

Date: 11/28/21

## I Dreamed A Dream

Texts: **Jeremiah 33: 14-16; Luke 21: 25-36** ; Ellen Bass, *Loving Life Again*

In 2009, a rather frumpy woman, 47 years old, unemployed, unattached, never been kissed even, living with her cats, stepped out onto the stage of Britain's Got Talent. Simon Cowell asked her "Okay, what's the dream?", and she said, "I'm trying to be a professional singer."

Cut to the audience, where we see scowls, grimaces, and rolled eyes. "Oh, yeah, right."

Simon went on, "And why hasn't it worked out so far, Susan?" And this dowdy woman replied, "I've never been given the chance before, but here's hoping it'll change."

Everyone in the audience was ready to laugh at her, but then Susan Boyle opened her mouth and began to sing. She sang, "I Dreamed a Dream", from *Les Mis*. I don't dare sing it to you, but let me remind you of the words:

*I dreamed a dream in time gone by  
When hope was high  
And life worth living  
I dreamed that love would never die  
I dreamed that God would be forgiving  
  
Then I was young and unafraid  
And dreams were made and used and wasted  
There was no ransom to be paid  
No song unsung, no wine untasted  
  
But the tigers come at night  
With their voices soft as thunder  
As they tear your hope apart  
As they turn your dream to shame  
  
And still I dream he'll come to me  
That we will live the years together  
But there are dreams that cannot be  
And there are storms we cannot weather  
  
I had a dream my life would be  
So different from this hell I'm living  
So different now from what it seemed  
Now life has killed the dream I dreamed.*

By the end of her song, the audience was on their feet cheering, and the three judges were gushing with praise. When the time came to give her yes or no to move on to the next round, first Piers Morgan said yes, and Susan looked shocked. Then the second judge, Amanda, gave her thumbs up, and Susan looked stunned. And finally, when Simon Cowell told her she could go back to her village with her head held high, it's three yes's, she was astounded, and in her pure joy, danced a little jig.

It was a great performance, but it was made greater by the fact that everyone there felt that she was singing about herself, about a life that hadn't worked out, that was full of disappointment in

the world, and in herself, and that when she sang the line, “I had a dream my life would be, so different from this hell I’m living,” she was singing about who she was and what her real life was like. Her life was miserable, and this was her one, last, desperate shot at making anything out of it. Her voice was full of hopelessness and disappointment and a longing for something better, something she was afraid could never be.

In the end, she didn’t win that year. It’s my guess that it’s because that small taste of success had taken away some of the desperation, and she could never quite recapture that moment. When the time came for her to sing in the finale, there was something missing.

Susan Boyle became an internet celebrity, with her performance quickly going viral on YouTube, and being seen by hundreds of millions of people worldwide. I think it’s because her incredible performance reached out to the hopelessness and disappointment that many people feel about their lives. It was Henry David Thoreau – in his great book, *Walden* – who said, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”

And it was the great modern essayist Studs Terkel, who once wrote that for many people, going to work was “a daily humiliation.” Sometimes we just need to hear it said (or sung) to know that we are there, too. Terkel talks about his experience interviewing, as he said, “a mother of four little kids, pretty, bad teeth –meaning no dental care – and the kids are jumping around, ‘cause they want to hear their mamma’s voice played back,” on the tape recorder, “and so I play it back and she listens to what she said on the tape, and she says, ‘Oh my God’ she says, ‘I never knew I felt that way before.’”

So before we can talk about hope, we have to talk about despair, about the midlife crisis of the soul that says, “I am more than this, I know I am, I could be so much more, but here I am and it’s too late, and it will never be, this more that might have been. And it fills me with dread.” That is where we are as we approach Advent. That is the world we live in. Things happen, life happens, and it doesn’t turn out the way we hoped. That’s our world, our natural world.

And that is the world that Jeremiah lived in, too – a world where he had watched his city be destroyed, its temple burnt to the ground, its people marched away by cruel tormentors to their new lives as captives in a foreign land. That’s the world where the people who first heard Jesus were, when the Romans ruled and a Jewish holiday was marked by Roman crosses at the side of a road.

And Jesus begins his talk that day by saying, “on earth there will be distress among the nations” and that “men will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.” It’s a picture of a despairing, desperate world that Jesus paints, with worries and fears and forebodings, where even the heavens seem to be shaken. And it will surprise no one, I think, if I tell you that every generation since Jesus first said those words has lived with the sense that he was talking about them, that everything was going to hell in a handbasket, that things were getting worse instead of better.

And though he is painting a frightening picture, Jesus’ advice to his disciples isn’t to give up in despair. On the contrary, he says, when these scary things start to happen, stand up, lift up your heads, ‘cause the time of your salvation is coming closer. “What are you doing in that heap of despair?” Jesus asks. “Stand up, get going, wash your face, don’t let your head droop, lift it up, salvation is coming.

Jesus is telling us that we can't understand hope until we know despair, that we aren't ready to receive what he's offering until we acknowledge who we are and what our lives are about. Until we see the sadness, we cannot have the joy; until we see the despair without Christ, we cannot see the hope with Christ.

But it is hope that Jesus has come to bring, hope in the midst of sadness and despair, hope that things could be, will be different. The theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff, who lost his son Eric in a tragic accident, speaks for a hurting world in his book, *Lament for a Son*. He writes, "With every fiber of my being I long to talk with Eric again. When I mentioned this to someone, she asked what I would say. I don't know. Maybe I would just blurt out something silly. That would be enough for a beginning. We could take it from there. Every day I wonder, and some days I doubt, whether that talk will ever take place. But then comes that insistent voice: *Remember, I made all this and raised my own son from the dead, so I can also ...* . I know, I know. But why don't you raise mine now? Why did you ever let him die? ... Why must your conquest of sin and death and suffering be so achingly slow?' When I say my first words to Eric, then God's kingdom will be here." Wolterstorff goes on to find hope in the suffering of Christ, who may not fix everything right away, but who at least stays with us in the midst of it all, and who offers hope that one day, one day, all will be made right.

But we live by faith, and we live in hope in the midst of the temptation to despair. Wolterstorff ends by writing about God's salvation, God's new life for us in a world remade without tears and suffering: "I don't see how God's going to bring it off. But I suppose if God can create, God can recreate. I wonder if it's all true? I wonder if God's really going to do it? Will I hear Eric say someday, really now I mean: 'Hey Dad, I'm back?' Then there's that voice again: *Remember, I made all this, and raised my Son from the dead, so ....* Ok, so goodbye, Eric, goodbye, goodbye, until we see."

For Wolterstorff, as for all of us, salvation is the dream that cannot be, but somehow is in Jesus Christ, the dream that dies in the night of despair but lives again in the morning light of his resurrection. God has dreamed a dream for this world, so different from this world we live in, but God's dream will never die, and one day, we will live in its reality.

And with that hope, we begin our Advent journey once again, to the stable where Christ was born, and in the midst of this world where despair is so easy, we hear God's voice from the Bible story, saying, "Remember, I made all this, and raised my Son from the dead, so...."

Amen