

In Praise of Dreamers

Rich Nathan

May 20-21, 2000

The Dedication of the New Building

Hebrews 11:1-12

Whenever a church has a building dedication to celebrate the construction of a new church building anywhere on earth – what we are doing today is something that is done all over the earth. I personally helped to dedicate some block wall church buildings in little villages in India a couple of years ago. I have read of the joy of believers as they dedicated thatched roofed buildings in Africa. Some of you may have participated in a building dedication service for some other church, either when you were an adult or when you were a child. But whenever a church building is erected and a group of people are setting aside a plot of land in this world saying, “We are offering this ground and this building for the worship of Jesus Christ for the next 50 years or the next century [in some cases the next several centuries], the whole project of building a church building and then dedicating it to God and offering it up for the ages is always infused by dreams and dreamers.

What a crazy thing in this pragmatic age, when everything is a matter of efficiency and productivity to take a building not for the purpose of starting up another dot-com company or producing another car or another scented candle, what a crazy thing to build an enormous building simply for the purpose of worshipping an invisible God. How impractical. It won’t make us any more money. It causes many of us to have to sacrifice. It doesn’t add anything to the GNP. It won’t be listed on the NASDEC.

To set aside a plot of ground for the worship of the invisible God for the next century or so, the only group of people to be crazy enough to do something like that would have to be dreamers. People for whom what this world presently offers is not enough.

I don’t know how many of you are old enough to remember the movie “Lawrence of Arabia” or have seen it in video. It is generally hailed as one of the 2-3 best movies ever made. Stephen Spielberg said he decided to go into film making because of the film “Lawrence of Arabia.” He said, “I was inspired the first time I saw “Lawrence.” It made me feel puny. It still makes me feel puny. And that is one measure of its greatness.”

The Lawrence from “Lawrence of Arabia” was a man named T. Lawrence who was born in Wales in 1888. He was born to a family of evangelical, Bible-believing Christians who all had grown up under the ministry of a very strong Christian pastor in the city of Oxford in England. One of Lawrence’s brothers became a medical missionary to China. A second brother became a teacher in India. And the third was a powerful speaker to young people at Christian camps.

But Lawrence was always known as a dreamer. And from the time he was young he dreamed of Asia. As a young man, Lawrence went to the Middle East where he helped to lead a coalition group of Arabs in overthrowing the Turks who ruled over Jerusalem for seven centuries. Lawrence, who grew up as a Welsh Christian, became the leader of a band of Arabs that was claiming the Middle East back for Arabs.

Eventually, Lawrence's dreams were betrayed and unraveled in the backroom politics of British government. But Lawrence said something about the power of dreams that I want to share with you today. He said **all men dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dreams with open eyes, to make it possible. This I did.** Lawrence said that dreams are dangerous men.

The Bible is a story of dreamers who were dangerous men and women – dreamers like Joseph and Daniel and Abraham and the apostle Paul. Restless men and women who could not leave good enough alone, who always were challenging the status quo and making things different and making people change. Dreamers are dangerous men and dangerous women.

See, for one thing, dreams are powerful. Most people get to a certain point in their lives sometime in middle age when they are 35 or 40 and they have experienced a number of tough blows. They stop dreaming. And then a dreamer comes along and shakes things up, threatening the established order. They inspire followership.

I think of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s great speech, "I have a dream..." Many of you probably had to study this in a high school government class. But there is Dr. King leading the great march on Washington DC, standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, which gave promise to African-American slaves. But America never delivered. The society had come to a place of accepting inequality between the races. Society had come to a place where they said we need to go slowly. We can't make too many changes. We can't rock the boat too much. We can't be too threatening or radical.

Dr. King stood up on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and uttered these dangerous words: **I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident. That all men are created equal. I have a dream that one day out in the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream and even the State of Mississippi, a State sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by their character.**

You become a marked man, a dangerous man – we become a marked group, a dangerous church when we allow ourselves to dream. See men and women of faith have always been dangerous dreamers. Dreamers don't conform to the status quo. They have a higher calling than Group Think – a different loyalty, a different security. So a dangerous man or woman of faith, a dreamer, will threaten the status quo in their workplace.

"What do you mean you are turning down a job promotion. You will make more money. So what if it involves a transfer to a different city or more traveling. Nobody turns down a job promotion. I am concerned about you."

