

FOOTSTEPS IN THE NIGHT
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Gen. 41: 1-8, Matt. 2: 13-15

It was late into the night when a hotel manager in Raleigh, N. C. heard screaming coming from one of the rooms. Some of the guests of were sleepily coming out into the hallway to discover what was happening. Everyone could understand the words in the person's scream. "It's in the phone book!" "It's in the phone book!".

The hotel manager quickly summoned the security office and they let themselves into the man's room. What they discovered was a man in the midst of a nightmare. They woke him up and after he had calmed down, he told them about his vision. It seems he was dreaming that the IRS owed him a substantial refund but they had lost his address. So, he was screaming, "It's in the phone book!".

All of us dream while we sleep. Researchers say that we dream on the average of one and one half hours per eight hours of sleep. Most of the time we don't remember the dreams. Like the time my wife woke up to the sound of me preaching Sunday's sermon. She said it was loud and clear. Maybe we should bring a bed in when I preach. While at other times some are so real we find ourselves waking up to answer the phone when it wasn't ringing. Some dreams frighten or disturb us and we wonder about their meaning.

Risking that I might put you to sleep and cause you to experience a nightmare, I want to reflect on the theme of "dreams, a way to listen to God". Three words we can hang our hats on: canon, warning, and God.

I. CANON IS OPEN

The first point we need to talk about concerning dreams is the canon. The canon I am referring to is the Bible. Those 66 books.

According to tradition the Old Testament canon was closed by the "Great Synagogue" in the 5th century B.C.. In the church a council meeting in Rome in 382 A.D. presented a complete list of the old and new testament books. No written work of God's revelation has been added.

It is as though God has ceased to reveal His truth. But God does speak to us individually, through our dreams. Just read the Bible. Jacob reported that "God said to me in a dream". (Gen. 31:11). Then the Lord came to Joseph in a dream. (Matt. 2:13)

But, as modern rational people we are suspicious of these primitive people's focus on God's presence in dreams. Maybe, you are getting a little suspicious of this sermon. You may be wondering if I have been eating too many grits. Like René Descartes we may believe that dreams have no meaning. The only significance is that we ate too much apple pie for dinner. It's ironic the Descartes received the inspiration for his book "Discourse on Method" from a triple dream series. He never mentioned this in his book.

The Biblical canon affirms that God does speak through our dreams. Listen to the author of Job when he wrote: "God speaks in one way, and in two, though man does not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, while deep sleep falls upon men....Then he opens up the ears of men."

John wrote the apocalypse-Revelation while in a "Spirit state." This spirit state could possibly have been a day-dream state. Haven't you been driving to work and find yourself drifting into a daze? Pretty soon you're daydreaming about winning the lottery or catching that 40 lb. muskie or maybe getting a hole-in-one. All kinds of images cross your mind. During this, you are making all the right turns and stopping at traffic lights. You pull into your parking place and your mind snaps back to the present. You can't remember driving to work.

Morton Kelsey, in his book "God, Dreams, and Revelation", said that in dreams and visions, the ego has limited control over the message that appears across the mind. The Biblical writers understood that through dreams God gave "knowledge of his divine reality and will." (p.18) The Biblical canon may be closed to God's revelation, but the dream canon is still open.

II. WARNING

Just like the warnings on medications, dreams have to be handled properly. There are two warnings I want to issue.

A. first warning concerns interpretation of a dream. When I was a child growing up on a farm isolated from modern culture, there was one superstition about dreams. At the breakfast table I would begin to tell my parents about all the monsters snakes and spiders I saw in my dream the night before. They would kind of laughingly remind me that telling your dream before breakfast was bad luck.

At the present time I am taking a class in Jungian dream interpretation. As we seek to understand those particular psychological principles, I have realized how complex this subject can be. In fact, I bring this theme to the pulpit with some fear and trepidation. It may be unlucky to tell our dream experiences to someone who doesn't have the expertise to interpret. You may have heard this story before but it certainly applies when it comes to interpreting our dreams.

A young man was presented before the presiding elder of the Methodist church with the desire to become a minister. But the ecclesiastical authority questioned the young man as to how he came by his decision. The young man said that the night before he had had a dream in which he saw the two huge gold letters P.C. written across the sky. He interpreted this to mean "Preach Christ". Well, the presiding elder knew he was utterly unfit for the work of the ministry. So, he replied, P.C. doesn't mean Preach Christ. In your case it means Plough Corn. God's calling for you to continue to assist your father on the farm.

