

DARE TO DREAM

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Text: 1 Kings 2:10–12; 3:1–15

Today's assigned scripture reading from the Revised Common Lectionary effectively ends the reign of King David with his death and introduces us to David's son Solomon as the next king. If you heard my sermon on July 25, you probably will not be surprised that I am glad to be done with this chapter of biblical history, and my feelings about David and God's preference for him remain conflicted. Last week, with Seth's fine sermon on individual and communal grief, we left David weeping for his son Absalom. Interestingly, the lectionary readings leave out what happens next, and David's questionable leadership tactics continue. If you are interested in David's final acts as King, please read 2 Samuel 19–24. In our summer series, we only have this week and next with King Solomon before the lectionary shifts to some wisdom writings and we transition into a brand new sermon series for the fall. And so we only receive a glimpse into Solomon's reign, through which David's legacy—for better or for worse—remains strong.

Hear these words from the 2nd and 3rd chapters of 1 Kings using the translation *The Message*:

Then David joined his ancestors. He was buried in the City of David. David ruled Israel for forty years—seven years in Hebron and another thirty-three in Jerusalem. Solomon took over on the throne of his father David; he had a firm grip on the kingdom.

The king went to Gibeon, the most prestigious of the local shrines, to worship. He sacrificed a thousand Whole-Burnt-Offerings on that altar. That night, there in Gibeon, God appeared to Solomon in a dream: God said, "What can I give you? Ask."

Solomon said, "You were extravagantly generous in love with David my father, and he lived faithfully in your presence, his relationships were just and his heart right. And you have persisted in this great and generous love by giving him—and this very day!—a son to sit on his throne.

"And now here I am: God, my God, you have made me, your servant, ruler of the kingdom in place of David my father. I'm too young for this, a mere child! I don't know the ropes, hardly know the 'ins' and 'outs' of this job. And here I am, set down in the middle of the people you've chosen, a great people—far too many to ever count.

"Here's what I want: Give me an understanding mind so I can lead your people well, discerning the difference between good and evil. For who on their own is capable of leading your glorious people?"

God was delighted with Solomon's response. And God said to him, "Because you have asked for this and haven't grasped after a long life, or riches, or the doom of your enemies, but you have asked for the ability to lead and govern well, I'll give you what you've asked for—I'm giving you a wise and mature heart. There's never been one like you before; and there'll be no one after. As a bonus, I'm giving you both the wealth and glory you didn't ask for—there's not a king anywhere who will come up to your mark. And if you stay on course, keeping your eye on the life-map and the God-signs as your father David did, I'll also give you a long life."

Solomon woke up—what a dream! He returned to Jerusalem, took his place before the Chest of the Covenant of God, and worshiped by sacrificing Whole-Burnt-Offerings and Peace-Offerings. Then he laid out a banquet for everyone in his service.

Let us pray:

Holy One, open our hearts to new meaning in these ancient words. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

* * *

I am fascinated by dreams. Isn't it amazing how the brain can conjure up images of people whom you haven't seen in decades—much less given a second thought in that long—who suddenly become center stage in a situation you are grappling with, creating a cinematic feature using a bizarre plot twist with needlessly specific details? Or is that just me? I take cues from my dreams: When someone I love who died shows up in a dream, I know I have some grief work unattended. When I awake troubled from a particular dream, I contemplate another approach to problem solving. When a friend with whom I have lost touch appears in a dream, I take that as a nudge to reach out. And while I do not have recurring dreams, I do have a repeated theme dream—most often in the form of what is called an “actor’s nightmare,” in which one finds themselves on stage for a particular role and cannot remember a single line or stage direction. My stage is always a church or a pulpit, where I find myself woefully unprepared for the sermon I was to preach, and always chaos ensues. I wake up from those thinking it may be time for a day off. It intrigues me which dreams dissipate upon awakening—there is an awareness that something specific and significant happened in a dream state but the cast of characters and details can no longer be retained—compared to the ones we simply can't let go. While on vacation two weeks ago I dreamt that my 17-year-old Hannah got married on her 18th birthday. It was vivid and real and has haunted me ever since. Trust me, I have shared my dream with Hannah, who rolls her eyes at me and states that I am ridiculous, and I should know her better than that. And I know that what that dream is really about is my grappling with Hannah leaving for college in a year, when I become an empty nester. But, still . . .

