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2 Chronicles 20:1-4, 13-15, 18-23

Leading With Gratitude

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It was not the best of times for the tiny nation of Judah. The good ol' days under King David, when the nation was strong and prosperous, were just a memory now. After David's son Solomon died, the Hebrews suffered under a succession of failed kings who led the nation into civil war, economic depression, the perversion of justice, military humiliation, and a general sense of social malaise.

Then, in the middle of the ninth century BC, Jehoshaphat became the king of Judah. He also made some mistakes early in his reign, but Jehoshaphat eventually became convinced that his nation's problems were primarily spiritual. So he reintroduced his people to the reading of holy Scripture.

When they returned to their holy texts, the Hebrews rediscovered the great dreams God had given them long ago. This includes the dreams God gave to Abraham of having a mission, which was that they were blessed to be a blessing. And the dreams God gave to Moses to live in freedom and never to lose it again. And the dreams God gave to David to be a holy kingdom, in which the people praised God not only with their lips but in all of their social and economic relationships as well.

These were great dreams! They depict what God is doing in the world through those who worship him. They are also dreams the Christian Church has inherited - dreams that tell us who we are, why we are here, what we are about in life. But since we live in a society that no longer thinks about inheriting great dreams, a society whose best dream seems to be to tell us to find our own dreams, we keep trying to come up with a dream on our own. The problem with this is not that we can't attain our own dreams, but we cannot be satisfied with them. No one invents a dream worthy of their life. Great dreams are always inherited.

That is why we come to worship. It is why we invite you to join the many in this congregation who worship a few moments each day through Bible reading and prayer. In worship we renew our identity as a people whose lives are formed by the great inherited dreams of those who have gone before us. In the seventeenth chapter of 2 Chronicles we are told that as the people returned to worship, and studied God's Word, their cynicism and despair gave way to spiritual renewal. And in chapter nineteen, we are told that their spiritual renewal led to a renewal of justice for all the people. The people were finally back on track to becoming a holy nation: blessed to be a blessing.

Now, I would have preferred for that to be the end of the story because that is the way it works in fairy tales. But it is not the way Scripture works. The dreams of God are more exciting than that.

The twentieth chapter of Chronicles begins by telling us that after Jehoshaphat had finally led the people into all of this spiritual and social renewal, after it seemed as though the victory was won, he then had to face his greatest challenge. A messenger came running up to the king saying, "The Moabites, Ammonites, and some of the Meunites are marching this way... a great multitude is coming against you." It has been my experience that some of the greatest challenges in life come on the heels of the moments of spiritual renewal and recovery of vision. And they come not one at a time, but as a multitude against us. Whenever you inherit the dreams of God, you had better be prepared for that.

Maybe you have inherited a great dream to raise children. It wasn't what you were planning. You were planning on throwing yourself into a career. But you held these babies, and one day everything changed. Maybe you continued to work but the most important thing in your life is now these children. "Ah, now I get it," you say. "I am here to give myself to this family." But for the rest of your life, parenting is going to involve a great multitude of challenges. There are a multitude of things out there that can hurt your children - not just drugs and alcohol - but also the things that cripple young spirits like loneliness and materialism. There are also a multitude of things that want only to distract you from caring for your children. And sometimes it feels like your little cherubs are themselves marching against you.

Maybe you have inherited from Scripture a great dream to be a Christian lawyer or a Christian in business, a Christian scholar or scientist. Through worship you have learned to commit your life to integrating your profession into the world view of the Bible. That is a wonderful dream, but don't expect it to be easy. Expect to encounter a multitude of complex ethical and moral dilemmas.

Then, there is also the church's own great inherited dream of working for God's holy kingdom. Remember, this is a kingdom where all children grow up with opportunity, where no one goes to bed hungry, where justice reigns, and where swords are beaten into plowshares. But for so long, many enemies have marched against this kingdom of God including racism, greed, and violence. So much violence. God's dreams have always had enemies.

