
Dreamers

Genesis 37:1-5, 12-28

Baccalaureate Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 9-10, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Luke Powery

Some of you have been dreaming of this day. Others—and don't point fingers—have been drooling for it. I know your parents are happy. I see their nodding heads. Many of you—graduates—are saying like Pharrell Williams that you are happy too and feel like a room without a roof, can't nothing bring you down, your level's too high "because I'm happy." You're wearing happiness this weekend. You're on a high! Things are really looking up as you face the future ahead just as it was for Joseph, the dreamer, until he has one of those days.

It was a pretty bad day by anyone's standards. At the age of 17, just when one is supposed to be dreaming dreams about the future and beaming with bright hopes of being accepted into Duke University, life is the pits for Joseph, literally. His older brothers don't throw a football around with him in Kville anymore or take him to Durham Bulls baseball games. They don't love to watch out for their little brother. They love to hate him so they throw him into an empty pit—life is the pits for Joseph! This pit is a symbolic death. It refers to the underworld. In other words, Joseph is having a hell of a day. I'm guessing you might have had one or two of those days at Duke at some point on your journey—that class or professor or research project or roommate or dorm bathroom made your day so bad that you felt like becoming a Tarheels fan. Now that would be hell.

Joseph is not in Twinnies drinking a skinny vanilla Starbucks latte. Joseph is in a pit. No Internet surfing, no access to email, no Facebook friendship, no Netflix, no texting or tweeting or twerking. Life is the pits!

Joseph's brothers hate him because their father loved him more than them but we're also told "they hated him even more because of his dreams." He sits in a pit and outside the pit his brothers sit eating their North Carolina barbeque. Joseph even sends his brothers an ancient near eastern text message—OMG WTP. Oh My God Why This Pit? They sell him into slavery eventually. All because they can't handle his dreams.

His older brothers hate him because he's a dreamer. His dream is their nightmare. Not everyone can handle our dreams. Joseph's dreams get him into trouble and he doesn't even taunt them and say, "naninanibooboo." He just dreams and his dreams make them want to destroy him—"we shall see what will become of his dreams." Everyone can't handle our dreams.

That might be the case because we dream what some experts on the science of dreams call a "big dream." Our dreams may be too big or too dangerous. Dangerous because dreams disrupt the way things are, imagining the 'oughtness' of life that transcends the 'isness' of reality. Dangerous because dreams may threaten the status quo and envision a new way of life. In one of his dreams, Joseph says, "the sun, the moon, the eleven stars were bowing down to me." He may sound like a supercilious Ivy League grad but don't take him in the wrong way. He sees the future and his brothers are mad to the bone because he dreams a different kind of world.

Dreaming is dangerous because it might get you into trouble. It may land you in a pit or in a Birmingham jail or in a grave. Dreamers put their life in danger because others may attempt to kill the dream. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a dreamer who put his life at risk. He dreamed a world that disrupted and disturbed the status quo in society. In 1963, the same year Duke desegregated at the undergraduate level and admitted its first black undergraduate students, at the March on Washington D.C. for Civil Rights before the Lincoln Memorial, Dr. King dreamed. "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day, even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream 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 the content of their character...” This dream still plays on the iPod of this country’s historical memory.

But not everyone understood that dream. Not everyone understands that dream. Not everyone understands dreams. Not everyone can handle dreams. Not everyone, like Joseph’s brothers, wants our dreams to come true. Dr. King’s dream leads to his death.

Stanford University historian and King scholar, Clayborne Carson, was asked in an interview, “What messages do you think King would want to impress upon Americans today?” Carson replied, “He would want people to know that his Dream was still unfulfilled at the end of his life and remains unrealized even now.”

