

Good morning everyone! This Sunday we are continuing our journey through the narrative lectionary with the story of Joseph. Now the story of Joseph is one that we don't necessarily talk about a lot, but I imagine most of us here know it somewhat well...Whether that's because of the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical or because of the Bible, who knows, but we know the story!

The story of Joseph ends the book of Genesis and it's a sort of epic conclusion because it really could be a book all on its own. What I love most about the story of Joseph is that it is one of the best examples I can think of in the Bible of a theme that runs throughout all of Scripture, from the beginning of the Bible to the very end. And that's that the people in the Bible are incredibly flawed. They make all sorts of mistakes and do some pretty unimaginable things to one another, and yet, they have this great capacity for love and bring God's love into the world in remarkable ways that heal brokenness and bring restoration.

It's not hard to see that in the story of Joseph which if we break it down has some pretty drastic and disturbing moments. To give you a really quick recap of the story—Joseph is one of the twelve sons and one daughter born to Jacob by his two wives, Rachel and Leah. Out of all his children, Jacob's favorite child is his son Joseph who we hear is incredibly talented and handsome, and Jacob certainly shows his favoritism by giving Joseph this wonderful robe that's made of fine linen. If that wasn't enough for all Joseph's brother's to deal with, Joseph has this dream that all of his family and

everyone he knows is bowing down to him, which he sees as foreshadowing that one day he will rule over them, and rather than keeping that dream to himself, Joseph tells his brothers all about this and that leads them to do something terrible. They sell their brother into slavery in Egypt and tell their father that Joseph—his favorite son—has died.

And yet—Joseph seems to make the most out of his situation. He ends up being sold to a man named Potiphar who is a high ranking official in the court of a pharaoh in Egypt. Joseph proves his talent again by serving Potiphar very well...and so he ends up becoming the overseer of Potiphar's house, meaning he is entrusted with taking care of everything that Potiphar owns. But the story takes another disturbing turn when Potiphar's wife takes quite the liking to Joseph. When Joseph doesn't reciprocate that affection, the story tells us that she claims that Joseph tried to sleep with her, and so Potiphar sends Joseph out of his home and away to prison.

The Scripture that we read for this morning comes from Joseph's time in prison where earlier in the story he interprets the dreams of two other prisoners, which is how pharaoh hears that Joseph has the ability to interpret dreams. And our Scripture shows us that through Joseph's interpretation, he is able to tell the pharaoh that a famine is coming and he saves the people of Egypt from a lot of suffering by ensuring that they store up plenty of food to get them through the famine.

An important point that weaves all of the story of Joseph together is the importance of dreams. In all the highs and lows of the story of Joseph, we see time and time again that dreams have something important to tell us about the future. You see, in the ancient world around the time that the story of Joseph became a solid tradition, ancient people believed that dreams were from the gods. In fact, people believed that dreams were placed in the minds of human beings at night by gods in order to help people understand the future. Given this way of thinking, dreams and dream interpretation was considered so important that people in power often sought out dream interpreters to advise how they should lead and serve on courts with them so they could make good choices for the future.

So obviously we no longer believe that dreams are placed into our minds at night by the gods. Usually we just see them as a sign of healthy brain activity while we sleep or at the very least, we see them as these funny stories we can tell our friends about when we see them at work and school. But even so, dreams are a really fascinating thing aren't they? I've always been fascinated by dreams and yet at the same time, I often forget just how remarkable our dreams are because they are such an ordinary part of our lives. We all have to sleep to survive, sometimes it feels like life might be a little easier if we didn't have to, but really every night when we go to sleep this incredible thing happens in our mind and body, this thing that clearly ancient people understood had something very important to teach us.

I don't think I'm alone in sometimes forgetting just how intriguing our dreams really are. If I had to guess, I'd say that most of us probably don't fully grasp the importance of dreams for our lives. And I want to be clear: When I talk about dreams in this way, I'm not talking about the ancient way of understanding them as God placing messages in our minds. I'm just talking about this everyday thing we all do...I think our way of living makes it especially easy for us to neglect the potential power of dreams to mold our lives. In our world, we tend to place a lot of value on what's predictable, measurable, and what gives us a sense of control over our lives. And dreaming sits in an ambiguous sort of place where on the one hand, our dreams are completely our own...they come from our brains and our unique experiences and so they are controlled to a certain extent by us...and yet on the other hand, they come from this part of us that is mostly out of our conscious control...that is, unless you regularly experience lucid dreaming...which can happen but it's not typical. In a world where we value what is concrete and productive, dreaming is more often than not, going to settle pretty low in terms of its importance to us.

