But What If It's Only a Dream?
(Isaiah 65:17-25)

I'm a teacher. My tools are metaphor, analogy, and the recognition of relationship. My job requires me to take things people don't ***already*** know (or, sometimes, only ***think*** they don't know) and give them something familiar to hang their thoughts on.

"You can understand ***this*** because it's just the same thing as when we talked about ***that***—only with a few more wrinkles that I'll explain along the way."

My inclination, if I'm going to ***explain*** something, is to tell a story—most likely from my past. Stories are like meta-metaphors. They give us access to things we can understand by offering recognizable reference points in narrative form.

We give parents a hard time about ***that***, don't we?

"Oh, sure Dad. Of ***course*** you had to ford a river and battle the Demogorgon in the Upside Down every day just to get to fifth grade. Please go back to watching the Golf Channel and leave reality to us."

"We ***know*** we have it easy; we never had to chop a cord of wood before lunch or repair a faulty fan belt with dental floss and some WD40."

Or, "Oh please ***do*** tell us about how you used to make your own clothes as a child out of old bits of lint and discarded bourbon boxes from the liquor store."

But our stories are an important part not only of who ***we*** are but of how we see the ***world***. Our ability to connect the past to the present helps us learn and gives us confidence that if we've survived the past, maybe we can keep going. They

keep hope alive that we'll find a ***future*** we can endure again.

Storytelling is an eminently human practice. We're always sifting through the past, trying to make some sense of the present, trying to get a line on the future, aren't we?

You know how this works. It's simple, really. Try this one on: The Iraq War was this generation's Viet Nam.

We haven't seen inflation like that since Jimmy Carter was President.

Snow in November is like bolting upright in bed when you suddenly remember the root canal you scheduled last month, then promptly forgot about … until now.

We like to think of the past as connected to the future by a common plot. This impulse is generally a good one. We can

understand a great deal of what the world is like by referring to the way the world ***used*** to be.

But what if the past is discontinuous with the future? What if the world we ***want*** isn't like any world for which we have a story?

That's an especially important question just now, isn't it? How do we tell the story of a world for which our words are inadequate?

How do you describe what a grape tastes like?

What grammar is robust enough to order the necessary words to communicate the disappointment of a broken promise, the devastation of a broken heart?

Or, how do you put into words what it feels like to kiss the face of the child you thought you'd never see … or the child you thought you'd never see again?

This is the problem Isaiah's got. In our passage for today, God lays out a new future that explodes our understanding of what the world ***should*** look like. And we don't have anywhere to look over our shoulders for a referent.

The stuff in the past … is past. No going back. In fact, God says, "I am going to create a ***new*** heaven and a ***new*** earth; the ***former*** things shall not be ***remembered*** or come to mind" (65:17).

But that's the problem, isn't it? How do you describe a world you've never seen before? How do you begin to put words to a reality the beauty of which is more than can be contained by words?

I had a dream one time. I dreamt that I was in church, the light pouring through the stained glass. The sanctuary was hazy, as in dreams things tend to be, and I was on my way to the pulpit.

I began to ascend the steps to the chancel when someone came to me. Now, this someone was just out of my peripheral vision, so I'm not sure who it was (although, in retrospect, I have a hunch). The voice came to me in my dream and said, "The church needs a new minister."

I didn't particularly like this idea. I thought, "I've worked hard. I love my job. I don't want to leave."

And the voice said, "The church needs a new minister."

I said, "But we already have a bunch of people doing ministry."

And the voice said, growing even more calm, “The church needs a new minister ... a minister of poetry.”

I argued with the voice that the church had more important business than poetry. We have youth to teach, disciples to make, prayers to pray, budgets to budget, and sermons to sermonize. We have mouths to feed and people to clothe.

We had, at least to my mind, much bigger fish to fry. “Poetry is nice, but the reign of God won’t be ushered in by a poet,” I told the voice.

“The church needs a new minister,” the voice insisted, “a minister of poetry.”

Then, as in dreams it so often happens, I suddenly ***got*** it. I caught a glimpse of that world. And all of a sudden, for

whatever odd reason that things happen in dreams, a minister of poetry made all the sense in the world to me.

I remember smiling ... smiling both because it was apparently not ***my*** job the voice was after, but also because the whole ***idea*** made such outlandish, ridiculous sense.

The thought had never occurred to me before. In my dream, I was certain that the idea had probably never occurred to ***anyone***. I thought, "We look for ministers of education, ministers of youth. The church is constantly trying to find music ministers.

"We hire ministers of counseling, evangelism, shepherding, pastoral care, and even ministers of 'Christian Finance'—whatever ***that*** is. But it's never occurred to the church that perhaps what we need most is a minister of poetry."

When I woke up, I found myself smiling at the notion of a minister of poetry.

As I was lying there, the line from Walt Whitman's poem, ***A Passage to India*****,** came to mind:

After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd,)
After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd their work,
After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemists,
the geologist, ethnologist,
Finally shall come the poet worthy of that name,
The true child of God shall come singing God's songs.

Finally comes the Poet. That's the title of a book on preaching by Walter Brueggeman some years back. He argued that the world has been flattened and reduced, in need of poets to sing it back to life. That is to say, the world we inhabit is a prosaic world,—a world written in the prose of newscasts and End User License Agreeements—which is world often devoid of dreams and vision and creativity. In other words, a world without poetry.

