

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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Mark 1:1-8

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

Advent arrives as a season of dreams.

For many, our Advent dreaming began when we found that free Saturday afternoon to pick up our flocked fir at the Optimist Club's sale on the village square. The tip of the Tannenbaum peeking through the Outback's clamshell, Johnny Mathis² or John Denver³ or Vince Guaraldi⁴ soundtracking the drive home. We pulled the decorations out of the basement, and, as we untangled the lights and unpacked the ornaments, holidays-past came back rushing back – for their joys and for their sorrows. Having given ourselves over to our best Clark Griswold [whimpering and shivering in the attic scene⁵], we called our sister or our brother or our parents and asked, “Do you remember that Christmas morning when ...”

Advent blesses us with dreams of what has been.

For those of a certain age, our Advent dreaming began with a pencil, a piece of lined notebook paper, and the J.C. Penney's Christmas Wishbook.⁶ We flipped fast past all those boring clothes, to the good stuff, the photographs of bicycles and Barbies, action figures and Hot Wheels, every page cataloguing wonders sending us into a glad realm of Land Speeders and slot-car sets and dolls who could blink and coo. On Advent nights, we fell asleep with dogeared pages open across our chest, having carefully listed department and item number to facilitate the operations of Santa's workshop.

Advent blesses us with dreams of what may be.

Singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt tells one of my favorite dream stories [that's a transition, by the way, a conjunction tied to the common theme of “dreams” ...].

I suspect you know Mr. Van Zandt, even if you don't know that you know him. Born in Fort Worth in 1944, Van Zandt's family moved around the country during his childhood, before his parents settled into Houston while he was away at a Chicago-area boarding school. By his own admission and description, he “never got along with life very well.”⁷ He struggled with bi-polar disorder and spent much of his adulthood self-medicating through drugs and alcohol, living alone in the Colorado mountains for months at a time, or crashing on friends' sofas while he played small bars from California to Tennessee.

Van Zandt also enjoyed healthy, creative seasons, and he released more than a dozen long-players before his death in 1997, at age 52. Like the Velvet Underground or Big Star, Van Zandt's influence on his fans and devotees wildly exceeded any financial success his music ever brought to him. Artists from Bob Dylan to Jason Isbell⁸ have covered his songs, and Steve Earle released an entire album of Van Zandt covers – an album named for, and dedicated to, his friend, *Townes*. In 1983, Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard reached number one on the Billboard Hot Country 100 with Van Zandt's now ubiquitous, "Pancho and Lefty."⁹

About his dream: in the 1960s, Van Zandt live in East Nashville with songwriters Susanna and Guy Clark, and one of the threesome came home sick with a flu, promptly sharing the bug with everyone in the house. As Van Zandt tells the story, every day they would draw straws to decide who would have to walk the quarter of a mile to the corner pharmacy and buy the bottle of codeine cough syrup the three would then share in their convalescence. In a concert recording I treasure, he explains:

My sleep was saturated with these Technicolor dreams, the most vivid dreams you could imagine, and I was laying on my bed in a little storeroom, a mattress with a lamp beside it, and I always had a pad and pencil there ... and I dreamt that I was a travelling folk singer, and I was up in front of these people, and I sang this song, and it was [entitled,] 'If I Needed You.' And it was so intense that it woke me up. I reached over, turned on the light, and wrote down the words. The guitar part had been so clear that I didn't even get off the mattress and go get my guitar.

Van Zandt goes on to explain that he returned to sleep that night, and, after coffee with the Clarks the next morning, he played the song for Guy – beginning to end – the same Emmylou Harris and Don Williams would take to #3 in 1981.

In this season of dreams, today's scriptures voice the overlapping dreams of the prophet, the psalmist, and the baptist.

Isaiah dreams of his people's relief from suffering. Having been overtaken by the Babylonians, the prophet understands Jerusalem to endure the consequences of her infidelity, receiving "double" from the Lord's hand "for all her sins."¹⁰ Yet, he dreams of a voice his people will hear, the advent of one who will call Israel to prepare the way of the Lord.¹¹ The cry of this one will *inspire the wilderness itself to labor with Jerusalem* in making straight the path of God's hope: the valleys will be raised level, the mountains will be made low, and the rough passages will be made smooth.¹²

Dreaming of what has been and what may be, the Psalmist shares this vision of restoration,¹³ of Israel's iniquity blotted out,¹⁴ of God "speaking peace."¹⁵ With fidelities renewed, salvation will draw near to God's people.¹⁶ Indeed, mercy and truth will kiss and preside over the land.¹⁷ As in

Isaiah, the very creation will partner with the faithful, so the Beloved Community will not labor alone: “Truth shall spring up from the earth,” the land’s yield will increase, and – again – righteous will make a path for God’s hopes.¹⁸

The Gospel of Mark understands John to share in these dreams, not only as a companion dreamer, but as Isaiah’s dream come true: God has sent John to make that wilderness cry the prophet so ached to hear.¹⁹ Vested as one who “never got along with life so well,” John wears camel’s hair and leather and eats locusts and honey – Technicolor details of a fever vision.²⁰ John dreams of the one who will “baptize with the Holy Spirit,”²¹ the Christ who will take up our sin and selfishness and sorrow, and burn them away like fire consumes the wheat’s chaff.²² This holy one to come will give sight to the blind and comfort to the suffering. Greatness and glory and power will be his, a share in God’s dream as big and broad as the most distant cosmos, and yet as close as a single life, a single heart, a single hope.

