

The Dream of God

Stephen Van Kuiken
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Ancient Witness: Amos 5:10-15

I want to share with you a wonderful children's book written by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Douglas Carlton Abrams called, *God's Dream*:

*Dear Child of God,
What do you dream about in your loveliest of dreams?
Do you dream about flying high or rainbows reaching across the sky?*

*Do you dream about being free to do what your heart desires?
Or about being treated like a full person no matter how young you might be?*

*Do you know what God dreams about?
If you close your eyes and look with your heart, I am sure, dear child, that you will find out.*

*God dreams about people sharing.
God dreams about people caring.*

*God dreams that we reach out and hold one another's hands and play one another's games and laugh with one another's hearts.
But God does not force us to be friends or to love one another.*

Dear Child of God, it does happen that we get angry and hurt one another. Soon we start to feel sad and so very alone.

Sometimes we cry, and God cries with us. But when we say we're sorry and forgive one another, we wipe away our tears and God's tears, too.

*Each of us carries a piece of God's heart within us.
And when we love one another, the pieces of God's heart are made whole.*

God dreams that every one of us will see that we are all brothers and sisters—yes, even you and me—even if we have different mommies and daddies or live in different faraway lands.

*Even if we speak different languages or have different ways of talking to God.
Even if we have different eyes or different skin.*

Even if you are taller and I am smaller.

*Even if your nose is little and mine is large.
Dear Child of God, do you know how to make God's dream come true?
It is really quite easy.*

*As easy as sharing, loving, caring.
As easy as holding, playing, laughing.
As easy as knowing we are family because we are all God's children.*

*Will you help God's dream come true?
Let me tell you a secret...*

God smiles like a rainbow when you do.

Today I want us to take a few minutes to reflect upon this idea of the dream of God and what it might mean for our world today. The great New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg wrote,

In a broad sense, the Bible as a whole is a story of the dream of God, beginning in Genesis with paradise and ending with paradise restored in the great concluding vision of the book of Revelation...

Yet the dream of God is not the whole of the biblical story, for the Bible also includes the nightmarish elements introduced by what happens in human history. The Bible speaks about the rejection of the dream as well as the dream itself. Thus, in a narrower sense, the dream of God is a social and political vision of a world of justice and peace in which human beings do not hurt or destroy, oppress or exploit one another.

And so one can say that the whole of human history is this struggle between the vision of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. And this vision of God's kingdom is held out as an alternative to a world dominated by power, acquisition and greed. There is another way. It is a vision where the first are last, the poor are rich and the weak are strong. It is a vision born out of a burning compassion for those who suffer and the casualties of the social order.

Sociologist, Gerhard Lenski wrote his classic book, *Power and Privilege*, about the preindustrial agrarian societies, which was the social world of the Bible. This was a society in which agriculture was the primary source of wealth. Almost all the population was rural and worked on the land producing food. And there was a small group of elites, living in small cities. They comprised about 1 to 2% of the population. These were the rulers and the aristocrats, and they held most of the wealth. And beneath them were the retainers, governmental officials, soldiers, priest and merchants. Together, the elites and the retainers, only 5 to 10% of the population, acquired two thirds of the annual production of wealth, while the peasants, comprising over 90% or the people, were left sharing the remaining third, living at a bare subsistence level. The elites were very good at calculating how much they could take without driving the peasants into starvation or rebellion. Life for the peasants was terribly harsh, living on the edge and vulnerable to the smallest failure. Life expectancy was about 25 years old.

So how were the elites able to dominate and subjugate almost all of the people? Mostly by extreme taxation that was skewed against the poor, and by acquiring the land that they then rented back to the peasant workers. This “peasant society” was marked by this severe disparity and concentration of wealth into the hands of the very few. It was severely hierarchical, economically exploitative and politically oppressive. This peasant society was the way the world was organized in the time of the Bible.

Now, ancient Egypt in which the people of Israel found themselves as slaves was a classic agrarian empire. And their foundational story was a story of liberation from the domination system and the injustice of a peasant society. God was moved by the suffering to the people and provided a dream of freedom and deliverance from exploitation and oppression. Instead of a religion of the elites, of the Pharaoh, a religion emerged of Moses and the peasants.

Centuries later, a new domination system emerged. This time it was in the form of the kings of Israel itself. On one side were kings and the elites, and on the other side were peasants and the prophets. The prophets like Amos, Micah and Isaiah became the spokespersons of the dream of God, issuing a challenge to a religion of the status quo, a religion that justified the ways of the ruling elite. Once again we see two conflicting visions of the kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of God on earth. Once again, Marcus Borg said it so well:

The passion for social justice that we see in the prophets is a protest against systemic evil. Systemic evil is an important notion: it refers to the injustice built into the structures of the system itself...

Importantly, the issue is not the goodness or wickedness of elite individuals. Elites can be good people... The issue, rather, is a system in which some people sleep on beds made of ivory while others end up being sold for the price of a pair of sandals.

Thus the passion for social justice does not focus on individual change but on structural change... The problem was not individual sinfulness but a social system in which the poor of the land were brought to ruin.

And later Jesus, himself, challenged the elites and the domination system of his day. Like the prophets, Jesus was the spokesperson of the dream of God, presenting an alternative vision of justice and a compassionate ordering of society. Jesus provided an alternative to the established order of Caesar and Rome, Herod and the Temple. Indeed, this is probably why he was killed. Over and over again, he talked about the kingdom of God, which opposed the ways of the established kingdoms of the world. And he prayed for the coming of God’s kingdom on earth.

After Jesus, we have seen that the theology of the elites and the powerful have taken hold even of Christianity. It was taken over by Constantine in the fourth century, becoming more of a spokesperson for the empire than the dream of God. Through the centuries the Christian church often confused dreams of acquisition, conquest and glory for God’s dream of compassion and justice. It became captive to the elite religion of colonizers and enslavers. And Christianity has often done the bidding of the counterfeit dream of national glory and dominance.

Today in our nation we see the growing gap between the elite few and the rest of the people, whose lives become increasingly harsh and difficult. The three richest people in the United States now own more wealth than half of the people in the nation. And a recent report by Propublica documents that these wealthy elite billionaires have paid almost nothing in effective taxes over the past decade. Meanwhile the single mother who works two jobs pays more in taxes than some multinational corporations that pay nothing. How is this fair? This continued deepening gulf between the rich and the poor is the result of social and economic policy, not because some classes work harder and others slacked off these past 40 years.

The new religion that serves the elite is the religion of individualism. It legitimates the current kingdom in which we live and denies the call for God's kingdom to come on earth. It legitimates the status quo and policies that increase the wealth of some and impoverish many others. It legitimates blaming the poor and ignores the health of the broader community. It is yet another rejection of the dream of God that yearns for fulfillment.

But this dream for a new social order, a dream of a domination-free world, a dream of an end of oppression and the exploitation of human beings, a dream of politics with compassion, a dream of prosperity shared by the many instead of hoarded by the few, a dream of shared political power and true democracy, a dream of protecting the planet instead of corporate profits, a dream of justice rolling down like waters, of the lamb lying down with the lion, of swords being converted to plowshares, of a community that values the dignity and well-being of all people.

This is the dream of God! And it is within each of us. And it will never, ever, die.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.