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Christ Church, Los Altos, CA Sermon L22
12 Pentecost (Proper 14A) RCL – Eucharist 8:00 & 10:15
Sunday 7 August 2005

Gen. 37:1-4, 12-28
Ps. 105:1-6,16-22
Rom. 10:5-15
Matt. 14:22-31

Daring to Dream

Joseph's brothers "said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now let us kill him... and we shall see what will become of his dreams..." Genesis 37

The dream is always the same... On Sunday morning two hundred people crowd the church. I am standing on the steps in front of the altar with a prayer book in my hand. The pages all look correct, but something isn't right. I know this book better than any other, but I cannot find my place. I'm trying to stay cool and calm, to look as if the lengthening pause is intentional. Awkward minutes pass. Every time I look up more people have left in disgust. After an hour almost everyone is gone. I lift my head one last time... and the bishop is sitting in the front pew.

What does it mean to be a creature who dreams? How should we understand the spirituality of dream life? In many respects we, in this time and place, may be least qualified to answer these questions. The German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) asserts that rationalism is the dominant force that shapes modern institutions and experience. As a result modern people have a very narrow view of reality. Technology and bureaucracy control so much of our lives. The products we buy, food safety regulations, advertisements, building codes and everything else have been planned in agonizing detail. We leave nothing to chance.

Technology shatters our experience of distance and alters our sense of time. We have difficulty even recognizing the parts of experience that lie beyond our control. Unless we can see something, unless we can touch it, measure it or sell it, we cannot believe. For this reason we have a hard time understanding God, and ourselves.

As a young man Joseph had a dream that his brothers would one day bow down to him. Later, when Joseph's brothers see him coming at a distance wearing his special long-sleeved coat, they resolve to punish him, both for being a snitch and their father's favorite. They say, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now let us kill him... and we shall see what will become of his dreams" (Gen. 37). We are like these brothers. We do not believe in the power of dreams even as they begin to come true. When we feel most in control we remain unaware of the real effect of our actions. God is intimately at work in the lives of the very people who cannot believe in him.

Maybe you think I am exaggerating in my claim that our 24/7/365 world means we experience less of reality, or that God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. But I am

not alone in thinking that we radically underestimate the importance of what happens when we sleep and dream.

Robert Stickgold a scientist at Harvard Medical School says, "We are living in the middle of history's greatest experiment in sleep deprivation and we are all a part of that experiment." "[T]here are major social, economic and health consequences..." He points out that we sleep significantly less than people one hundred or even fifty years ago did. According to the 2005 Sleep Foundation poll adults get an average of 6.8 hours of sleep on weeknights. Scientists believe that this is more than an hour less than they need.¹

Stickgold says, "Sleep deprivation doesn't have any good side effects." Lab rats die when they cannot get enough sleep. People slip into psychosis without it. Sleep deprivation may be related to obesity and hyperactivity in children (Ritalin is a "wake-promoting drug"). Lack of sleep depresses the immune system. It affects digestion and appetite. It shortens life-span. Twenty-four hours without sleep has the same effect on reaction time as having a blood alcohol level of .1% (of being legally drunk). Caffeine blocks chemicals that warn the brain we are tired. It is the second most valuable commodity in world trade measured in dollar terms

In our culture we see sleep as a waste of time, as a diversion from the real business of life. It is remarkable that with all of our scientific knowledge we are not sure why animals need sleep. We know even less about dreams.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) thought that the mind has a malleable, overwhelming energy. He called this libido and associated it mostly with sexual desire. The pressure of this subconscious power will find any outlet that it can. Dreaming is a leak in your drip watering system shooting fifteen feet into the air. The libido plays out all its wishes in dreams filled with symbols (like the famous cigar or umbrella) waiting to be de-coded. This is why Freud called dreams "the royal road to the unconscious."²

The psychologist Carl Jung (1875-1961) strongly disagreed. For him dreams don't hide or disguise forbidden desires. Instead, they compensate for areas of our character that are underrepresented by the way we live. He calls dreams a "personal document," a "letter to oneself" which balances out our life.

It is hard for me to see how my prayer book dream is really about my mother or how it will make my character more complete. I think that both Freud and Jung try to impose a single simplistic story in order to explain these sometimes outlandish experiences. Indeed sleep scientists do not have much respect for these theories of dream life. But they do not seem to have much to contribute either. We have only known about Rapid Eye Movement sleep since 1953.

