

“In Your Wildest Dreams”

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5-19-19

Based upon Gen. 28:10-22; Acts 11:1-18

I have always been a vivid dreamer, and spend most of my nights being bombarded by elaborate technicolor dramas both good and bad. But when God called me to go into ministry almost twenty-four years ago, it didn't feel like a dream. I was awakened in the middle of the night as if physically shaken, by an authoritative, unfamiliar voice telling me that I should be “advocating for the Lord.” Accompanying those words was the memory of a lengthy conversation that I had apparently had, debating what that meant, although that was not what I had been dreaming when I was awakened. I was also shown a vision of a spreadsheet of my life, connecting dots that I had never consciously connected myself, all demonstrating that I was ready now to advocate for the Lord. The experience was so overwhelming that I was awake for the rest of the night, drenched in sweat, with my heart racing. I didn't know what to make of it all or what to do about it. I was a lawyer at the time, living in a world grounded in reason and demonstrable evidence, not emotion and visions. So, I called my pastor in the morning, poured out the whole experience to him, and then said, “What do you think? It was probably just a crazy dream, right? I don't have to change my life for a dream, or take it seriously right?” He thought for a minute, trying to digest all I had told him, which he later told me I had spilled out so fast that it almost sounded like I was speaking in tongues. Finally, he said, “Well I don't know, Elizabeth. Even if it was a dream, and it doesn't sound like one, there is a strong biblical precedent for God speaking to people in dreams. I think you would do well to take it seriously and think about what it might mean.”

Up until that point, I had never really thought about dreams in the Bible, but as he correctly noted, there is a strong biblical precedent for God communicating with humankind through dreams or visions, what the Bible calls waking dreams. It is a dream that tells Joseph not to divorce Mary, and to take his new family to safety in Egypt when Herod is on the rampage. (Matt. 1:20; 2:13). It is a vision that persuaded Ananias to heal the apostle Paul after he was blinded on the road to Damascus, rather than let him dwell in darkness as a punishment for his crimes. (Acts 9:10). Dreams, and his ability to interpret them, saved Daniel when he was in exile in Babylon, (Dan. 4), and also the other Joseph when he was imprisoned in Egypt. (Gen. 40 and 41). Dreams and visions allowed the prophets to hear God. As God explains to the Israelites in the *Book of Numbers*: “When there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams.” (Num. 12:6). The entire *Book of Revelation* we considered last week purports to be a dream God gave to John to give the persecuted Christians hope. Thus, in Scripture, dreams and visions are not the stuff of nonsense; they are a means by which God makes God's wishes and way known.

We just heard in today's lessons, the stories of how two famous biblical characters grew spiritually from dreams and visions. When Jacob had his famous dream, he was far from being spiritually enlightened. Having tricked his twin, Esau, out of his birthright, and his father Isaac, into giving him Esau's blessing, Jacob was on the run because Esau wanted to kill him. While he

was running Jacob was not pondering the morality of his actions, just their consequences, and did not seem to know the God who had inspired his grandfather, Abraham, to give up everything he knew in order to gain only previously dreamed-of blessings. So, when Jacob picked a rock for his pillow and lay down to rest in the middle of nowhere, outside a city no one remembers called Luz, he was shocked to be given a dream that revealed he was on holy ground. In his dream he saw angels of God, ascending to and descending from Heaven, carrying messages to earth. Tradition says they were on a ladder, which has led all kinds of people to think hierarchically about what you have to do to climb the ladder to get into Heaven. But in the Hebrew, it says the messengers of God were on a ramp that looked like a ladder, kind of like the ones that led up and into Mesopotamian ziggurats, buildings which were seen as homes for the gods. **[Image of a ziggurat shown]**. The symbolic point of the ramp ladder, therefore, was not to reveal the height, hierarchy, or difficulty of the climb, but to reveal the access. Heaven and earth were not light-years or lifetimes apart. In his dream, Jacob had direct access to God, a point made even clearer when suddenly, God was by Jacob's side in the dream, promising him the same things that God had promised his grandfather: land, prolific offspring, and the assurance that God would be with him always.