There are 21 dreams recorded in the Bible, most found in the Hebrew scriptures, many of which involve a seemingly direct message from God. In the 12th chapter of the book of Numbers it states, “God said, Listen now to my words: those of you who are called to be prophets know that I make myself known to you in visions; I speak to you in dreams.” Solomon’s dream takes center stage in our scripture reading today. Here we have a new king at the beginning of his reign, a position given to him even though he is not David’s oldest son, and it appears that Solomon is having some anxiety about what lies ahead. Solomon’s rule has been established before we read of his dream, but it commences with bloodshed that continues the violence marking much of David’s reign, including the execution of his older brother. Apparently, Solomon is exhausted, and in his sleep God appears asking him to make a petition. Solomon waxes eloquent about how much God loved David, and Solomon’s plight in being a young king, and then Solomon gets specific in his request: “give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.” (3:9) Note here that “understanding mind” is also translated as “listening heart,” both of which are beautiful qualities of a servant leader.

God rewards Solomon for not requesting material riches or a long life by granting Solomon just that, along with the legacy for which Solomon is known: wisdom. A listening heart, an understanding mind, the ability to discern what is right and good—we might all pray to be gifted these things, but they are especially significant, and often lacking, in our governmental leaders. We can praise Solomon for his discerning plea and use this as an example of the ways our own prayer petitions might be shaped. For Solomon, the fact that this exchange happened via a dream seems to have a particular impact—for upon his awakening he goes to Jerusalem to worship and then serves a generous banquet for everyone in his employ.

How do our dreams shape our actions? While we do not know yet the long-lasting effect of Solomon's dream, we do know that there was an immediate response and it was one of praise and gratitude. Are you compelled by any nocturnal vision to try something new, re-approach a current conflict, or be more thoughtful in the way you live? Dreaming is not always friendly, and for some it can be traumatic. Studies have shown that dreams during this pandemic have become more vivid and sometimes disturbing, a phenomenon similar to the impact 9/11 had on dreams. For those with PTSD, a report suggests 70–90% have consistent nightmares.¹ There are many in our midst whose best nights of sleep are dreamless. So perhaps, Solomon's dream and encounter with God is a prompting to consider our dreams and spiritual interactions while wide awake. I have noticed, since living in a pandemic, and especially since our glimmers of pre-pandemic life have been devastated by the Delta variant, that we seem reluctant to dream and vision our future. We pray for normalcy without considering whether we really want to resume the status quo of February 2020. Think about that. Do we genuinely want what used to be? Or is now the time to create a different future, more inclusive and less contentious?

We grieve all that we have lost: the death of those whom we love; the sadness around canceled opportunities, missed travel, and other milestone experiences. We vent our frustrations over the need to wear facemasks we thought we had safely tucked away. We worry about what the future holds. What has happened to the necessary dreaming, the visioning of the future we want to procure? And where is God in the midst of our daily living and future shaping? We baptized two beautiful children of God today. What do we want the world to be like as Hana and Tashi share their gifts with humanity? If we cannot dream for ourselves, could we dream for them? Yes, the pandemic has stolen so much from us, and life has changed in ways too numerous to list. Yet if we dare to dream a different future, we then become vessels for hope—and isn't hope what we need most right now? We hope that what is will not always be, and instead there is a future we have yet to imagine. I recently had a conversation with a man who had only weeks earlier retired from decades of work. He confessed he was trying to acclimate to his new life and schedule. He told me that in about six months or so he planned to find a job. I asked if he would continue in his chosen career. He didn't think so, he said. He was giving himself some time to be present to what is and to see what opportunities might arise. I told him that what was waiting for him was perhaps something he could not even yet imagine. And he replied, smiling: "That's it exactly!" That is why this time "in-between" is so important.

We are living in a time in-between—a liminal time it is often called. And it can be a heavy, disconcerting, sometimes devastating, extremely inconvenient, lonely, burdensome time. We must name this. As Seth reminded us last week, we must grieve our losses—individually and collectively—as it is through grieving and weeping that we heal. But with our understanding minds and listening hearts, we must also courageously dream a future and together build what we now only imagine. May God take a central role in our dreaming, whether we be sleeping or awake, may we be brave enough to follow the Divine lead, and may our communal dreaming be rooted in hope so it might blossom with love.

Amen.

¹"Nightmares and PTSD," *National Center for PTSD, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*, <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/related/nightmares.asp> (accessed August 16, 2021).