Scientists point out that dreams are not surreal. Although our experience of time, space and character is skewed, our dreams do not look like a painting by Wassily Kandinsky or Salvador Dali. Dreams are so intensely private and it is hard for me to know how they estimate that two thirds of our dreams are about people we know, or that two thirds of them involve anxiety.

Other cultures and times take dreams far more seriously than do we. In some places it is against the law to awaken a sleeping person. Eskimos and Malaysians believe that the soul leaves the body during dreams. Many cultures equate dreams and reality. In Borneo a man who dreams his wife is an adulteress is justified in sending her back to her father. A Zulu broke off a friendship after dreaming that his friend betrayed him. The Iroquois thought that dreams should be immediately acted out upon awakening.³

A sleep and dream deprived people will have difficulty understanding the Bible and the God who constantly works through dreams. The most important moment of Jacob's life comes during a dream in which God enters into covenant with him. God warns Pharaoh of the destruction that will result if he continues to keep the Hebrews as his slaves. The self-satisfied tyrant Nebuchadnezzar first learns of his downfall through a dream that is interpreted by Daniel. In the New Testament God protects the infant Jesus from another tyrant by warning the wise men to return by a different road.

There is a deeply dreamlike quality to the gospel. At dawn, after praying alone on a mountain Jesus walks across the stormy waters. The disciples are not sure if he is a ghost and Peter says one of the strangest things in the Bible. "If it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Peter also walks on water until he gets distracted by the strong winds and begins to sink. Jesus immediately reaches out his arm and catches him.

To describe this story as dreamlike is not to suggest that it is less than true. This vivid image reminds us that Jesus is available to all people in this way. Whether it is trouble at work, the death of our parents, the disintegration of our marriage, a life-destroying disease or a seemingly irreconcilable conflict with someone we are supposed to love, I believe that Jesus reaches out to save us when we are sinking. He does this through the people we love and our circumstances, through the depths of our unconscious life and dreams.

We forget how deep and complicated we are because we falsely think that we are the sole authors of our conscious and unconscious life. Jung calls dreams a letter to oneself, but what if they are more like a dialogue with God? What if God also is speaking to us while we are awake? Back in the fourth century St. Augustine pointed out that the human mind is like an expansive cavern. Huge amounts of what we know and who we are simply do not seem immediately available to us.⁴

By this I mean that there are two kinds of forgetting. There are events that happened in our lives that nothing will recall to us. But there are also thousands of moments which we can remember but are not conscious of right now. All of us have this experience. Next week is my class reunion. On the letterhead of the invitation are names of people I haven't thought of in twenty years, but I instantly remember them. Growing up in California I always wondered if my earliest memory of taking my brother home from the hospital was correct. In my twenties I went back to that hospital for the first time and it was exactly as I remembered it. In this way, we do not realize all that we know.

The apostle Paul believes that part of what we already know is our creator, that "[t]he word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (Rom. 10).

Against my better judgment I want to read you a long section from a poem by Walt Whitman. My brother warned me that it might put you to sleep. Whitman writes, "There is that in me - I do not know what it is - but I know it is in me. / Wrench'd and sweaty - calm and cool then my body becomes, I sleep - I sleep long. / I do not know it - it is without name - it is a word unsaid, / It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol. / Something it swings on more than the earth I swing on, / To it the creation is the friend whose embracing awakes me... / Do you see, O my brothers and sisters? / It is not chaos or death - it is form, union, plan - it is eternal life - it is Happiness."⁵

There are people who tell you not to dream because they think that we inhabit a nightmare. They live on high alert with no time for what eludes their control. Dreams are not a geyser in your irrigation system or a letter you wrote to yourself. They are the time when we struggle with the most mysterious parts of ourselves. They are another way that God invites you into holiness.

So wake up to your spiritual life in sleep. Alter your consciousness of reality through prayer. Reach out to Jesus who lives in you and saves you in the storms. Let God's goodness live through you.

¹ This paragraph and the next are from: Craig Lambert, "Deep into Sleep," *Harvard Magazine*, July-August 2005, 25ff.

² Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

³ Information from this and the preceding paragraph come from: "Dreams" in *Encyclopedia Britannica* Online Edition. <http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-38748>

⁴ St. Augustine, *Confessions*.

⁵ Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" #50 in *Leaves of Grass* (NY: Modern Library, 1921), 76-7.