

January 21, 2018

“You Start With a Dream...”

Portions of this sermon are based on:

http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93041083

Genesis 37: 17b-27, *Common English Bible*

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them in Dothan.

They saw Joseph in the distance before he got close to them, and they plotted to kill him. The brothers said to each other, “Here comes the big dreamer. Come on now, let’s kill him and throw him into one of the cisterns, and we’ll say a wild animal devoured him. Then we will see what becomes of his dreams!”

When Reuben heard what they said, he saved him from them, telling them, “Let’s not take his life.” Reuben said to them, “Don’t spill his blood! Throw him into this desert cistern, but don’t lay a hand on him.” He intended to save Joseph from them and take him back to his father.

When Joseph reached his brothers, they stripped off Joseph’s long robe, took him, and threw him into the cistern, an empty cistern with no water in it. When they sat down to eat, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with camels carrying sweet resin, medicinal resin, and fragrant resin on their way down to Egypt. Judah said to his brothers, “What do we gain if we kill our brother and hide his blood? Come on, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites. Let’s not harm him because he’s our brother; he’s family.” His brothers agreed.

Think back to Martin Luther King Jr.’s *I Have a Dream* speech. If you want a reminder, here is a link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vDWWy4CMhE>



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Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. knew that this speech was going to be huge. He knew that millions of people were looking to him as their spiritual leader, and as a leader who could make changes in civil rights. So when he got to the podium in front of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, he knew this speech had the potential to be earth-shaking.

And so he did something beforehand that was unusual for him—he prepared what he was going to say. He rarely used speech writers, and often spoke off-the-cuff, but this time he went through several drafts and asked for suggestions from those he trusted. Despite all this, he wasn't happy with what he came up with.

In fact, the most famous line, "I have a dream," wasn't even in the speech he prepared. It was something he'd said before, but not planned for this speech. His friend, singer Mahalia Jackson, was sitting behind him as he spoke, and saw he was struggling to connect with the audience. She shouted out, "Tell them about the dream, Martin!" And he obeyed. The rest is history.

Scholars have named it the most significant speech of the 20th century. *Time* magazine reported in 2013, "With a single phrase, Martin Luther King Jr. joined Jefferson and Lincoln in the ranks of men who've shaped modern America."

I've been calling this a "speech," but it's really a sermon. To Rev. King, the civil rights movement was a Christian movement. You hear it clearly when he said:

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is Isaiah 40: 3-5, and in Luke 3, John the Baptist also quotes it to announce the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah. For Rev. King, the rough places will not be plain and the crooked places straight until justice comes to all humanity. He continued, "This is our hope. This is the faith that I will go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope."

It was a sermon, and a dream, that changed the world. But not everybody was happy about that. An FBI agent named William Sullivan heard Rev. King's words, and had a very different reaction. As head of the Bureau's domestic spying division, he reported to Director J. Edgar Hoover:

In the light of King's powerful demagogic speech yesterday he stands head and shoulders above all other Negro leaders put together when it comes to influencing great masses of Negroes. We must mark him now, if we have not done so before, as the most dangerous Negro of the future in this Nation from the standpoint of communism, the Negro and national security.

Rev. King was a dreamer, and sometimes things go badly for dreamers. Dreamers can make the powers of the world uncomfortable because dreaming often leads to change—and staying in power almost always means maintaining the status quo. And the powers of this world can do ruthless, desperate things to keep their power.

Which is why our reading today is about Joseph. He had lots of dreams over the course of his life. As a boy, he dreamed that one day his family would bow down to him, and that he would save their lives. His older brothers found this disturbing to the power structure in their family that favored them. As the youngest, Joseph should be bowing to them! So they come up with a plot to cut his dreams short. "Here comes the big dreamer. Come on now, let's kill him and throw him into one of the cisterns, and we'll say a wild animal devoured him. Then we will see what becomes of his dreams!"

In the end, they don't kill him, but sell him into slavery. At that moment, Joseph might have thought he'd have been better off if he *was* dead.

But we know the rest of the story.

