

Following Your Guiding Star: Dreams

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, December 1, 2019, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Matthew 1:18-25](#) and [Matthew 2:13-15](#)

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The experts say that adults typically have four to six dreams a night and that dreams can last for as long as 34 minutes (which strikes me as an oddly specific number).¹ They also say that most of us forget 90 to 99 per cent of our dreams.²

We don't have scientific evidence that conclusively points to why we dream. Some think that our dreams reveal the workings of our subconscious, that they reveal our deep and hidden desires and emotions. Other prominent theories suggest that dreams assist us in memory formation (that they are a time when the events of the day write to disk), that they assist us in problem solving, or that they are simply a product of random brain activity.

I personally subscribe to an "all of the above" theory. I've had dreams that I managed to remember that helped me better understand my emotional self after working with them. I suspect that some dreaming not only helps a memory solidify in our brains, but also help us make sense of experiences. I once came up with an approach to an advanced math problem in a dream while I was in college that helped me solve it, and I suspect other interpersonal problems are worked on in our dreams. And I've remembered some really weird dreams that make me think they had to be the random product of random brain activity.

Sunday night – actually, early Monday morning – I dreamed I had lost my phone, and then it became my wallet that was missing. I found my wallet in the dream, but it was empty. My driver's license and credit cards were missing. But then I realized it was my old wallet, so I needed to find my new wallet, which I did, and everything was fine.

I had forgotten to put my phone in my pocket Sunday morning, so I think the dream was related to that experience. And there may have been some emotional stuff going on related to identity (my ID was missing from my wallet). I did solve the problem of my missing wallet in my dream. And maybe some random stuff was happening in my brain, because the new wallet that I found was green, and my wallet in real life isn't green.

The one thing I can say for sure about my early Monday morning dream is that it wasn't life changing.

I have had exactly one dream that changed my life – or, I should say, changed my view of death. In this dream I died. Or more accurately, I went from being alive to realizing that I must be dead (because no one can survive walking on lava). The thing that was life changing was realizing how peaceful it is to be dead. While I still have some concerns

¹ The National Sleep Foundation, *Sleep.org*, <https://www.sleep.org/articles/how-often-dreams/> (accessed 30 November 2019).

² *Ibid.*

about dying, about the actual process of moving from this life to the next, I am convinced that whatever comes next, it will be peaceful.

The Hebrews and Jews³ viewed dreams (at least some of the time) as somehow connected to the supernatural. I say “some of the time” because the record we have is about the dreams that were interpreted as being connected to the supernatural. I don’t know what the equivalent for Abraham would have been to dreaming that it’s the final exam and you haven’t been to the class even once all semester. I’m sure the people of Ur, four thousand years ago, had some type of anxiety dream. Those dreams didn’t make it into the Bible, however, so I’m not aware of evidence that it would have been considered somehow supernatural.

There are a few references in the Bible’s wisdom literature suggesting that some dreams should essentially be ignored as unimportant.⁴ Nonetheless, some dreams were certainly seen as connected to the supernatural, and thus they could be both feared and sought after because of their potential bearing on persons and events. Jacob’s dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder between earth and heaven is an example of a dream in scripture that was viewed as being connected to the supernatural.

The difference between a “dream” and a “vision” in the Bible isn’t completely clear to me. For instance, in the Book of Acts, there are times when someone has a vision and receives a specific direction from God to do something. Like in Acts 9, when Ananias has a vision in which God says to him to go to the home of Judas (not the Judas who betrayed Jesus; a different Judas) and find Saul of Tarsus, and lay hands on him to restore his sight. Perhaps these visions that come from God are like the dreams that come from God in that they offer some direction to do something, the difference being whether the receiver of the direction gets the message while they’re asleep or awake.

Most of the time, visions and dreams seem to be very specific and concrete, but not always. There are two important instances in the Bible when dreams are highly metaphoric and, interestingly, both of these involved kings of non-Jewish countries. The first happens in Genesis. If you’ve read the Jacob saga, you’ll remember that he had twelve sons and the one named Joseph was his favorite. Joseph had two important talents: One was annoying his brothers. The other was interpreting dreams. And he used the second to accomplish the first.

