

Dreams

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Funny things happen in dreams. We're walking across the stage to receive the Oscar, but whoops, we've forgotten our clothes. We're back in 8th grade and we didn't study for the test. Someone that we loved and lost a long time ago comes back to have tea with us. We dream we're falling out of a tree.

In Bible Study a couple of weeks ago we remembered dreams of math problems solved between lights out and dawn. We considered old family struggles smoothed over in dreams. Strange things have happened in our dreams.

Powerful things happen in dreams. We travel to places we've never been. Poetry gets written. Sermons get finished. Traumas get processed. Patterns start to emerge out of chaos. You go to bed in crisis and you wake up with a plan. You go to bed with a plan and wake up with a new plan.

That's Joseph's story. He went to bed with a completely reasonable plan and he woke up with a completely different, unreasonable plan.

I imagine that when he went to bed that night, in the little room above the carpentry shop, he fell into bed exhausted. He had walked the roads and alleyways of Nazareth for hours, and walked the hills and fields outside of town, trying to make sense of the day's revelation: Mary, his betrothed, was pregnant. And she said it was God's doing. So she was not only unfaithful, but also either dishonest or insane. Maybe she loved another man. Or maybe she had been violated. Or maybe Mary was a troubled soul. However it was, Joseph thought he could no longer marry her. The chaos and the grief were overwhelming: betrayal, loss, anger, uncertainty, humiliation, uncertainty, hopelessness, fear. All this was swirling inside of him. And in the midst of all this, mercy, and compassion, and love, for this young woman he adored.

When the soles of his sandals had almost worn through, when his legs ached and his hands were sore from clenching, when the very last candle had gone out in the very last kitchen in town, when he could walk no more, he stumbled home and to his bed.

By then, he had a plan. A very quiet divorce. The compassionate option. He loved her enough to protect her even if he could no longer marry her.

I imagine that he prayed before he closed his eyes.

Maybe he prayed for understanding.

Maybe he prayed for peace after a difficult decision.

Maybe he prayed for Mary.

Maybe he simply prayed to be able to rest.

Somehow I doubt that Joseph asked for a vision, asked for a dream, although his ancestors in faith had received countless insights in the depths of the night.

Remember Joel who offered God's prophecy:

“I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.”

Remember Joseph’s namesake, whose dreams saved so many.

But, when we are worried, we don’t imagine good news coming in our sleep. When we are confused, we don’t imagine clarity coming in the night.

I imagine that as Joseph closed his eyes, he could not imagine something happening that would right the pain that he was feeling. And I imagine that as exhausted as he was, sleep did not come quickly...that this man, whom one preacher calls “one of those good people of few words, solid and simple as the wood he worked in his trade as a carpenter,” this man tossed and turned for hours, agonizing.

And then, when sleep finally came, then came the dream.

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid.”

A dream like the prophecy of Isaiah:

Isaiah 43:14-21

“15 I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King. 16 Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters... 18 Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. 19 I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

Do not be afraid.

I am doing a new thing.

Something Joseph could not even have even imagined while he was awake. It took a dream for him to see it.

“Joseph is awakened by his dream.”

Funny what happens in our dreams.

There’s room in our lives for dreams and visions, for little bits of mysticism (or bright, shining, stunning moments of wonder). Sometimes it makes us panic a little, to think of inviting in the inexplicable. And that is fair, most dreams don’t come with clear instructions like those to Joseph:

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Call him Emmanuel.

If it’s not that clear, it’s okay. The Bible even gives us a way to check what we think our dreams are saying:

4 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God... (1 John 4)

We know the right questions to ask: is this the direction of compassion, of courage, of justice, of love? We have community, too, in which to check the direction our dreams might send us.

Desmond Tutu gives us another reason to be open to the power of dreams. Sometimes, sometimes, we glimpse God's own dream for us, and for the world, dreams for a future filled with love and laughter.

1:24 "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife..."

God, who is still speaking, even today, came to Joseph when he began to dream, and showed him an unimagined future; a pattern in chaos; hope instead of pain. And when Joseph woke up it was not divorce that was on his mind: he was already figuring out what kind of wood he would use for this holy baby's cradle.

25 "...and [Joseph] named him Jesus."

Rosalind Brown writes, "Advent is a time of preparation for the coming of God, a time to pay attention to the clues that God is active, a time to practice the scales of fidelity that will enable us to play the new music when God puts it in front of us."

If God has visited you in one dream, perhaps you go to bed every night wondering if God will visit again in the wee hours. Perhaps, every night after the baby arrived, Joseph prayed for courage, for strength, for wisdom. Joseph prayed by candlelight before kissing the child goodnight, prayed that this child would hear God's voice in his dreams, too. Maybe, Joseph prayed to be open to the next dream.

Matthew tells us that God appeared to Joseph in a dream a little while later, and told him to take his wife and son to Egypt, out of harm's way. God spoke to Joseph in a dream and said, go this direction. Follow this path.

Funny things happen in dreams. Sometimes, God says, Go this direction. This is your path.

That is why we dream.

"Give us your dream, O Holy One.
Guide us and give us courage,
like Joseph,
to live toward your dream's fulfillment."

Amen.