



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

When Dreams Die

SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ JULY 17, 2022

Introduction

In his message “The In-Between Places” (July 10, 2022), Pastor Doug Pratt introduced us to the concept of “liminal” or “threshold” experiences. He briefly defined such times of transition, and gave us several strategies to approach them. And for those 120 or so individuals from our church who were preparing to board flights at RSW that week—including several staff and members traveling to Germany for the Oberammergau Passion Play and the Kims who moved to Thailand—Pastor Doug shared the quintessential threshold experience of the **airport**. No one goes to the airport to stay; rather, it is a transitional space. Like most transitional spaces, airports are necessary, but rarely enjoyable! Likewise, most of us do not enjoy transitional times. We would rather not remain in them, but if we want to get from one place to another, we must pass through them. Life is full of transitional times we must walk through.

Today, we are going to look at a subset of transitional times: when dreams die (or, at least, they seem to die). By dreams, I do not mean to refer to the adventures that ensue when you close your eyes and drift off to sleep. Rather, I intend to speak about sacred imaginations that enable us to envision the world that God intends to bring about.

This type of dream is powerful. Dreams like this can chart the course of our lives, orient our decision-making, and catalyze our actions. These dreams can change the world. This type of dream clears the fog of uncertainty of transition and helps us glimpse God’s good future.

One of the pivotal moments of the civil rights movement came from the communication of one man's dream. On August 28, 1963, with a quarter million people gathered in the sweltering summer heat in Washington D.C., Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Through it, he gave a compelling vision of what the world could look like when the image of God was recognized in every human being and when our values as a nation were truly embodied. It was a dream that helped a nation glimpse a good future in the midst of a transitional time.

Dreams can be powerful, they can change history. And dreams can be dangerous for the dreamer. Four and half years following his delivery of the Dream speech, Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968. For many, King's death signaled the death of a dream. In the aftermath of his assassination riots broke out in major cities like Baltimore and Chicago. The nation wondered what to do when it seemed as though King's dream had died.

Joseph the Dreamer

Turning to our text for this morning, we will explore the life of an individual whose dreams became dangerous for him. His story is one of the most vivid (almost technicolor) narratives in the Old Testament. It quintessentially portrays God's providential working through history.

Joseph was one of twelve sons to his father Jacob, who himself was a dreamer. Much to the chagrin of his brothers, Joseph was his father's favorite son—the golden child. Even at the age of 17, the age we will encounter him in today's text, Joseph had the annoying habit of always doing the right thing. For instance, Joseph frequently reported back to his father news of his brothers' poor behavior. Like when his brothers took Dad's car without permission and experimented with firecrackers, Joseph was the tattletale. For this reason, and because he was the child of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel, Joseph was the favorite son. Many of you may remember this aspect of Joseph's story: as a symbol of his love for his son, Jacob gave a special gift to Joseph, a coat of many colors. When Joseph's brothers saw this, it

made their blood boil. First, he was the family snitch, and now this? The ornate garment served as a constant reminder of his cherished position and his brothers were not shy to let him know of their disdain. Growing up in my home, my parents used to say, "If you can't find anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." Well, silence would have been better than the treatment Joseph received. The Bible declares that they never spoke a kind word about him.

Then came the straw that broke the camel's back. Joseph began to dream. And worse, he reported his dreams to his brothers.

Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.

Genesis 37:6-7

For Joseph's eleven brothers, this dream added insult to injury. But the dreams didn't stop there. Joseph had another dream he reported to his brothers and his parents. He dreamt that the sun, moon, and eleven stars all bowed down to him. This dream even made his father wonder, *Is my son saying that we are going to be bowing down to him? Is he delusional? A narcissist?* Jacob rebuked him.

Joseph was a dreamer and his dreams got him into trouble. We pick up the story in the latter half of Genesis 37.

Now [Joseph's] brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, ¹³and Israel said to Joseph, "As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them."

"Very well," he replied....

¹⁷So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. ¹⁸But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.

¹⁹"Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other.

²⁰"Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these

cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."

²¹When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said. ²²"Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the wilderness, but don't lay a hand on him." Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

²³So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the ornate robe he was wearing—²⁴and they took him and threw him into the cistern. The cistern was empty; there was no water in it.

²⁵As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.

²⁶Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? ²⁷Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed.

²⁸So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.

Genesis 37:12-13, 17b-28

The [seeming] Death of a Dream

It's a narrative that appears over and over in the scriptures. The father sends his son, and his son is rejected. It's the same narrative that echoes in Jesus' life. God the Father sent Jesus, the Son, who was rejected by humanity. Joseph's father sent him to his brothers and he was rejected. While he was still a long way off, Joseph caught the scornful gaze of his brothers. He was probably easy to recognize! Who could mistake that coat? He was dressed like a walking disco ball! So during the time it took Joseph to meet them, they hatched a plot among themselves.