B. The second warning doesn't have to do with interpretation, but with a warning about the dreams themselves. Don't ignore them. Abraham Lincoln dreamed of his assassination before he went to the Ford Theater. Julius Caesar's wife dreamed of him bleeding and dying in her arms. Joseph was warned in a dream to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt for their lives were in danger.

In London, England a woman took her husband to see a psychiatrist. She said he was suffering from delusions of grandeur. He keeps saying he is expecting a letter which will make him the owner of a 1000 acre farm and another letter telling him he has inherited a diamond mine in Africa. The man was in intensive treatment for three weeks - then the letters arrived.

Be careful about interpreting our dreams. Don't ignore them either, for God may be speaking.

III. GOD'S PRESENCE

The last point to consider in our reflection is the reality of God's presence in our dream world. St. Paul wrote: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Gal. 2:20) Since the spirit of God's truth exists in us, then when the guard dogs of the conscious mind are asleep there is a chance for God to speak. When God's message comes through there are two possible goals.

A. God's presence seeks to compensate for our feelings in our conscious life. Sometimes we have one of those days where everything goes right. During the day we volunteer our time at the Congregational Home or serving the meals at the New Member dinner. Maybe you stop to help someone who has had an accident. You notice all the cars that whiz by, not even slowing down. You feel a little anger at the insensitivity of people.

That night Mr. or Mrs. Self-Righteous drifts off to sleep feeling very satisfied. But during the night you dream a horrible dream. A dream in which you hurt or even kill a close friend or relative. Next morning, you wake up feeling dirty, like you have sinned after being such a Good Samaritan the day before.

Dr. Robert Moore, professor in my class, said that "God pushes us toward our dark side" when we are feeling self-righteous. We cannot experience grace unless we are aware of sin. God's presence in our dreams will make us aware of our estrangement. That compensates for our inflated self-righteousness.

In his book, "Dreams: God's Forgotten Language", John Sanford in dealing with the compensatory nature of dreams said that "in his dream a meek-minded man might see himself as Napoleon, the self-styled society woman might dream of a prostitute, and a dedicated minister might dream of strangling a parishioner." (p.100) I don't remember ever having any dream like that last one. God is just trying to get us to see the other side of ourselves. Shine some light in the darkness.

B. Secondly, God not only guides us to see ourselves as we are, but to transform us. St. Paul wrote that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." (II Cor. 5:17) To recognize God's spirit speaking in our dreams can change our perspective.

A minister by the name of A.J. Gordon, while sleeping, dreamed a dream that changed his life. In his dream it was Sunday, and as he stood before his congregation about to begin preaching, he looked up and discovered a stranger who had just come into the church and was seeking a seat. A well-known member of the congregation stood up, greeted the stranger, and offered him a seat. As Gordon preached, he felt compelled to look constantly at the strange man. He thought to himself, "As soon as the service is over, I must go to this man and speak with him." However, because of the crowds streaming out of the church, he could not spot the man. He did reach the man who had offered the stranger the seat and said to him, "I'm sorry that the stranger who sat next to you is already gone. I wanted very badly to speak to him. Do you know by chance who he was?"

The man replied, "Yes. Did you not recognize him? It was Jesus." Gordon then asked the man why he had not detained the stranger so that Gordon might have spoken with him. The man replied, "Don't be sad because of that. He was here today, and he will surely come again."

After Gordon awoke, he could not remember any of the features in the stranger's face. He still knew in which pew the stranger had sat and who had greeted him. The only thing he remembered about the stranger was that His face had an expression of strange sorrow upon it.

Because of his dream, Gordon's life and ministry were deepened and he was filled with a new Christian spirit. He started the "Salvation Center" in Boston as well as a school for missionaries. This dream initiated the transformation.

CONCLUSION

God continues to reveal himself even though the Biblical canon is closed. God's footsteps can be heard in the night as we sleep. Like a flashlight in the darkness, he warns us of destructiveness, helps us to see ourselves as we are and seeks to transform us with Christ like energy. We just need to pay attention to our dreams for "When we are asleep to the world our souls are awake to God." (Kelsey, p.11)

Morton T. Kelsey, God, Dreams and Revelation

Kelsey, "Dreams: A Way to Listen to God"

John A. Sanford, "Dreams: God's Forgotten Language"