Later in his life, Van Zandt teased that “If I Needed You” was the only hit he wrote in his sleep, and he admitted his first thought was, “Man, I’ve gotta get me some more of that codeine cough syrup.” For one who endured lifelong pain – pain of his own making, pain of his peculiar chemistry, pain that the world pressed upon him – I hear his simple lyrics as a prayer:

If I needed you,
would you come to me?
Would you come to me
and ease my pain?

If you needed me,
I would come to you.
I’d swim the seas
for to ease your pain.

In the night forlorn
the morning’s born,
and the morning shines
with the lights of love.
You will miss sunrise
if you close your eyes, and
that would break my heart in two.

Since I showed her how
to lay her lily hand in mine,
Loop and Lil agree
she’s a sight to see,
a treasure for
the poor to find.

If I needed you
would you come to me?
Would you come to me
and ease my pain?

If you needed me,
I would come to you ...²³

Van Zandt’s hymn – authentic, honest, and as Advent as any we will sing today – voices not only his cracked heart, but our own:

My God, who I have made so far away ... *will you come to me?*

My God, from whom I have turned ... *will you come to me?*

My God, who has been so generous, yet from whom I have withheld my dearest fears and disappointments, my earnest pleasures and hopes ... *will you come to me?*

Open my eyes as the morning shines, open me to see the lights of your love!

Strengthen me to dare heartbreak, to dive deep into the possibility – the belief! – that my aching will be eased, that as I need you, you will come to me.

Dreams carry us out of this world, and into another, into a fantastic territory inlaid with elements of what has been and what may be, of our hurts and hopes and those of the whole world. As a season of dreams, Advent invites us into that new realm – at once as simple and sweet as a child’s list of toys, and as bittersweetly fond as our Christmases past; as urgent as a people’s prayer for the end of war, and as intimate as a lover’s renewed embrace. From wreath-making to the moving magic of Candlelight Carols next weekend; from Messiah this afternoon to the whispered Peace when we sing “Silent Night” on Christmas Eve; we at Trinity join with the prophet and the Baptist, the psalmist and the songwriter, and together we share in God’s grand dream for us and for all – this babe so soon to be born, even Christ our Lord.

As companions in this loving household of God,
Amen.

¹ From Psalm 31.

² This was the LP on my parents’ turntable every Christmas morning. [Some really terrible lip-syncing in this video of “Winter Wonderland,”](#) the first song on the 1958 album, *Merry Christmas*.

³ We usually skipped past “Aspenglow” and hit [“The Christmas Song”](#) first.

⁴ For good reason (as in, it’s the best!), my children are deeply devoted to the [A Charlie Brown Christmas soundtrack](#). I’m guessing we have 10 versions of this album, a variety of releases on LP, CD, and cassette.

⁵ Lord, have mercy: I love that scene so much. No matter the holiday busy-ness, my family aims to watch *Christmas Vacation* together before December 24. [Poor Chevy may not be doing so good.](#)

⁶ My dad worked at Penney’s, so we gravitated toward its pages over those of the Sears catalogue.

⁷ I draw these quotes from the 1997 release, *Last Rights: The Life and Times of Townes Van Zandt*, which features an interview Van Zandt, cut among recordings of his songs.

⁸ While Steve Earle’s version to close out 1995’s *Train A’Comin* introduced me to the song, [I do love this Jason Isbell cover](#). I’ve always heard the fact of the (crushingly sad) story starting all over again when the song nears its end as a brutal reminder of suffering’s endurance.

⁹ [That this version could overcome the worst of 1980s' production values](#) to hit #1 testifies to the song's power.

¹⁰ Isaiah 40:2.

¹¹ Isaiah 40:3.

¹² Isaiah 40:4-5.

¹³ Psalm 85:1.

¹⁴ Psalm 85:2.

¹⁵ Psalm 85:8.

¹⁶ Psalm 85:9.

¹⁷ Psalm 85:10.

¹⁸ Psalm 85:11-13.

¹⁹ Mark 1:2-4.

²⁰ Mark 1:6.

²¹ Mark 1:8.

²² Imagining how the mechanics of baptism “with the Holy Spirit” will differ from John’s baptism “with water,” I borrow the “fire” imagery from the same scene in Matthew 3.

²³ Van Zandt, Townes. “If I Needed You.” *The Late Great Townes Van Zandt*, Poppy/United Artists, 1972. [As Van Zandt notes in this classic live recording from 1973's *Live at the Old Quarter*](#), “Loop” and “Lil” were his parakeets.