"Your ultimate loyalty does not seem to be to this law firm. What's wrong with you?"

"What do you mean you can't sell auto repairs or insurance or chiropractic services or basement waterproofing the way we have always sold them?"

"You make me uncomfortable. You seem positively dangerous."

Brothers and sisters, do you know that pastors are supposed to be dangerous people? We are constantly supposed to upset the status quo even in the church. Pastors are supposed to be dangerous dreamers. To continually say to the church: Never stop dreaming about what could be. Don't ever come to the place of saying: Gosh, that thought is too threatening. That's too scary. That's outside of the box. We've never done that before. We don't know if we can. That seems impractical.

The average person in most churches just wants to be left alone. Please, just leave us alone. We just want to be comfortable and rest. Please allow us to anesthetize ourselves with the idols of our larger homes and larger bathrooms, with our careers, our relationships, and our ideas about how to organize our lives.

And then dangerous dreamers come along. And they challenge the status quo and they shake us up. And they say that we were put on earth for something more than simply comfortable compromise and accommodation with the idols of our age. We can have more. We can be different. It is a dangerous dream to look at what doesn't exist – a church, a church building and say "why not?" I think of Bobby Kennedy's famous line: **Some people see things as they are and they say "why?" I see things that never were and say "why not?"**

This morning as we dedicate this building, I want to call this church to a renewal of our dreams. We are not dedicating a resting place and the achievement of our dreams. What we are celebrating and dedicating this morning is a launching pad from which we can verse new dreams. What I would like to call us today is to become a dangerous people, a people who say things that never were and say "why not?" And then we go about the business of doing it.

Why not a church that sees thousands of people come to Christ each year. Why not? Why not become a church that produces scores and scores of real disciples who would do anything for their Lord Jesus Christ? Why not?

Why not aim at becoming an integrated church? Why settle for what the society tells us? We have to have white churches and then African-American churches. Why not a church that goes after diversity? Why not?

Why not a church where young and old don't dismiss each other or run from each other or put up their hands to defend themselves against each other? Why not be a church where young and old adults come together and really generally feel their need for each other? Why not?

Why not be a church that has teenagers that are so alive in Christ that the thought of doing drugs or engaging in premarital sex simply has no hold? Why not a group of teens who are filled with the Holy Spirit and filled with passion for Christ? Why not?

Why not be a church where the Spirit of God's power is so evident that people are getting healed and delivered from addictions? Why not? Why not pray for the Spirit's coming? Why not kick over a few sacred cows and so church differently than its been done before? Why not? What's stopping us?

There is no rule that says that the Columbus Vineyard has to play the religious game. Why not build a community that is different than anything that is currently modeled in America? Why not a group of people who are genuinely trying to love each other and are genuinely trying to speak well of each other and don't judge each other and don't gossip about each other. Why not do real Christianity here? Why not?

Why not have a school that graduates several hundred Christian leaders, pastors and missionaries, business and academic leaders? Why not finish the project that we started in South India of building a training center and then man that training center so that we can participate in turning South India on its head for Christ? Why not?

Why not use our size not to get caught up in ourselves, but to take even bigger risks and to be even more audacious with the projects and the plans that we undertake in the future?

This morning we are coming together not only to dedicate a piece of ground or to dedicate a building to the worship of God. But to dedicate ourselves in a fresh way toward becoming the kind of dangerous dreamers that God is looking for.

The text that we are going to be looking at today is found in Hebrews 11:1-12.

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead. By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not

experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith Abraham, even though he was past age – and Sarah herself was barren – was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good a dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

Verses one and two tell us that we are going to be looking at dangerous dreamers from the past. *Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.* Faith is being sure of we hope for or having the assurance of things hoped for. Faith anticipates the future. Other translations put this Greek word “hypostases” as faith gives substance to our hopes. It’s by faith that dreams from God are made substantial. They don’t stay in the realm of virtual reality. Faith gives substance to our dreams. It allows us to see into the future and to see into the invisible realm as if it is already real.

