

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

There's a song called *DREAM BIG*, by a blue grass/country group called Ryan Shoup and the Rubber Band. The refrain goes like this, "When you dream, dream big; as big as the ocean blue. Cause when you dream, it might come true. So when you dream, dream big."

Today God's Word to us invites us to reflect on the dreams of some big dreamers. The first is a man named Nehemiah. He's probably as familiar to you as Ryan Shoup. Actually there is a whole book in the Bible that is named after him, that is Nehemiah, not Ryan Shoup. Nehemiah was a Jewish slave who served as a "cup bearer" in the palace of Artaxerxes, the King of Persia (present-day Iran), about 450 years before the birth of Christ. "Cup bearer" sounds like a pretty insignificant service, but it was a task given to only the most trusted of all the servants. The job of the "cup bearer" was to not only carry the cup from which the king would drink, but he had to protect the cup, and often drink from it before the king to protect the king from being poisoned. How's that for being paranoid.

Well Nehemiah heard of the destruction of the city of Jerusalem, the home of his ancestors. It saddened him so deeply that he often broke into tears just thinking about it. He couldn't stop thinking about it and when he slept he would dream of restoring the City of God, the God of his forebearers. One day as he served the King tears were streaming down his face. Artaxerxes asked what was wrong. Nehemiah told the King of the pain he felt over the destruction of Jerusalem and the suffering of his people. The King asked what he could do. Nehemiah told the King he would like to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the City. The King gave permission and sent a cavalry regiment and an army to accompany and assist Nehemiah.

What we read about in our first reading today is the fulfillment of Nehemiah's dream—the walls of the City have been rebuilt and the people return to rejoice.

The priest, Ezra, stands before the people, reading and explaining the Law of the Lord from sun-up until noon, a full six hours (and you think I preach long sermons). As the people hear the Law which they had abandoned, fall to the ground and cry tears of remorse for their sins and evil deeds.

Nehemiah, seeing this, steps forward, stretches out his arms, calling the people's attention to the walls of the newly fortified city, the fulfillment of his dream, and says, "Today is holy to the Lord your God. Do not be sad and do not weep...go, eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks, and allot portions to those who had nothing prepared, for today is holy to the Lord. Do not be saddened this day, for rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength!"

So was Jerusalem, the City of God, restored---for a time.

The next dreamer we hear from is St. Paul. His is more of a vision than a dream. He addresses the Corinthian Christians who were prone to disunity, competition, rash judgment, and petty bickering. Especially vexing to Paul was their rivalry regarding spiritual gifts. Some of their thinking could be compared to a prosperity gospel that claimed that wealth was a sign of God's blessing, and the greater the wealth of a person, the greater was his or her status before God. Different members of the community had received different gifts and some of them assumed that their particular gift demonstrated their superiority.

Paul's insight or vision, or dream, if you will, was to relate the members of the community to the parts of the human body—each part, therefore, each member, having its particular purpose in serving the well-being of the body. In this, Paul gives us the image of the Church as the Body of Christ, in which every member has its role to play in the well-being and building up of the Body.

Next the Word of God directs us to the dream of Jesus. He had been away from home for a while. He had gone off to be baptized in the Jordan by John and then was led into the desert by the Spirit where he was tested for forty days. His recent return to the neighborhood became the talk of the town when word got out that he had turned water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana.

The synagogue of his youth, where Joseph had taken him to study the Word of God, was abuzz when he strode into the place, with his mother, Mary, taking her place in the cordoned off place where women were permitted to gather. She knew a change had come over him. He knew it as well. The people were twittering about the young carpenter of Nazareth. What was going on with him?

It apparently was his turn to read the scroll, which he probably had memorized from his childhood because a synagogue in such a small place as Nazareth only possessed a single scroll of the Word of God. St. Luke tells us, "He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it is written: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed to free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.*

Standing as he read this passage of Isaiah, he sat down, as was the custom, to give a teaching on the Scripture. "The eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him".