Joseph does sink pretty low—all the way to prison. But ultimately his dreams lead to him having an elevated position in the Egyptian government. He ends up running the country as sort of a chief of staff to Pharaoh. As Joseph dreamed that there would be 7 years of plenty, followed by 7 years of famine. Thanks to Joseph the Egyptians were prepared for the lean years. As the famine deepened, Joseph's earliest dreams came true—his brothers came to him begging for food. They bowed down to him, and he saved them, along with the whole Hebrew people.

Here's the point: Joseph was a dreamer, not a complainer. He had a lot to complain about, with being so abused by his own family; but, at every step he made the best of it, dreaming of better times.

Jim Wallis, of the Sojourners Community in Washington D.C. makes the same observation about Dr. King. Wallis notes that ***the thing missing from the great sermon was, "I have a complaint."*** Wallis goes on:

There was much to complain about for black Americans, and there is much to complain about today for many in this nation. But King taught us that our complaints or critiques, or even our dissent, will never be the foundation of social movements that change the world—but dreams always will. ***Just saying what is wrong will never be enough to change the world. You have to lift up a vision of what is right.***

Dr. King lifted up what was right—a dream of a time when “...my four little children will...live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” ***What he was really dreaming of was the Kingdom of God***, and Dr. King saw there equality and justice among all God's children. As we know, that Kingdom is already and not yet. It is already in those places and times when people join together in love and unity. It is not yet, as we look forward to a time when there is no racism, no hate, and no inequality, and when all people have a place at the table of justice and abundant life.

And there are more dreams for those who see with Kingdom eyes. As Paul said to the Corinthians: “So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!” (2 Corinthians 5: 17) Paul saw the Kingdom as a place where we could say goodbye to old habits of living that chained us to sin and death, where new life is possible for all who love Christ. And we keep dreaming that dream, and moving ever closer to its reality right here, among us.

When we think about the future for us, the church, it's easy to complain. It's easy to start moaning about how things aren't the way they used to be. But the stories of Joseph and Dr.

King suggest that's not a fruitful place. Complaining won't get us anywhere. Instead, we need to dream.

On the front our bulletin every Sunday you will find the official dream of our congregation. It's called Our Vision:

*A growing, creative Christian family caring for each other,
known for being God's hands to our neighbors,
and making disciples of Jesus Christ.*

Here's how it came about. The congregation was invited to participate in a visioning process as part of a meeting of the Vision Team. So some folks got together, and we talked about what dreams we had for our congregation over the next 5-10 years. We wrote down a lot of dreams, and over the course of 3 sessions, we whittled and combined our ideas into a single statement.

We first of all dreamed that we would be growing—that our congregation would be enlarging and incorporating more people. Being creative—open to new ideas and doing innovative ministry—was important to us, so we put that in. We knew that we are defined by our faith in Christ, so of course “Christian” had to be part of it. We furthermore want to be Christians that live in community, like a family. That means caring for each other.

We decided we also want to be known in our larger community. We'd like to be that place that when our name is mentioned, people say, “Oh, I've heard of them. They're doing X, Y or Z ministry. They really help their neighbors.”

Finally, we dream of being faithful to Jesus' Great Commission: “Go and make disciples of all nations...” (Matthew 28: 19)

What would this church be like, if we lived that dream? Can you picture it? And where are you in that picture? What are you doing to further the dream?

We don't need any more complaining. That's an old path that leads to nowhere. We need dreaming—people having visions of what miraculous things could happen if we step out in faith. We need dreamers who can develop those small steps to achieve small goals that lead to bigger goals.

Just one person can make a big difference. Not long ago, Christine Gustafson dreamed of going to Uganda and spreading God's love. She shared her vision so that most of us got caught up in it. And a miracle happened—70 children are going to school because of Christine's dream, and because the rest of us grabbed hold it.

We in the church, Jesus' new life people, need to be in the practice of raising up our dreams that bring new life to all people. What if we put energy behind our dreams? What if we

changed our community with God's love and grace? It starts with a dream, but by the grace of God, it becomes his Kingdom.