At first, their plot was to kill him. Then they would be done with his dreams once and for all, because his dreams would die with him. However, his brother Reuben interceded to save Joseph's life. (Because of an incident that took place a couple of chapters earlier, Reuben was not in the best standing with his father, so perhaps he interjected to get back on his dad's good side.) After Reuben's plea, Judah adds to the plot by inquiring, "What good is our brother to us if he's dead?" So, ultimately, the brothers landed on the plot to throw him down into a dry cistern. Just like that, Joseph was in the bottom of a well and his dreams seemingly went down the tubes with him.

That was actually the purpose of throwing him in the well in the first place. In verse 20, the brothers say, "Then we'll see what comes of his dreams." Joseph is left in a cold, dark, dank hole in the ground where his dreams must be echoing in his mind just as his cries for help echoed off the walls. God had given Joseph a dream where his family came bowing down to him. Now, they are just looking down at him through the narrow opening in the well. Talk about the seeming death of a dream! Sheesh!

This is the beginning of a long, and humbling journey for Joseph. He is sold as property to an Egyptian master named Potiphar. Potiphar recognizes Joseph's administrative gifts and value, so he elevates him to a place of prominence in his home, until another conniving scheme is hatched that lands him in prison—another pit. All in all, Joseph spent a total of fourteen years in the pits—first a cistern, then a prison—where, I imagine, he had lots of time to ponder. *What about those dreams I had?* I imagine it felt to him at the time like those dreams had died.

The Boulevard of Broken Dreams

Have you ever walked the boulevard of broken dreams? It is not a fun place to be ... but the truth, I suspect, is that all of us have these seasons in life.

I have known more than one married couple who, ever since they were dating, had dreamt of what their future family would look like.

“We will have a house with full front porch and a white picket fence, and we will have two children who will swing together on the old tire swing.” A couple of years later, after trying and trying and waiting and hoping and praying, they discover that—for one reason or another—they cannot have children. And the dream of their perfect nuclear family seems to die.

I know a husband and wife who, after years of working hard and dreaming of retirement, retired to Southwest Florida to develop a life together in their Golden Years. Shortly after their move, one of the spouses unexpectedly died. Suddenly the future that was all mapped out and seemed so secure is up in the air.

I have a friend who is going through a divorce. He made the vows at his wedding almost two decades ago, “until death do us part.” He dreamed of growing old with his wife. Today, as the reality of where his life is heading sinks in, he keeps saying, “I never dreamed I would find myself here.”

The loss of a relationship, a job, a personal failure, a health crisis: these are all moments when our dreams—our hopes and plans for the future—seem to die. Or perhaps the dream is not an individual dream but a collective, shared vision. There are many today who are wondering if we are seeing the death of the American Dream. Has what made us distinct as a nation been lost?

What do we do when dreams die? How do we move forward when the vision we had for the future is gone and what remains is murky at best?

Where Is God When Dreams Die?

When life is in the pits (forgive the pun), it’s natural to wonder where God is when dreams die. The scriptures are filled with those who have asked that question. However, our ancestors in the faith, even when they expressed this wonder, often followed it up with assurance of God’s providential leading. Consider Psalm 28:

To you, LORD, I call;
you are my Rock,
do not turn a deaf ear to me.
For if you remain silent,
I will be like those who go down to the pit.

Hear my cry for mercy
as I call to you for help,
as I lift up my hands
toward your Most Holy Place.

Psalm 28:1-2

Those words are attributed to King David, but they almost sound as though they could have been written by Joseph! Still, at the end of Psalm 28, David writes hopefully of God's deliverance.

Praise be to the LORD,
for he has heard my cry for mercy.
The LORD is my strength and my shield;
my heart trusts in him, and he helps me.
My heart leaps for joy,
and with my song I praise him.

The LORD is the strength of his people,
a fortress of salvation for his anointed one.

Psalm 28:6-8

While the scriptures are filled with the faithful wondering aloud about where God is when life is in the pits or when dreams die, the faithful resound with confident resolve a refrain of trust in God.

Today, the faith of many operates with a tacit assumption. That assumption, though never expressed, goes something like this. *If God is good, and God loves us, then life will be good.* Christian Smith, a sociologist, wrote about the faith expressed by many younger Christians today. He summed up their expression with the term Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. In short, God wants you to be good. God wants you to be happy. And, though God made everything, God is not very

involved in everyday life. A faith like this cannot handle when dreams die, because if God wants me to be happy, and hardship comes, then maybe God is not that good after all. What's more, for the moralistic therapeutic deist, God certainly isn't near when life is in the pits, because God is not near when life is good. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, while rampant today, offers no hope when dreams die.

When Dreams Die, God Is Near to Us

But that has not been the expectation of most of the faithful throughout salvation history. The expectation was not that life would be good or easy or even that we would be happy, but that God is always near, closer than our next breath, and an ever-present source of strength even amidst hard times. And this is Joseph's expectation and experience. Here is what Joseph's narrative reveals.