We may think Dr. King’s rhetorical corpus only includes the “I Have a Dream” speech but he spoke of other dreams throughout his life. In a 1961 commencement address at Lincoln University, King speaks about “The American Dream” and he says, “America is essentially a dream, a dream as yet unfulfilled.” Dreamers know that some dreams will be unfulfilled in their lifetime or even shattered. The Dreamer King was no different as he preached sermons titled “Unfulfilled Dreams”(1968) and “Shattered Dreams.” He believed those kind of dreams were “hallmark[s] of our mortal life.”

If we didn’t know that before, we’ve certainly learned that this year as some of your classmates did not make it to this day. Their dreams and their parents’ dreams, unfulfilled and perhaps shattered like broken glass. Little Nigerian girls kidnapped causing social media movements like #bringbackourgirls and #stolendreams. It’s true that “life [maybe] like [Franz] Schubert’s ‘Unfinished Symphony’.” It’s true that our reach may always be beyond our grasp. King was honest and believed that “few of us live to see our fondest hopes fulfilled.” But that didn’t stop him from dreaming. He still had the courage to dream and take the risk to dream, knowing that not all dreams come true and that dreaming can even be dangerous.

So why should we dream? We dream because to dream is to live and not to dream is to die. A spiritual mentor for King, Howard Thurman, a former dean of the chapels at Howard and Boston Universities, put it this way. “[We] cannot continue long to live if the dream in the heart has perished...Where there is no dream,.. life becomes a swamp, a dreary dead place and, deep within, [our] heart begins to rot...[The dream] is the ever-recurring melody in the midst of broken harmony and harsh discords of human conflict...It lives in the inward parts, it is deep within...for as long as a [person] has a dream in his heart, he cannot lose the significance of living.”

To dream is to live and not to dream is to die. Once upon a time, I had a dream. I dreamed that I would be a computer engineer, a technologically-savvy Hewlett Packard employee in the Silicon Valley of California. Clearly that worked out! Look where that dream got me. There will be detours in life and sometimes life may even feel like the pits. But God is at work in hidden, mysterious ways. Your dreams may manifest in ways you never imagined. Your dreams may not have come true as of yet but they may just be delayed for the moment. Like in Joseph’s case, his dream was deferred but it was not ultimately denied. He kept dreaming and eventually became the second-in-command in Egypt.

Joseph’s story reveals that setbacks may just be setups for comebacks because dreamers don’t die easily. A Harvard Business Review article published at the beginning of this year, urged readers how to have a year that counts and it said “start with your dreams.” Not your goals or plans or objectives, but your dreams. At this ending that is also a beginning—a commencement—start with your dreams. The unthinkable, the impossible, the questionable, the unorthodox, the risky, the dangerous. We have enough paper pushers and machine maintainers and meeting managers and administrative advisors and email extroverts and full-time Facebook folks, but do we have any dreamers in the class of 2014 who are determined to “keep alive the dream” in the heart and like Langston Hughes “hold fast to dreams”?

Dreams are bigger than diplomas. A degree is not the sum total of your destiny nor should it dilute your imagination of what could be because you are greater than your degree and God is bigger than your academic

discipline. Dreams can be dangerous. And you may have to risk your life or risk the way life is by dreaming it, but to dream is to live and not to dream is to die and rot away. To imagine beyond what we see or experience. To dream even beyond ourselves. A dream job is fine (you do have to pay off school loans!) but be courageous enough to dream a world.

I dream a world where [human]
No other [hu]man will scorn,
Where love will bless the earth
And peace its paths adorn.
I dream a world where all
Will know sweet freedom's way,
Where greed no longer saps the soul
Nor avarice blights our day.
A world I dream where black or white,
Whatever race you be,
Will share the bounties of the earth
And every [hu]man is free,
Where wretchedness will hang its head
And joy, like a pearl,
Attends the need of all [hu]mankind—
Of such I dream, my world
(Langston Hughes)

I hope you have a dream though dreams are not always welcomed. Every institution or firm won't hire dreamers as employees. But if you aren't dreaming, you're dead. Dreamers know this. So "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive"(Howard Thurman). Amen.