I imagine he looked back. He knew that they were expecting him to explain how Isaiah spoke these words to the enslaved Israelites in Babylon to give them hope that God would come to save them, that the acceptable year of the Lord was coming. Perhaps Jesus' onlookers expected him to compare the enslavement of Israel of old to the present day occupation by the Romans and encourage them to look forward to the day that God would send the promised savior.

They looked at him expectantly. He gazed upon them lovingly, perhaps hopefully, that they would understand. They would come to see that he was the One they were hoping for. Finally, he spoke, “Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”

He did it! He told them who he really was! How would they take it? How would they react?

Well, the Church wants you to think about that and come back next week to find out what happens. I think you know. But, for now, live in the moment. Be in that moment in that synagogue when one whom you’ve known all of your life tells you that he is the Messiah of God. How would you handle it?

Finally, I want to tell you about another dreamer. He came among you twenty-six years ago. Like Nehemiah, he found a church broken and broke. The Church was leaking and had no heating or air-conditioning. The Parish Center, newly built, was a disaster because the builder cut all kinds of corners with electric, plumbing, heating, and air-conditioning. The roof on St. Malachy’s was literally caving in, with poor heat and no air-conditioning. And the parish was more than \$1,000,000.00 in debt on the building of the parish center. Like Paul, this dreamer found a fractious community. People who worshipped at OLC would have nothing to do with the parish center or St. Malachy’s. People from St. Malachy’s had nothing to do with people from OLC. And the people who went to the parish center did so only because there was parking available there.

And when this dreamer arrived, he was welcomed with as much apprehension as the Nazarenes welcomed Jesus, because this dreamer was a big, burly, loud-mouthed character who was replacing a gentle soul, as soft-voiced and humble as a human being can be.

This dreamer was installed as pastor here on July 3, 1993, and as he looked out at the congregation on a steamy, humid Saturday evening, this Word of God came to him, “They are like sheep without a shepherd.”

Yes, I am that dreamer. Like Nehemiah, I found this City of God in shambles, but went to work with you. You dreamt with me. Together, we heated and air-conditioned both churches, restored the beauty of both churches, made the parish center functional, and paid off a debt of \$1,600,000.00. With Paul, we dreamt of becoming more unified and we have engaged literally hundreds of people in ministries and services to build-up the Body of Christ in our midst. And as Jesus did, we rejoice as we proclaim that the Anointed One of God, the Messiah, the Christ, dwells in our midst.

With Nehemiah, we can proclaim “rejoicing in the Lord must be our strength”; with Paul, we acknowledge, “we are Christ’s Body, and individually parts of it”; and with Jesus, we “proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.”

While the dreams of Nehemiah and Paul and Jesus were fulfilled, each faded over time. The walls of Jerusalem which Nehemiah built were once again destroyed some 500 years later. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians indicates that the people of Corinth didn't really pay that much attention to the first. And Jesus proclamation of a year acceptable to the Lord ended some three years later, with the people screaming, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

It deeply troubles me that my dream, though fulfilled, seems to be fading too. Though we have grown from 650 households when I arrived to 1,150 registered households today, we only have 250 reliable contributors a week. Our expenses to maintain buildings, properties, services, and ministries are outstripping our income. Where once we had 200 households committed to our various campaigns to retire our debts, we now have only 70 households willing to commit to provide the necessary building blocks to fulfill our Vision 2020.

If the dream to build a debt-free, self-sustaining, joy-filled parish was only my dream, and is not yours, it will end as did the walls of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. By now you are all aware that throughout the country, it is the policy that a parish that cannot sustain itself is simply closed. And we seem to be slipping off the path of sustaining ourselves.

Next month, members of our Pastoral Council will meet with you to share the results of the "Disciplemaker's Index, the survey you took last year to determine the strengths and challenges facing of our parish.

As I prepare to leave in a few, short months, I encourage you to meet with your Pastoral Council, to keep our dream alive. When you dream, dream big, as big as the ocean, blue. 'Cause when you dream, it might come true. So, when you dream, dream big.