But while Joseph was there in prison (there in the pit) ²¹the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden ... the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

Genesis 39:20-23

In the midst of one of the most difficult times of Joseph's life, scripture declares not only that God was not far from him, though it may have felt that way to Joseph at times, but that God was with him. More than that, in the midst of that most challenging of times, God was showing him kindness.

If you are in a transitional season where a dream seems to have died or you are in the bottom of a pit, even if it feels that God is distant, He is not far from you! God may be showing you kindness in unexpected ways. You are not alone! You can have confidence in this.

Still, when Joseph was in the pit, that did not mean that everything went well, even with God's favor. Providentially, the dreamer was in prison, and two other prisoners came—a cupbearer and a baker—both of whom had dreams. Disturbed, they turned to their cellmate Joseph,

who accurately interpreted their dreams for them. For the cupbearer, God would restore him to prominence in Pharaoh's empire; but for the baker, things would not go so well. He would lose his life.

True to Joseph's prediction, the cupbearer was released and the baker died. When the cupbearer returned to his position in Pharaoh's service, he did nothing to help Joseph for another two years! In other words, it's possible to have God's favor upon you, but that does not mean that everything goes well.

If you are in a season where a dream seems to be dying, take courage: God is with you, and God may show kindness to you in unexpected ways! Still, that does not mean, necessarily, that this season will end quickly. Remember: for Joseph, it took fourteen years.

When Dreams Die, God Gives Wisdom

One of the greatest challenges when dreams die is that our sense of the future becomes murky and thus our anxiety grows. Our dreams serve to help us chart the course of our lives, orient our decision making, and catalyze our actions, so when they die, we can find ourselves unable to envision the future. Do you remember, during the early phase of the pandemic, just how uncertain everything was? Here is the good news: not only is God near to you during times when dreams die, but when we trust in God and rely upon Him, God will provide us His wisdom to navigate an uncertain future.

In the New Testament book of Acts, when Stephen is about to become the first Christian martyred for faith in Jesus, he delivers a speech to the Sanhedrin in which he unpacks God's providential leadership throughout all of history. He reflects back upon the story of Joseph and says this:

...God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Acts 7:9-10

In the midst of seasons when dreams die, we can trust in God's faithful presence. And if we seek it, God will also provide wisdom during transitional seasons of life. The book of James tells us that God gives wisdom graciously to those who ask. So when life is in the pits or dreams have died, turn to God and ask Him for wisdom. **As God draws near to you, draw near to Him and seek His wisdom.**

When Dreams Die, God Is Working His Purposes Out

Throughout the fourteen years that Joseph is in prison, one would think that he may have become bitter. He could have become bitter to God, because the dreams he thought originated from God did not seem to be coming about. He could have become bitter at his brothers who sold him into slavery in the first place. He could have become bitter at the cupbearer who forgot about him shortly after he ministered to him in prison. But Joseph does not.

As God continues to work His purposes out, Pharaoh had a dream, and the cupbearer remembered Joseph and told Pharaoh that he knew of a man who could interpret the dream. Joseph was brought out of the depths of the pit and interpreted Pharaoh's dream. A famine would be coming, and Joseph developed a plan to save all of Egypt from the coming disaster. So Joseph was promoted to the highest position in the kingdom, with the exception of Pharaoh himself. The surrounding nations did not fare so well. Providentially, because Joseph's family members in Canaan were struggling, they traveled to Egypt and found themselves before Joseph. Joseph had the ability to save them or pass judgment on them. He chooses to save them. Initially, his brothers did not recognize him, because he's dressed like an Egyptian and speaking in the Egyptian tongue, but when he revealed himself to them, his brothers feared for their lives. After all, they had betrayed him! What would he do to them?

Joseph's response is stunning:

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

Genesis 50:20 (NIV)

Here is the final piece of good news that I want to share with you. At the end of a prolonged season where his dreams seemed to have died, Joseph was able to see God's providential hand guiding him all the way. The faithful can look backwards and see God working His purposes out.

Dare to Dream

Whatever you are going through today ... whatever dream seems to have died, God is not done with you yet. Trust that God is not far from you, but closer than your next breath. Look to God for wisdom, for God will graciously provide it to those who ask. And know that God will always be working His purposes out and perhaps work His kindness to you in unexpected ways.

Dreams are powerful things. They can be dangerous to those who have them. But don't give up daring to dream, even when it seems as though your dreams have been dashed. Because God can take even that which people mean for evil and turn it into good.

Isn't that the story of the cross? God sent His Son to humanity, but Jesus was rejected. He was crucified and thrown into a tomb. But through what humanity meant for evil, God worked to bring about something beyond our wildest dreams: the salvation of all those who place their trust in Jesus. God isn't far from you. God's wisdom none can fathom, and God is working His purposes out, even when your dreams seem to have died. So dare to dream, because God isn't done with you yet! ■



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