Let’s look down the list of dreamers beginning in v. 3: *By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.*

V. 3 shares the worldview of the Christian dreamer. Our worldview is this: that all that we see began with the command of God. The Christian is the person in the community who says that in the beginning nothing existed but the Triune God. This perfect Trinitarian God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a Being who is utterly content, who had no needs, who is self-sufficient. The Triune God who experienced love in community between Father, Son and Spirit. And as an act of love, this Triune Being spoke a word, “Let there be light” and so the universe began.

And not only so, but it is sustained by God without him upholding the universe, it would collapse in on itself. And all the atoms that make up everything would fly apart. The universe begins with God, it continues with God, and it ends with God. The goal of creation for the Christian dreamer is bringing every thinking, feeling being into a love relationship with God forever. The quest is to win the universe of men, women and children for Christ. That’s what we are about. That’s what we dream about.

But we recognize that if anything exists – this building, these chairs, this stage, this equipment, and the parking lot – if anything exists, it exists solely by the command of God, from whom, to whom and through whom are all things. Which leads to this very simple point: that dreamers are grateful to God for everything that we have.

The apostle Paul once asked the church in Corinth: What do you have that you did not receive? It was a rhetorical question. That answer is “nothing.” What is it that we are dedicating today that we didn’t first get from God? The answer is “nothing.” It all came from him – all the money, all the strength, and all the intelligence it took to build this. All the efforts. From him, through him and to him are all things.

Part of what we do in a Dedication Service is to simply say “Thank you, God. Thank you for your gifts. Thank you for your hand.” Os Guinness quotes a famous artist who once said, “The worst moment in the world for an atheist is when he is genuinely thankful, but has nobody to thank.” When your heart bursts with gratitude at the birth of one of your children or grandchildren, when you are filled to overflowing as you look out at a gorgeous sunset, when you hold your spouse and you are so happy that you get to enjoy love that you begin to cry, when you begin to see a part of a dream realized and become substantial, what a terrible thing it would be to be full of gratitude and praise and have no one to say “thank you” to. The Christian dreamer has someone to say “thank you” to – our Lord Jesus Christ.

And Abel is an example of the grateful dreamer. We read in v. 4: *By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.* Genesis 4 tells us that Abel offered the first of his flock and Cain gave some of the fruits of his field. Abel’s offering was accepted by God; but Cain’s was not. Throughout Christian history there have been theories about why Abel’s offering was accepted and Cain’s wasn’t. There is no suggestion in the text that it was because Abel’s offering was an animal sacrifice. That it involved a blood offering that would make atonement. Whereas an offering of fruit would not. It wasn’t that one cost more, that Abel’s was more expensive and Cain’s was less expensive. They both gave what was appropriate to their vocations. Cain was a farmer; Abel a shepherd.

What we see in the sacrifice of Abel, according to this author, is that Abel’s sacrifice was the outward expression of a heart filled with faith and gratitude. *By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offering.* When many of you gave to the building campaign so that this building we are dedicating today would be able to be built, your pledge was an act of faith. You stretched. You said, “God, you need to provide. I am relying on you. I am responding to what I believe you are saying to me.” Some of you are choosing to continue to hold onto your original commitment and your original pledge. Some of you may pray about whether to start to give, since a significant part of this building is not yet paid for.

The issue is always going to be what will God see in your sacrifice. What does he see? As God looks into your heart, does he see faith? Does he see the kind of why not

stretch, why not be radical, why not act on what I say I believe? I say I believe the most important things in the world are those things which aren't totally practical – things like preaching the gospel and worship to an invisible God. Does God see in you and your sacrifices a willingness to live consistent with what you say your convictions really are? Does God see in you and your sacrifices the grateful heart of Abel – just a heart of gratitude? That's part of what propels a dreamer forward. It is gratitude. It is "I love you, Jesus. You have been so good to me. What I give is just a way for me to say thank you." Whenever you stroke a check and put it in the offering basket, whenever you serve in inconvenience, it is just a way to say thank you, Jesus.

Michaelangelo once did a pencil drawing of the Pieta for a friend. With the dead body of Jesus supported by angels at her feet, Mary doesn't cradle her son as in his other renderings. But in the pencil drawing of the Pieta, Mary raises her hands and her eyes toward heaven. On the upright beam of the cross, Michaelangelo inscribed a line from Dante's *Paradise*, which is the focus of the drawing. The line is this: **No one thinks of how much blood it cost.**

It is very rare that we pause and kneel with our eyes upward in adoration and say: I haven't said thank you recently for how much blood it cost for me to know you. I haven't said thank you recently for how much blood it cost for us to have a church. I haven't said thank you recently for how much blood it cost to forgive me and to show grace to me; for how frequently I disobey you.

