential supplies for heating homes and feeding families dwindle until the whole town is on the edge of starvation. Out of coal, the Ingalls' burn hay to keep the cold at bay; out of everything but one sack of grain, their daily rations dwindle to two meals of plain brown bread.

Then, as suddenly as it began, winter comes to an end as warm Chinook winds melt winter's ice and snow, and the whole town lives in expectation of that moment when the long delayed supply train will finally arrive...until one morning they all hear it; "clear and long across the prairie," the train whistle sounds, and running to the window, they see the smoke from the train's smokestack rolling up black against the sky. (319)

How great are your hopes this Advent season? How large your dreams?
For a homesteading family, cooped up in a harsh Dakota winter, hope that the snows will stop and the train will finally come is dream enough.

What are the dimensions of your dreams? How bold are they, or simple? How far do they reach?

The season of Advent is a season for hoping; a season for dreaming. And this year, these four Sundays bring us the reverberant echoes of Isaiah's voice announcing God's Dream for the world.
This Dream of God's is grounded in four texts from four chapters this season:
Isaiah 2, Isaiah 11, Isaiah 35 and Isaiah 7.

And the scope of God's dream is enough to get us laughing in wonder or in disbelief…
- swords becoming plowshares
- predator and prey as playmates
- desert sands transformed to bubbling springs
- a maiden's womb ripe with Immanuel

Dream you say? Pipedream is more like it! Yet, God, speaking through the prophet, doesn't back off, doesn't go conservative, doesn't scale it down, doesn't begin with what's probable or attainable or sensible or even what's possible.

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Instead, with his canvas stretched large as the prairie sky, God's painter, Isaiah, throws up color upon color, stroke upon stroke, constructing a storyline to show us what God is up to and where God's heading in all this.

God's message through Isaiah this Advent is simple: God invites us into his dream.

Some years ago, when I served among Tribal communities in Northwest California, I came to know an elder who was preparing for a role as a medicine person among her people.

Jean taught me many things: about the riddle of living with integrity with her tribal heritage in a world that considered her obsolete; about the complexity of battles for federal recognition that pitted tribe against tribe; about the bureaucratically driven policies of government entities that ignored that spiritual values that had served her people for centuries.

As we traveled together one day, near the confluence of the Salmon and the Klamath Rivers, at a place her people called "the center of the world," she told me of a vision she'd been given.

- She'd gone up to her people's holy mountain, to fast and pray for the protection of her people and the preservation of sacred places that were under siege.
- For days she stayed there at a site where timber was slated to be harvested, determined to remain as long as the threat remained. Until one day her eyes were opened and the vision revealed itself.
- There in the midst of the mountains she saw a great high archway stretching across the sky toward the four corners of the earth. And under this archway, this dome, people of every color and race were gathering from every direction. The scene was filled with light.

This vision she'd been given was bigger than her personal dream for her people; bigger even than the tribe itself. It opened a window in her mind not unlike the window in Isaiah's vision this morning:

> In days to come the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all nations shall stream to it.
>
> God shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many people;
> They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;
> Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

This is it; this is God's vision, God's dream for SHALOM. Can we enter it? Can we live it?

There was an article in the Times back in October—maybe you saw it—about a new protective suit being developed for elite soldiers to wear into battle: a suit with built in bionic limbs, head-to-toe armor, a built-in power supply and live data feeds projected on a see-through display inside the helmet. It's nickname? Iron Man.[1]

This suit would be all but impervious to bullets and shrapnel. Relying on tiny motors, the exoskeleton would enable a soldier to run and jump without strain while carrying 100 or more pounds, making him more lethal in battle, less vulnerable, more secure.

[1] *Seattle Times*, October 31, 2013. Some experts question whether the project represents a misunderstanding of the lessons of the past dozen years of war, when U.S. soldiers, despite being equipped with technology and weaponry far beyond anything their enemies possessed, were dueled to a virtual draw in Iraq and Afghanistan. "When the U.S. military entered the global war on terror, it was infatuated with technology and believed that it wins wars," said Andrew Bacevich, a retired Army colonel who now, as a Boston University professor, is critical of recent wars. "The experience in Iraq and Afghanistan ought to have destroyed any such expectation, but this (project) suggests it is still true."

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Building Iron Man is a dream the Pentagon contractors would like to make a reality…
As if, if we could only get the technique down, then war will become more manageable, and human beings (at least on our side) will become less breakable, less susceptible to destruction; only the enemy will get it, and drones will no longer cause collateral damage…it's all about technique, technical solutions.

What Isaiah tells us this morning is, the journey to SHALOM is not a matter of technique; it's about transformation of the human heart, mind and soul, until the instruments that call for war and wage war within ourselves are melted down, and recast, reforged into implements of peace, tools that cultivate relationship with God, with the land, with each other, leading to true security for us all.

If there's a battle to be won, it must begin right here (in heart).

In his book REASONS FOR HOPE, Jose Luis Descalzo, writes about his friend JOE WRATH, who he calls a "fanatical antimilitarist."[2]

> "For years," he writes, Joe "has been obsessed by the topic of war…no antiwar demonstration takes place without Joe's being there." He's "chained himself to the gates of various barracks a total of four times now, participated in no fewer than 42 anti-NATO demonstrations…"
>
> But "the funny thing is…Joe forgets all about his pacifism in his daily life, which, rather than being guided by his antiwar positions, seems rather to be under the 'wrathful' influence of his last name. For Joe is argumentative and a troublemaker in his office, intolerant with his wife, harsh with his children, dismissive of his mother-in-law, and short with…his neighbors. All the peace that he dreams of for the world, he completely forgets about cultivating in his own home."
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> "I am not writing this little parable to belittle public action against war," Descalzo concludes, "but rather to make the point that in the last instance the great peace of the world will only come about as the sum of the many millions of little fractions of peace that we bring into being in the lives of each of us."

God has a dream. And God longs to share that dream with us. To incarnate that dream within us, among us. And it's not going to happen all at once, this dream of SHALOM, but one day at a time, one heart at a time; not through technique but through conversion.

IN THE DAYS TO COME the mountain of the LORD's house shall be raised above the hills and all the nations shall stream to it…
It is a day we long for, a day we hope for, a day we pray for;
a day which, as history proves, cannot come through our own ability or ken; and yet, a day whose light and joy and peace God is calling us to make our home even now.

Will you walk toward that light? Will you wake to God's dream?

Our worship planning team has developed "windows" for entering into the spirit of these texts even before we cross through the doors of the nave. That's what the exercise with sticky notes in the narthex is about.

God's dream of SHALOM is what we're about today, and you are invited to enter the dream with us.

[2] Pp. 141-142.

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