But here's the thing: I firmly believe that dreaming is a crucial way that we experience the divine. And that's incredible because it's this ordinary and necessary part of our lives that can allow us a deep connection to God's voice within ourselves. In our dreams we access possibilities within our world and ourselves that we would not be able to discover from our waking consciousness alone. To give you a sense of what I

mean by this, I'm going to tell you a little bit about what happens in our minds and bodies when we sleep and it's my hope that you will come away from what we talk about this morning understanding that our dreams are a vital spiritual tool and door to the divine. Because truly, I think that Joseph's ability to hear God's voice in his dreams and in the dreams of other people is something we all have within us. So what do you think, does it sound a little woo woo to you? That's okay. I think that by walking through this together, you might find that this is something you're already familiar with.

So as I said, want to start by telling you a little bit about what goes on in our brains while we are asleep and I am conscious of the fact that there's a person who knows a lot about the brain sitting right behind me. We're just covering the basics today. One of the major reasons that we as human beings need to sleep is that while we are asleep, our brains get to let go of a lot of stuff that gets in the way of our ability to make sense of the world around us. Simply put, when we sleep our brains get to figure out what information from our day and our life it wants to keep and what it can get rid of, so it can make space for the most important things.

If you've ever stayed up late cramming for a test, you might understand this better than you think. If you cram for a test, you may be able to recall a good bit of what you studied when you go to take your exam, but within a day or two, it's likely that you've

forgotten most of it. And that's because your brain didn't get the time it needed to process the information you studied and store it away for the long term.

But even beyond that, when we go to sleep, our brains also turn off some of the default processes it needs when we're awake and processing the world in real time, so what we're taking in all day long can become more clear to us. People like Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, and Salvador Dali understood this very well and used sleep as a way to reset their mind when they got stuck solving problems in their work. All three of them are said to have had a practice where if they got stuck and couldn't figure something out, they would go to sleep sitting upright with something heavy in their hands, that way when they started to drift off to sleep, their body would relax and the heavy object in their hands would fall onto the ground, make a noise, and wake them up. They'd do that because when they woke up, they often found that they had an answer to the problem they were trying to solve because even in that early stage of sleep, their minds were free to make sense of the problem without the extra noise of waking life.

And so, given this freedom from the noise of conscious life and the way our mind sifts through our memories when we sleep, our dreams are essentially our mind's way of telling us what lies under the surface within us that is inaccessible to us during our waking hours. The best way I know how to explain this is with a story I heard in a documentary several years ago. It's about a man named Donald Newman who was a

mathematician who worked at MIT in the 1950s and he was part of this group of some of the best mathematicians in the world that were also there during that time.

This group of mathematicians were very competitive with one another, so while they collaborated on problems, they were also trying to out-do each other constantly. So one day, Newman was working on a theoretical math problem, trying his very best to solve it and he just couldn't get it to work or make sense no matter how hard he tried. So he's trying and trying, until eventually he just gave up and decided he would go to sleep. And while he was asleep he had a dream.

Now before I go any further, it's important to know that one of the elite mathematicians at MIT that Newman was competing with was a guy named John Nash. You may know of him because of the book and film *A Beautiful Mind*...but even if you don't know of him, all you need to know is that John Nash was considered to be an absolute genius...the top of the heap by a long shot and definitely the one to beat among this group of mathematicians at MIT. This is important because while Newman was asleep, he dreamed about the solution to the problem he was trying to solve. Only he didn't dream directly of the solution. Instead, he dreamed that he and Nash met in Cambridge where MIT is located, and Newman asked Nash in his dream about the problem he couldn't solve.

And sure enough, Nash walked Newman through the solution to the problem step by step in the dream so that when Newman woke up he actually had the solution in his

mind. He said it was the most amazing thing he had ever experienced. Eventually he went on to publish a paper explaining this theory and the solution to the problem using all that Nash explained to him in his dream. And this is just amazing to me, but Newman gave credit for the theory in his paper to John Nash because he said that it was not his solution...he felt there was just no fathomable way he could have solved the problem. To him it was Nash.

I love this because I don't think John Nash visited Donald Newman in his dream...I think somewhere within himself, Newman knew that this was a problem John Nash could solve, and so through a dream he was able to allow Nash to show up and walk him through it. This is the sort of thing that the pressure of competition and the entanglement of day-to-day affairs we all know too well probably would have kept from happening in the waking hours of Donald Newman's life. But in his dreams, a kind of freedom allowed this very real part of him to step forward and make sense of something that was previously unfathomable to him.