Of course, the inverse of this is also true. If you have just got a few simple plans for life that are easily managed and seldom threatened, then they are not God's dreams. If you have cut a deal with the enemies of God that says, "Hey, the world is a hard place. I can't make a difference with that. All I can do is take care of myself," then you have just dealt yourself out of God's dreams.

Do you feel sometimes that a multitude of enemies are marching against you? I hope so. It means your dreams are big enough to threaten the enemies of God's kingdom.

We are told that after Jehoshaphat heard that this multitude of enemies were marching against him, he became afraid. I think that this was probably the only rational response. The king knew the limitations of his tiny nation. He knew the odds were against him. And if you are convinced you don't have what it takes to pursue God's dreams for your lives, you are probably correct also. But so it has always been. The first disciples were not called to follow Jesus because they were so talented and he just had to have their help. Sometimes when our nominating committee calls someone to serve as a church officer, the person they call will say, "I don't know if I have what it takes to lead the church." I am always tempted to respond, "Well, we were trying to choose between you and Mother Theresa, but we hear she is gone now." Of course, you don't have what it takes to lead in ministry. Do you think I climb into this pulpit because I deserve to be here? No, I serve as a pastor for the same reason every disciple serves a dream - only because we have been called.

So the question is not should you be afraid? The question is what do you do with the fear? We are told that "Jehoshaphat feared, AND he set himself to seek the Lord." That is a great phrase that brings us back again to worship, where we set ourselves to focus not on the enemy and not on our limitations, but on God. Jehoshaphat concludes his prayer by saying, "We do not know what to do, but our eyes on you."

Worship is also the place where we "set ourselves" to listen and watch for God's word. When we tell the truth about ourselves, it is only that we may hear the deeper truth from God. So the Lord responded to Jehoshaphat saying, "Do not fear or be dismayed at this great multitude, for the battle is not yours but God's." If it is God's dream you are pursuing, then it is God's battle to make the dream come true.

When the people believe that, their fear is always turned to gratitude. They become thankful for how God has delivered them in the past and for how God will deliver them through this moment as well. Most

of all they are thankful for the dreams of God that have already changed their lives. Whether we realize it or not, that is what this Thursday is really all about.

Let us now return to the text to see what it means to allow your life to be led by gratitude.

They rose early in the morning and went out into the wilderness of Tekoa: and as they went out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, "Listen to me, O Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the Lord your God and you will be established; believe his prophets." When he had taken counsel with the people, he appointed those who were to sing to the Lord and praise him in holy splendor, *as they went before the army*, saying, "Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever." (2 Chronicles 20:20-21)

So the Hebrews head off into battle, and who does the king have in front of the troops? The choir. Think about that, because I know the choir has. Someone probably had his hand up, trying to get the king's attention: "This isn't how we learned to do this at the Academy." But away they went into battle, singing about the faithfulness of the steadfast love of the Lord.

It must have looked pretty foolish. But a lot of God's ideas are outlandish, and it seems pretty foolish to march toward them. Are you really going to head to work every day believing that Jesus is your real supervisor? They may crucify you as well. Are you really going to become financially invested in God's dreams for the world? You may have to sacrifice to do that. Are you going to become emotionally invested in our urban ministry or in God's work in distant places like Malawi? Will you join the holy kingdom in praying your way through a newspaper?

Is it foolish to remain hopeful about hopeless situations? Maybe. But the foolishness of God always drives his enemies crazy.

As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set an ambush against the Ammonites, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah, so that they were routed. For the Ammonites and Moab attacked the inhabitants of Mount Seir, destroying them utterly; and when they had made an end of the inhabitants of Seir, they all helped to destroy one another. (20:22-23)

Who would have thought of this? The enemies destroyed each other before the battle with Judah even began. Who would have thought that Jehoshaphat's little Thanksgiving choir would survive? Who would have thought that those confused fishermen who started following Jesus would become the apostles of a church that would eventually win the empire?

Who would have thought that a southern Black preacher could inspire the world with a great dream, or that a handful of people from our church could help poor kids get into college? Who would have thought what you could do if you dare to dream the dreams of God?

Benediction: *Thanksgiving has to be expressed because you were blessed to be a blessing. Amen*

