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Gordon A. Jensen

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Called to Dream

Gordon A. Jensen¹

Gen. 37:18–20; Joel 2:28.

In times such as these, what are we to do? In the last few months, a senseless war has been launched against Ukraine. Nor can we forget the countless other regional wars that have simmered for years and decades, leaving millions of refugees trying to flee or fleeing for their lives from places like Syria, the Sudans, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Libya, and elsewhere.

In times such as these, what are we to do? We are celebrating a convocation today, in person, for the first time in three years. And yet, there is still worry on our faces. After all, we are still in the midst of a pandemic that has brought our familiar worlds to a standstill and has plunged society into turmoil, creating crises of physical and mental health. And if that were not enough to handle in the last few years, we have also been confronted with the realities of racial injustices, of missing and murdered Indigenous women, and with the many—too many—stories of residential school survivors and the graveyards of those who did not survive. We have faced civil unrest with protests and freedom convoys that have disrupted lives and blocked borders. We are constantly confronted with injustices toward people because of their skin colour, ethnicity, gender, gender fluidity, sexuality, religion, politics, and countless other unjustified reasons. We are encountering, with increasing frequency, people who are ever more blatantly speaking and acting from places of entitlement; but we are also, hopefully, finally hearing the oppressed, who are finding their voices—voices that have been silenced all too long.

Faced with these nightmares in our world, what are we to do? As foolish as it seems, we are called to dream. It's what the people of God do. Martin Luther King Jr., amid segregation abuses, dared to proclaim, "I have a dream."² He had a dream that one day, his four little children would "live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." He dreamt of a time when all people will join hands and sing, in the words of the old African American spiritual, "Free at last. Free at last. Thank God almighty, we are free at last." He was called, by God, to dream—and to get all people to dream along with him. Nothing was more important. It was a matter of life and death.

In the 1965 Broadway musical *Man of La Mancha*, Miguel, while facing the Inquisition and certain death, breaks into song. You know the first line of this song: "To dream the impossible dream." But later lyrics are just as important. Listen:

No matter how hopeless, no matter how far

¹ This sermon was preached at the Saskatoon Theological Union Convocation on May 6, 2022. Gordon Jensen recently retired from his position as Academic Dean and the William Hordern Chair of Theology, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon, and he resides in Saskatoon.

² Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream," speech delivered 28 August 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington DC. <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihavedream.htm>

To fight for the right without question or pause
To be willing to march into Hell for a heavenly cause.³

That was Miguel's dream. And he wanted others to dream along with him. Nothing was more important. It was a matter of life and death.

Nor are they alone in doing the crucial work of dreaming. We have countless biblical examples of people who dared to dream, including Joseph, Daniel, Sarah and Abraham, Esther, Ruth, Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, and Mary Magdalene, to name a few. And the history of the church is filled with the stories of dreamers who stood up to those in power: dreamers such as Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Sienna, Argula von Grumbach, Katarina Schutz-Zell, Dorothy Day, Desmond Tutu, and countless others. For them, it was a matter of life and death.

Millions of refugees in our world have given up everything to pursue a dream for justice, peace, and respect. They dream of a time when people will study war no more. They dream of a time or a place where they will finally be accepted for who they are. Their dreams are about life arising from the midst of death.

Yes, we are called to dream. To dream, not just about what could be for tomorrow, but what is needed for today. For our dreams arise from out of the very midst of suffering and injustices and persecutions and death, as we seek life and resurrection. And at their core, such dreams are nothing less than the gospel—as Christ Jesus, the crucified and risen one, proclaimed it. This gospel is a message of living fully as human beings, in a community where there is respect for each other and all creation and all creatures, as God has intended.

But we also know that the world is very uncomfortable with dreamers, for dreamers can't be controlled. These dreamers, like the prophets, continue to speak as the Spirit of life gives them utterance. And that is a dangerous activity, for when God's dreams are voiced, creation—and re-creation—happens. When dreams are spoken, a valley of dry bones comes alive by the breath of the Spirit blowing upon them. When God breathes a dream, the breath of life enters that which was dead, and resurrection happens.

No wonder so many in power or in positions of privilege and entitlement fear these dreams, for God's dreams cannot be controlled. And so, out of fear, they try to silence the dreamers and squelch the dreams. Joseph's brothers tried to do that. The Inquisition tried to do that. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassin tried to do that. These dreams, and these dreamers, were nightmares to their plans for power and control.

So, in times such as these, when people want to silence the dreamers, what are we to do? We are to dream. We are called to dream God's dreams for us, not in isolation from each other but in community, so that our own dreams can be tested, so that our own dreams do not give "empty consolations" or "illusory hopes," and so that our dreams are not actually nightmares, enforced at the expense of others or at the expense of creation. Dreaming God's dreams isn't easy. We are not promised a "rose garden." We are not guaranteed that God's dream will become a reality in our midst today, or tomorrow, or even next year. But we are called to encourage one another to be faithful dreamers, dreamers of God's dream for us and for all creation. That is our most holy and sacred vocation.

³ Joe Darion, "The Impossible Dream (The Quest)" from *Man of La Mancha*, 1965.
<https://www.songlyrics.com/man-of-la-mancha/the-impossible-dream-the-quest-lyrics/>

Graduands, you have been equipped with the tools of the gospel to dream God's dreams—not just by yourselves, but to dream with, and in, your community for the sake of all. You are called to proclaim God's dream for all people and all creation, and then to roll up your sleeves and help your communities and this world experience and work for justice and peace and the integrity of all creation. You see, dreaming God's dream is a community activity, so that God's dream for us and all creation can break in upon us today and tomorrow, even as we "march into Hell for a heavenly cause," and so that one day soon, everyone can say, "Thank God almighty, all people and all creation are free at last."

So, in times such as these, what are you and I to do? You know the answer: dream. Dream the dream that God has for us and all creation. And dare to live into God's dream. For we are called to be "dream-makers," to live into the dream together. It's a matter of life and death. Dream that impossible dream, looking forward to the day when all can say, "Thank God that all people are free, free at last." God, make it so.