Joseph had dreams that he interpreted to mean that his brothers would bow down to him and his authority. That ticked them off enough to sell him to slave traders. He ended up in Egypt as a slave, and then in prison (I’ll let you read the story for those details). He got out of prison by interpreting first some fellow inmates’ dreams and then Pharaoh’s dreams. Thanks to his interpretive skills, he rose to a position of authority in Pharaoh’s government, and sure enough, his brothers ended up coming to him for help, and bowing down before him. All the dreams in this story were metaphoric and needed interpretation.

³ I use “Hebrews” to refer to the people of the Hebrew Scriptures before perhaps through the Babylonian captivity and “Jews” to refer to these people after the Babylonian captivity.

⁴ See, for instance, Job 20:8, Psalm 90:5, Psalm 73:20, and Ecclesiastes 5:3,7.

The second happens in the book of Daniel. In this story, the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, has a vision or dream and he can't figure out what it means. Daniel, thanks to some coaching from an angel, interprets the dream.

The thing that is consistent in these stories is the belief that the interpretation of dreams could be accomplished only with God's guidance. In fact, there are laws in the Torah against false interpreters and false interpretations of dreams. It's a dangerous thing to claim to know God's will.⁵

And yet it seems that Joseph (the husband of Mary, not the son of Jacob) knows God's will for him. The dreams that this Joseph has in Matthew's introduction to his gospel are very direct and clear and are the revelation of God's will for him. In the first dream, Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant. He knows he's not the father, so he decides to break things off with Mary. He's a decent enough of a fellow to do this quietly, rather than dragging her in front of some court and accusing her of adultery. And then he has a dream. An angel shows up in the dream and is quite clear with him: "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

There are four more dreams that follow in rapid succession in the overture to Matthew's gospel.⁶ The second one is a dream the wisemen have. And then Joseph has three more. We heard the next dream Joseph has, the one that comes after the wisemen's visit, when Joseph is directed to protect his family by fleeing King Herod's violence and becoming refugees to Egypt. They stay, Matthew tells us, out of their country until it becomes safe to return, when Herod the Great dies. Joseph learns that it's safe to leave Egypt in a dream, and in the last dream that they shouldn't return to Bethlehem for safety reasons, so they return to Galilee instead.

Joseph is the actor in the introduction to the Gospel of Matthew. And he acts on God's instructions communicated in dreams. Joseph has a dream and takes Mary as his wife. She bears a son and Joseph names him Jesus (as the angel is his dream directed). Joseph flees with his family to Egypt and it is in a series of dreams that he determines that it is safe for them to return.

I admit that I'm a little jealous of the Joseph described in these first two chapters Matthew's gospel. When it comes to decision making, I'd love to get angels showing up in my dreams directing me. I would love to have the big neon sign pointing "This way!" I would love to have that level of clarity about how to best fulfill God's vision for me and for humanity. But I've never had an angel show up in a dream.

In fact, I've never had a dream that I remember where I got any sense of how to best make an important decision. And let's face it, these were big decision Joseph got direction

⁵ A. C. Meyers, "Dream," *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 293-294.

⁶ Just as the overture to a Broadway show introduces the audience to musical themes they will hear later during the show, chapters 1 and 2 of Matthew's gospel act as an introduction to themes he will expand on later. This is an idea much more fully described by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in *The First Christmas*.

about. Should I marry her? Has home turned into the mouth of a shark and we should flee?⁷ Is it safe to return home?

And so it occurs to me that perhaps, if God will not send us angels in our dreams, we must have visions. Perhaps it is our duty, as followers of Jesus, to claim his vision as our own and to use that vision to help us make decisions – individually, in our families, and as a congregation.

On the day of Pentecost, on the day we look to as the day the church was born, Peter quotes the prophet Joel. “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.” May God’s Holy Spirit be poured out on our flesh so that we may prophesy, so that we may see visions of what can be, so that we can dream God’s dream.

Amen.

Questions for Quiet Contemplation

How have your dreams impacted your life?

How have you heard God speaking to you?

Who do you describe God’s dream and what do we need to do to fully embrace it?

⁷ A reference to Warsan Shire’s poem “Home,” which you should read if you’re not familiar with it. You can do so at <https://www.facinghistory.org/standing-up-hatred-intolerance/warsan-shire-home>.