What propels dreamers forward, friends, is faith and gratitude.

See, gratitude – a recognition that we have nothing that we haven't received will keep us as a large church from becoming full of ourselves. It is gratitude that will get our eyes off of our accomplishments onto his accomplishments. Augustan once said that the Christian life was supposed to be **a Hallelujah from head to toe**. Just one praise to God for head to toe. That is what God wants.

Dreamers are not only grateful to God, but dreamers draw near to God. *By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*

All that the Bible says of Enoch in Genesis is that Enoch lived 65 years and fathered Methuselah. And Enoch walked with God after he fathered Methuselah for 300 years and fathered sons and daughters. All the days of Enoch were 365 years and Enoch walked with God and he was not, for God took him. Out of the tens of billions of men

and women who have lived, Enoch was one of only two men in the history of the world who didn't die. Along with the prophet Elijah, he was one of just two – Enoch and Elijah – who didn't experience death, but who was taken up alive to be with God.

It seems that there was a time in Enoch's life when he did not walk with God, but apparently he began walking with God after the birth of his son, Methuselah, when he was 65. Maybe Enoch realized that he couldn't be a decent father to his son without a relationship with God. Maybe he saw that the birth of his son was the gift from God that he waited for for 65 years to receive and had not yet. But something made him change. Something made him want to draw near to God.

Has something made you change where you were not walking with God and began to walk with God? What, if anything, made you change? What would make you change now, if you haven't been walking with God, to get you to draw near to God? What would make you change?

Most people change out of personal need. They draw near to God because they realize they can't be the kind of people that they want to be. They can never find the fulfillment or the peace or the freedom from addiction or the comfort or help. Most people draw near to God because life is not working. And so they cry out to Christ and say, "I want to change. I need your help. I need you in my life."

Dangerous dreamers are folks who are grateful to God, who see him as the source of everything they have that is good. And they are willing to take the steps necessary to change their lives by drawing near to God. What makes you truly dangerous is if you are a person who is intimate with Almighty God. You are not just a person who has great ideas, a great personality, who may be bright or talented, who has a great singing voice. What makes you dangerous, what shakes up the status quo in this world is a person who spends time and is intimate with Almighty God.

Enoch was just such a man. He walked with God.

The text goes on to say: *Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*

How do we draw near to God? We first of all must believe that God exists. This is the most fundamental belief that undergirds all of the Christian faith – to believe that God, who is invisible, who cannot be seen or touched, God who is immortal, King of all ages, actually exists. And not just a God exists. That is not Christian faith. That won't make you dangerous – a God exists. I believe in a higher power. I believe in a supreme force. What makes a person dangerous is to believe in *the* God. To believe *the* God who created the world, who spoke through the prophets, who authored the scriptures and who sent his Son Jesus to die on a cross and to be raised from the dead – *the* God who sends his Spirit into this world to give us the power to change. It is believing in *the* God and believing that that God exists.

And not only does he exist, but he rewards those who go after him. I love this phrase: *He rewards those who earnestly seek him*. This is the secret of dangerous Christian dreamers. They believe that it makes a difference whether they pray or not; whether they draw near to God or not.

Let me ask you a question: Do you in your heart of hearts believe that it really makes a difference whether or not you pray about something? Some people are what I call Christian fatalists. They would say: Yeah, I believe in the God, the God of the Bible, but I am not really convinced that it really makes a difference if I pray for a loved one or not. I am not sure that God really cares if I seek him over and over again for the salvation of my kids or my parents. Or whether God is just going to do what God is going to do no matter what.

The dreamer says, “No.” The dreamer takes God at his word and says, “You reward those who diligently seek you.” The dreamer refuses to look at the world the way it is and say, “Well, *que sera sera*, what will be, will be. What can I do to change anything.” The dreamer says, “My God, the Almighty, the Invisible, the Only Wise, Omnipotent, Omniscient, All-Knowing, All-Loving, All Gracious God, my God hears prayer. And it makes a difference to my God whether I pray or not.”

My God can break in and change my marriage.

My God can break in and change my child.