It’s a world that insists on realism and shuns imagination.

It’s a world that’s settled on the inevitability of violence, pride, and self-absorption.

It’s a world that takes for granted that there will always be weeping and infants who live but a few days.

It’s a world that assumes that people die young and children are born for calamity.

It’s a world where conventional wisdom tells us wolves eat lambs for breakfast.

It’s a world where people live with the lingering fear that their race, their gender, their sexual orientation, their gender expression, their immigration status, or their disability

makes them vulnerable to the caprice of those in power, a target for bigots and cowards.

I think Brueggeman was right: the church desperately needs someone whose job it is to find the terrible and the beautiful words to speak a new heaven and a new earth.

What the church needs, as it finds itself situated in this lifeless world of prose, is a poet ... or, as they were called in the Bible—a prophet—someone who can navigate where there is no map, someone who can tune out the noise and articulate what God's future must look like for ***all*** God's children.

And that's it, isn't it? Some things are both too terrible and too beautiful to put into words. But we must try. That's where poets and prophets come in.

The church—to the extent that it has promoted a version of the gospel concerned primarily only with helping ***me*** to get to heaven—has been complicit in allowing Christians to get comfortable with the idea that poverty, xenophobia, racism, sexism, homophobia aren't a primary matter of concern when it comes to living like Jesus—that the cries of our sisters and brothers are of interest only after we've secured our individual souls.

In our flattened world, all that stuff happens to ***other*** people who—although we may not make them targets of our open hostility—qualify as perfect candidates for our indifference. Too often, the church's cries about being "realistic" require it to be concerned with ***"bigger"*** things than with the scattered cries of a marginalized group of "other people."

In this case, "Let's be realistic" really means something like, "Let's don't rock the boat. Let's do things that don't cost us very much and don't make people really mad at us for

doing them. Just keep quiet, swallow your personal hurt for the good of the whole."

But Isaiah sees a different reality. The problem is helping everyone else to see it.

What if you've spent the last 50+ years sitting abandoned and forgotten in a foreign land, a million miles from anywhere that looks like home?

What if when you looked out your front window and could see only the unfamiliar and frightening landscape of the wilderness that threatened to overwhelm you? How do you put ***that*** into words?

Or what if, after you get home, all you see is the wasteland your hometown has become in your absence? All the abandoned buildings and old tires strewn about the countryside? What if all you see when you look out the front

window is a darkened landscape that holds only the failures of the past?

What do you do in a world like that? How do you find the strength to go on, the strength to hold the hands and bear the burdens of those convinced they can't make even one more day in a world that seems to have no place for them?

The Shawshank Redemption is set in Shawshank State Penitentiary. Andy Dufresne, the prison librarian, is the main character. One day, he gets a call to come to the guard house where he's finally received boxes of books and records for the prison library—after writing for six years to the state senate for funds. He's so taken by the moment that he locks a prison guard in the bathroom, then locks himself into the command center with a record player and begins to play an aria from *The Marriage of Figaro* over the loudspeaker for the whole prison to hear.

As the prisoners are out in the yard for exercise, some in the shop working, this beautiful music begins to play. Everyone stops to listen.

Eventually, of course, the guards break down the door and throw Andy Dufresne in the hole for his stunt. But Morgan Freeman's character observes:

> *I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singing about. Truth is, I don't wanna know. Some things are better left unsaid. I like to think they were talking about something so beautiful it can't be expressed in words, and makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you those voices soared, higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream.*

And that's just it: What if our job is to carve out new worlds, to sing hope into a gray place where nobody dares to dream?

What if, for a world satisfied with things it already takes for granted—that white men should always occupy the top of the food chain and that a person's money or power ought to

be the measure of their worth—what if our job as God's children is to unleash the poetry about a "new heaven and a new earth"—a place where preposterous, unthinkable things are possible?

A place where there are no more cries of distress, where the work of our hands is not claimed by someone else for their profit, a place where children are blessed and protected, where the wolf poses no threat to the lamb, where people live without fear that those in power can come along and steal their security, or their dignity, or their bodies.

"I like to think they were singing about something so beautiful it can't be expressed in words, and makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you those voices soared, higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream."

And for my part, I like to think Isaiah's singing a song about a new day, a new world where the hope of God's people will be set free by the power of God's saving hand—where those who've been cast aside, abandoned, "othered," left to die alone with no one to speak terrible and beautiful words over their lifeless bodies will "come to Zion singing"; and "they shall not hurt on all my holy mountain."

In a gray place where hopelessness seems to rule the day, in a flattened and dry land where walls are built and people are cast aside, and where even in church, we often can't see our way to welcome one another—we wonder how our perseverance in the struggle to follow Jesus ***makes any difference***.

Standing on tiptoes, we peer with the eyes of hope into the shadows, awaiting a word from God about the dream of our deliverance from the wilderness.

After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd,)
After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd their work,
After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemists,
the geologist, ethnologist,
Finally shall come the poet worthy of that name,
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.

But what if it's only just a dream?

In the world in which we live, eating the bread of tears and drinking from wells poisoned by the blood of the powerless and forgotten, a new dream might just be the best thing to happen to us.

What do you say we find out?

-Amen.