

DREAMING THINGS THAT NEVER WERE

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Today is Epiphany Sunday. Epiphany Sunday celebrates the visit of the wise men to the nativity and it is the official end of the Christmas season. The Christmas season is the shortest of all the church seasons – a little less than two weeks. 12 days. The 12 days of Christmas. Precious little time to take in the marvelous drama of Christmas – angels and shepherds and birthing parents and visiting astrologers... Quite a cast of characters for such a short time as this.

And it's not just the characters, but *what they are doing*. They're all heading somewhere. There is lots of traveling going on at Christmas. Mary travels to Elizabeth. Mary and Joseph travel to Judea. The shepherds go unto Bethlehem. The wise men follow a star in the east. Lots of holiday travels. Christmas is the time to be on the move. For a lot of us, we are on the move for Christmas.

But the travels all happen as the result of earlier dreams. Dreams. Many of our Christmas characters have been dreaming during Christmas. Christmas is the season of dreams. Joseph is dreaming, the wise men are dreaming. And in those dreams angels appear. Joseph sees an angel. The wise men see an angel. Zechariah sees an angel. Mary sees an angel. The shepherds see angels. And with each of these angelic appearances come dreams. Dreams beget dreams. Dreams bring about angels and angels bring about dreams. Christmas is the season of dreaming. And the dreams the angels bring are to wonder with the Christmas characters – could something be that has never been? Could

something be that has never been? Zechariah – could your old wife, well beyond childbearing years, could she still bear a child? Could something be that has never been? Mary – the Holy Spirit will conceive in your womb and you will bear a son. How can this be since I am a virgin? Could something be that has never been? Joseph, your wife is pregnant and it is not what you think it is. She will bear a son. And you will call him “God with us”. Could something be that has never been? These are the dreams of Christmas. Dreams that set the dreamers on their way. On their way from the way life used to be, to the way life will be. They carry the angels’ question with them – could something be that has never been? Only one way to find out. Let us go to Bethlehem. Let us travel to Judea. Let us go home but by another way. It was their dreams that set the course. Their dreams set them to travel to places they’ve never been. And in their faithful obedience to their dreams – they receive epiphanies. Discoveries of what God can do. So what have you been dreaming this Christmas?—And are those dreams taking you somewhere you’ve never been?

So, in the story of *Les Miserables*, which some of you have seen in the theater – and that the rest of you better go see if you know what’s good for you – the hardened ex-convict Jean Valjean, embittered by 19 years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread, wanders the French countryside and eventually bangs on the door of a bishop for a scrap of food. What he doesn’t know (*and this is Steve’s interpretation*) is that the bishop is—in a sense—also an angel. And the angel invites him to table and serves him from the finest silver. With belly full, the hardened Valjean returns the favor by rising in the night and stealing the bishop’s silver. When he’s caught the next day, they bring him back to the bishop for his condemnation and what the bishop/angel does is he offers the candlesticks as well. And in doing so he places within Jean Valjean a dream. A dream for his life that he could not dream himself. Could something be for him that has never been? “Jean Valjean, my

brother,” says the angel, “you no longer belong to evil, but to good. I have bought your soul of you. I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and give it to God.” The angel places a dream inside a soul.

Now those who have read the book know that what immediately happens after Valjean receives this great blessing of grace (this is not in the play or the movie) – is that he goes out and immediately steals the money of a child. No sooner has he received this dream but that he returns to the way life used to be. And just as he realizes what awful thing he has done he sees a vision. He sees a vision of the bishop – an image of the bishop alongside an image of himself. An image of beauty alongside an image of disgust. And by grace, the longer he looks at these images, the image of the bishop grows and the image of himself fades – until all he can see is the bishop – the angel of mercy. And the dream sets the dreamer on his way ... a new way ... to a place he has never been. A redemptive life. He heard the question of the *angel*: Could something *be* that has never been?

So it is Epiphany – the close of Christmas. This week the tree will come down and the decorations packed away. For most of you that’s already happened. Time to go back to the way life used to be. Back to who we once were. But what about the dreams? Were there any dreams? Did you see angels? Did you hear their question? Could something *be* that has never been?

This display before you does not come down. It remains. The table of grace and mercy ... silver from which to be fed. Is this the vision the angel brings? A new table of grace that implores us to travel by another road to a place we’ve never been? Might your soul, this table asks, have been purchased such that you no longer belong to what has been, but to what will be by God’s grace?

The old George Bernard Shaw line puts it to us another way: *“Some see things that are and say, Why? Others dreams things that never were and say, Why not?”*

You know about that dream, don't you? You know it's in your soul. Dreams of the angel. Dreams of a different way for you. This good dream. This dream of goodness. You know that the image of the angel stands to grow before you and within you. You know that, don't you? So take heart. Or should I say, let your heart be taken. Find for yourself the new road. And discover the epiphany.