My God can break in and change me.

I will never give up, the dreamer says, praying to him.

I am going to give him my health problems. My emotional problems. My fears. My job concerns. My future. This relationship.

The dreamer says: My God does hear me. My God does see me on my knees. My God does see my tears. My God knows that I am afraid.

Dreamers are grateful. Dreamers are empowered by drawing near to God. And dreamers believe that God can do something unprecedented. *By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith, he condemned the world and became heir to the righteousness that comes by faith.* It says that Noah was able to be warned. Some people, because they can't immediately feel the sting of the consequences of their sins, say: Oh, there probably won't be any consequences. Some people shut the voice of God out. God keeps trying to talk to you and warn you. Don't go there. Don't do that. Don't cross that line. That's dangerous. That is not a good relationship. That is not a good financial move. That is not a good job to take.

But because we want to do what we want to do, we don't take God's warnings very seriously. As we figure it, I can't see how this would be so bad. It doesn't seem to me that dating outside the faith or engaging in premarital or extramarital sex or moving to another city or separating from our mates, or any of a thousand other things we do – I

can't see it as bad. It says that Noah was warned about things not yet seen and in holy fear, he built an ark to save his family.

Write this down: Ask yourself this question: Am I a person who listens to God's warnings? Am I a person who takes God's warnings seriously enough to fear the consequences of disobeying him?

But on this theme of dreaming, Noah was a dreamer. He not only took God's warning seriously, but he believed that God could do something utterly unprecedented. In the history of the world, up until the time of Noah, no global flood had ever occurred. Some people believe that up until that time, it had not yet rained. But to build an ark maybe hundreds of miles inland from the sea would have seemed absolutely absurd to Noah's neighbors. Noah was responding to God's Word and like all dreamers he believed that God could do something for the first time, something that he had never done before that was unprecedented in the history of the world. Dreamers say, "Why not? My God answers prayers. My God continues to speak. As I have an open heart to God and hear his call, why not? So what if it has never been done. So what if it has never been done that way?

Friends, can you believe for something unprecedented in your life? To say: God, I want to believe again that you can totally change my marriage after all the counseling, after all the fighting, or all the pleas and prayers? Can you believe for something unprecedented in God bringing one of your children to repentance? Or giving the gift of salvation to a loved one or a friend? Or healing a loved one? Or birthing an unprecedented ministry in this church? Maybe we aren't touching our reaching out to a certain segment of the community. Maybe no church has reached out to that particular segment. Why can't God use you and some other people? Why can't God do a new thing or call you to a totally new ministry? Why can't he? He had Noah build an ark inland. It had never been done before.

Last point: Dreamers are grateful to God. Dreamers draw near to God. Dreamers believe God for the unprecedented. And dreamers are engaged in a lifelong journey with God. *By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundation, whose architect and builder is God.*

I love this statement in v. 9 that *By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents.* Abraham was a lifelong sojourner. Even in the promised land Abraham lived like a pilgrim. And this is where we need to be and live as a result of building this new sanctuary. Like Abraham, the continual dreamer, he was never a settler. He was always a pioneer. He was constantly looking forward, constantly pressing the envelope of faith.

Friends, this building is not our dream home. Our dream home awaits us in heaven with God. That's our dream home. You never build a dream home by getting a piece of property in the country and hiring an architect. If that's your dream, what a small dream it is. What a poor dreamer you are. We Christian dreamers are pulled forward by a dream that could never be quite captured or realized by any set of architectural plans in this world. This is not our dream home. This new sanctuary is more like a bus station where people will come for a period of time, get healed up, get trained up, and get sent out to change this world. This is a launching pad, not a rest home. This is a place where we pull people into such close connection with Almighty God that they become dangerous dreamers who look at things that never were and say: Why not?

Let's pray.

In Praise of Dreamers

Rich Nathan

May 20-21, 2000

The Dedication of the New Building

Hebrews 11:1-12

- I. Dreamers Ask God “Why Not?” (Heb. 11:1, 2)

- II. Dreamers Are Grateful to God (Heb. 11:3, 4)

- III. Dreamers Draw Near to God (Heb. 11:5, 6)

- IV. Dreamers Believe God for the Unprecedented (Heb. 11:7)

- V. Dreamers Journey With God (Heb. 11:8-10)