Upon waking, Jacob christened the place of the dream "Bethel," which means "house of God," and agreed as his grandfather had, that if God was going to do all those things for him, then he would recognize Yahweh as his God. It took about another two decades for Jacob to learn how to be a decent guy and not just a trickster/thief. But he went on to become the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the place he named, went on to be, in Walter Brueggemann's estimation, the most important city in the Israelite tradition after Jerusalem.¹ That dream in Bethel changed the path of his life, and shaped the story of Israel.

Peter was awake when God delivered his life-changing message. This time instead of seeing angels come down from the sky, Peter saw something like a picnic blanket, filled with animals that God was offering him to kill as food. Some of the animals were kosher, and some were not. At first Peter was appalled by the suggestion that he would make a snack out of a creature not approved by the Law. He interpreted the vision as a test of his faithfulness. But then a voice from Heaven told him three times: "What God has made clean; you must not call profane." After the picnic blanket disappeared, three men showed up asking Peter to go with them to Caesarea to share the gospel with a Gentile household there. Remember I said that "three" in the Bible is like the fingerprint of God? Peter realized from this experience that God intended the Gospel to be for Gentiles as well as Jews. His whole ministry changed, and with it the Church. Most scholars believe that if Peter had not declared Gentiles clean for Gospel-receiving purposes, Paul's ministry to the Gentiles would never have been accepted. But Peter did, and as a result the Church grew exponentially through the ministries of both men.

¹ Brueggemann, Walter, Genesis, INTERPRETATION: A BIBLE COMMENTARY FOR TEACHING AND PREACHING (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 247.

It's hard for us to imagine what a radical move this was at the time, we who are largely descendants of Gentiles. But at the time, Jews saw Gentiles not just as different, but truly as profane. It took a dream, told three times in *Acts* for holy emphasis, to convey that their old views were wrong. In Christ there was no longer Jew and Gentile, and thanks to Peter's dream, the Church has learned since then not to exclude other people on the grounds that they are profane, including LGBTQ children of God. Peter's vision truly changed not only his life, but the Church as well.

Today if a Christian leader said that a dream told him or her that the Church needed to scrap a core theological understanding, I'm not sure whether people would respond the same way. In our scientific, post-Enlightenment world, we tend to think of dreams as either the meaningless product of nocturnal neural cleansing, or as simply revelations of our own unconscious yearnings and fears. We think of people who see visions as being mentally ill. Most of us do not make a lot of effort to remember or catch our dreams as Native American culture teaches, let alone think of them as an access point to God.

That's why it's worth remembering that not only does the Bible speak of God working in and through our dreams, so does psychology. Carl Jung, the great psychoanalyst, built a huge part of his practice around dream interpretation. After leaving a shared practice with Freud, who he came to believe missed the point and message of dreams almost entirely, Jung immersed himself in dream studies for fifty years, and discovered in the process that our dreams are filled not just with unconscious yearnings and fears, but also with messages and truths that transcend our individual circumstances. He encouraged everyone to study their dreams to learn more about themselves, their faith, and the world.

“Christians often ask why God does not speak to them as he is believed to have done in former days,” Jung wrote in his book *Man and His Symbols*. “When I hear such questions, it always makes me think of the rabbi who asked how it could be that God often showed himself to people in the olden days while nowadays nobody ever sees him. The rabbi replied: ‘Nowadays there is no longer anybody who can bow low enough.’ This answer hits the nail on the head. We are so captivated by and entangled in our subjective consciousness that we have forgotten the age-old fact that God speaks chiefly through dreams and visions... I doubt whether there is a Protestant treatise or doctrine that would stoop so low as to admit the possibility that the [voice of God] might be perceived in a dream. But if a theologian really believes in God, by what authority does he suggest that God is unable to speak through dreams?”²