And so this idea I'm putting out there to you about dreams is deceptively simple—I'm trying to say that our dreams give us this ability to allow parts of us that are locked away to step forward and show up. Parts of us where I believe the divine lives. Often I think these very real and beautiful parts of who we are get pushed down into us because of the way certain undercurrents of our lives distract us from what truly matters. But here's the truth: This whole idea that sleep and dreams are a key to



unlocking distant parts of ourselves, really brushes up against a pretty stubborn feature of how I tend to operate in the world. I was taught from a very young age that hard work is the solution to everything and so whenever I experience a problem or challenge, my first instinct isn't to try to let go and find the answer within myself by sleeping or dreaming. It's to clench my fists and muscle through to a solution with all my might. Needless to say, that process tends not to include sleep and dreams so much as it includes self-criticism aimed at helping me feel some kind of control in my life.

I mention this because given my inclination toward that desire for control, I'm aware that being open to the wisdom that exists in our dreams can feel very vulnerable because it can lead us to discover truths about ourselves and the world that are uncomfortable. In dreaming, that quieting of our conscious mind can allow what lies below the surface to come up in such a way that we suddenly understand past and present experiences with clarity that cuts us to our core. Even beyond that, I think our dreams can open the door to worlds that we never knew existed. And while that's wonderful, it's also a lot to take in. It's a lot easier to just forget and discount the possibilities that our dreams hold than it is to embrace the way our dreams allow us to surrender and let go of all the stuff we are consumed by every day that keeps us from taking an honest look at who we are and what we're going through. But that tendency

to want to hold on to what feels more predictable and within our control is why we need to dream in the first place.

This is where I think the story of Joseph has something really important to teach us.

In the story, we see that amid some of the most devastating circumstances imaginable, Joseph's dreams and his ability to interpret the dreams of others sets him free. His dreams don't remove the pain of being betrayed and hurt by his brothers...of being separated from his family. But his dreams allow him to see beyond that to a different reality...to see the divine coursing through even the darkest suffering and worst behavior of people. Even as he is sold into slavery, he has this dream that there is life beyond his present reality. When he is thrown into prison, he brings himself to life through the dreams of other people and continues to see something more for himself beyond the imprisonment of his waking life.

And in the end of the story of Joseph, we see what I think is one of the most beautiful things in the Bible—Something that sets the stage for the story of Jesus that comes later in the New Testament. Joseph encounters the brothers who caused him so much harm in the first place...who ensured that his dreams were often preferable to the realities of his waking life. They see Joseph because the famine that Egypt was prepared for because of their brother has hit the land of Canaan where they are from so they come to Egypt hoping for food. And remarkably, Joseph forgives the brothers who sold him into slavery and chooses to love them. Forgiveness is one of the

greatest gifts any person can give or receive and it's also one of the most difficult things to offer up when you've been wounded deeply. If you've ever been in a situation where you've had to forgive someone for causing you harm, you know that it requires a kind of letting go and surrender that at times can feel impossible. To me, the reality of forgiveness...true forgiveness, not just empty words or saying you forgive someone when you actually hold onto that anger for dear life, can only come about through surrender to the limitless possibilities and new worlds we encounter in dreams. It requires a sort of imagination beyond what we find in our waking life.

Many of us don't value how important dreams are in molding our lives and our world. But what I want you to know is that Joseph's gift of dreams is something we all have within us. Dreams are absolutely amazing things. Our minds create new worlds for us to inhabit while we are asleep...Things that we could not imagine with our waking mind alone because our minds know that without dreams, we cannot take full advantage of all the beauty this world has to offer. Our dreams open doors to things that we could have never thought possible...worlds without hatred. Forgiveness for those who have caused us the most pain. Dreams move us beyond our present reality and allow us to be aware of what lies under the surface, so we can move past barriers that keep us disconnected from ourselves and one another and allow us instead to connect.

So often, when we feel lost and heartbroken in our lives and world, our first instinct is to grab onto whatever allows us to feel a sense of control. Be that a harmful ideology, a person in power, a tendency toward muscling through. But the truth is, what we are looking for is within us already. The anchor we are looking for, the connection to something beyond us is internal. And all that it requires of us is to allow ourselves to let go and to dream and to see those dreams can be a reality. That is when we experience God's love.

And so today I want to invite you to know that all we need to create a new world...a world defined by God's love and forgiveness, lies within us. More often than not, the entanglements of our world and our conscious minds get in the way, but that doesn't mean we can't discover it. By simply closing our eyes and opening our hearts to the possibility of dreams, we can discover clarity and feel the hunger within ourselves for a world that is better than the one laid before us. So today, my prayer is that we will all be filled with the wonder and possibility of our dreams and what already exists within us. It's my prayer that we might all know that while dreams are not placed in our minds by gods at night, God gave all of us the ability to dream so that we could experience the divine in ourselves and open the door to new ways of living and being together. May you know that this gift of Joseph is within you and all of us...All it requires is that you go to sleep and dream. Amen.