While I would quibble with his jab at Protestants, I agree with him that we would do well not to dismiss our dreams as embarrassing nonsense or pure neuroscience. That doesn't mean that every dream we have is a profound message from God, of course. Sometimes a dream, like the classic one about being naked in public, it just a dream that you are feeling anxious and vulnerable. Sometimes a dream that is wild and unsettling is just a mental rehashing of the *Game of Thrones* episode that you watched before bed, not a divine calling. But if we make an effort to

² Jung, Carl, G., *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Dell Pub. Co., 1964), 92-3.

remember our dreams, even writing them down so we won't forget them, I do believe that through the grace of God we can learn more about how to become whole and fulfill our divine purpose. I also believe that sometimes, if not all the time, we may hear the word of God.

The psychiatrist and author Scott Peck believed this. He considered dreams to be a form or way "in which the gifts of grace are given to us.... so that if we are able to unlock their symbolism, their messages almost always lead to spiritual growth."³ When we are awake, our conscious need for control and familiarity tends to block our receptivity to the divine. But when we are asleep, and therefore less guarded and more vulnerable, the Spirit's guidance can come through. Peck did not believe that you have to be asleep in order to be enlightened in this way, moreover. He also believed that waking visions or "idle thoughts" could be means of grace. So, whenever he had a persistent day dream, or recurring thought that kept interrupting his regular stream of thought, he would pay close attention to it for such thoughts and dreams were often, in his words, "pay dirt," in terms of revealing something important about himself or one of his clients. The Spirit's prodding can happen at any time of day.

Do you remember your sleeping dreams or pay attention to your day dreams? Do you ever have recurring dreams? I would especially pay attention to the latter. But even a single dream can hold a message that can transform how you see yourself, others, or the world. Your dreams can tell you how you are really feeling about a situation if you've been in denial. They can tell you what gives you joy and what or who you love. They can tell you it's time to change or time to let go. So, I invite you to try this as an exercise. Make it a practice before you go to bed, to pray to God about whatever is weighing on your heart. Ask for God to help you in your understanding and handling of the situation; then go to sleep open to receiving God's guidance in your dreams. Even if you don't hear a voice or see a vision, if you trust that God is at work in what your unconscious is trying to tell you, you can discover all kinds of things that are invaluable to achieving wholeness, connection and peace; and the more you study your dreams, the easier it will be to understand their symbolic language.

There's a Hasidic story about a Rabbi named Isaac, son of Yekel, who had a series of dreams in which he was told to dig for treasure in Prague under a bridge that lead to the king's palace. After the third dream, he set out for Prague. But when he arrived, he found that the bridge was guarded day and night, so he didn't dare dig. Finally, the captain of the guards, who had been watching him, asked him whether he was looking for something or waiting for someone. Rabbi Isaac told him of the dream that had brought him there. The captain laughed, "Because of a dream, you poor fellow, you wore out your shoes to come here! Why if I paid any attention to dreams, I would have had to get going when a dream once told me to go to Krakow and dig for treasure under the stove in the room of a Jew. Isaac, son of Yekel, that was his name." And he laughed again. Rabbi Isaac bowed, traveled back home, and dug up the treasure under his stove."⁴

³ Peck, M. Scott, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 244-45.

⁴ *Animating Illustrations*, cf. "dreams", HOMILETICSONLINE, retrieved from https://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=dreams&imageField2=

I can't promise that you have buried treasure under your stove. But I can promise you that treasure of a different kind can be found in your dreams. As Scripture reveals again and again, they can be an access point to God. So, don't be afraid to travel and dig, and don't feel that you are too enlightened to take them seriously. By the mercy of God, there is grace to be found in our dreams, and whether or not there is also a calling for us in them, our recognizing that grace may still change the world. Amen.