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“Not Another Dream”

A sermon by M. Keith Daniel

**2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time: Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday
January 17, 2016
Genesis 28:10–22**

Mother to Son

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

—Langston Hughes

Dr. King said, “Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” Jacob’s dream of a staircase of angels is tremendous. There is not another dream like Jacob’s dream at Bethel recorded in all of scripture. There are 118 passages dealing with the dreams of mortals in the First and New Testaments. Just shy of one third (33) of the dream passages are in Genesis with only 8 references in the New Testament.

Dreams are interesting phenomena in the human experience. I’m speaking specifically of the condition of being fast asleep, or in more scientific terms, in the REM (Rapid Eye Movement) state of unconscious awareness. Clinical Psychologist Ilana Simons, Ph.D., referenced Freud’s assertion that “whether we intend it or not, we’re all poets. That’s because on most nights, we dream.” And dreams are a lot like poetry, in both, we express our internal life in similar ways. We conjure images; we combine incongruent elements to evoke emotion in a more efficient way than wordier descriptions can; and we use unconscious and tangential associations rather than logic to tell a story.”¹

“Freud essentially called dreams those poems we tell ourselves at night in order to experience our unconscious wishes as real. Dreams allow us to be what we cannot be, and to say what we do not say, in our more repressed daily lives. For instance, if I dream about burning my workplace down, it’s probably because I want to dominate the workplace but am too nervous to admit that aggressive drive when I’m awake and trying to be nice to the people who might give me a raise... For Freud, every single dream was the picture of an unconscious wish.” Dr. Simons notes that many great literary minds were obsessed with their dreams. Samuel Coleridge wanted to write a book about dreams—saying that “night’s dismay which stunned the coming day.” Edgar Allan Poe knew dreams fed his literature, and he pushed himself to dream “dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.”

I don’t recall ever really having a nighttime dream worth interpreting.

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-literary-mind/200911/what-do-dreams-do-us>

However, I have discovered a certain essential food group tends to trigger my “night’s dismay”—ice cream.☺ Most every time I indulge in the heavenly realms of some good ole mint chocolate chip ice cream, I have the weirdest dreams!

Could you imagine Jacob having had some “Rocky Road” ice cream that fateful night he lay down in Luz? The text would read, “Having indulged in too much sinfully delicious Rocky Road ice cream, he found a stone to rest his head against and lay down to sleep... And he dreamed...”☺ Well the text doesn’t reveal that [ice cream]; however, the full narrative *context* reveals that Jacob’s life was sinfully rocky. From the moment of his birth, Jacob has been the ultimate supplanter of dreams. Jacob’s got issues, and it’s hard to imagine him sleeping at all let alone encountered God and living to tell the story.

One could argue Jacob suffered from “influenza”—a “diagnosis” that he had no concept of responsibility because his rich parents coddled him his whole life. Rachel, his mother, loved him more than his brother, Esau. His father, Isaac, favored Esau, but he still rewarded Jacob’s deceitful character by giving him Esau’s blessed inheritance. Our patriarchal family (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) affairs were constantly on the rocks. From lying about their marital status, fear, jealousy, manipulation, intramarital discord, and familial drama what biblical scholars call saga is reality TV in its most original and uncut edition. Thankfully, God cuts in or in cuts God.

God gets personal with Jacob at Luz. God is not another dream. God is not some distant, aloof or uncaring deity. This is *The I am*, *The I have*, and *The I will* God of all creation. It’s personal now. As I discovered by listening to Duke Divinity School professor Dr. Ellen Davis and reading her book *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*, the Bible yields its meaning in tiny increments. It’s like a poem, not a novel. Almighty God makes it personal and guides us through those who have gone before us,

“I am the Lord, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God

of your father, Isaac. The ground you are lying on belongs to you. I am giving it to you and your descendants... And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants. What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you.”²

Suddenly the angels are gone. The dream is over. God speaks and Jacob awakens. The stone he slept on is made even more real. Jacob awakens from not another dream, but to God's dream—unswerving vision and perpetual action with, in, and through all creation. Jacob sets the stone upright as a memorial pillar representing order and stability against all forces that lurk under the cover of darkness—think, “upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it”; think, “the stone that the builders rejected is the chief cornerstone”; think, “the rock of ages”; think, **Jesus our rock and our redeemer**. Jacob pours oil on the rock, representing the work of the Spirit that transcends human capability, sanctifies, and makes all things holy. And last, Jacob takes ultimate power and authority by renaming the location from Luz to Bethel representing the favor and blessing of Almighty God.

Dr. King was more a realist than a dreamer. His motivation to put his life squarely on the line for America and all humanity was not precipitated by one night's dream. He did not intend to invoke the dream metaphor during his March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom speech. That was entirely the oil of the Spirit transforming Dr. King's prophetic words into poetic form in the moment of mass communication. And, what a powerful moment it was.

The thirty-foot tall statue of Dr. King, positioned southwest of the National Mall in Washington, DC, was sculpted by Lei Yixin, a Chinese artist, out of Chinese granite, in China. None of the quotations on the Inscription Wall are from King's famous “I have a dream” speech. The strength, stability and power of King's life were not in another dream.

² Genesis 28: 14–15, NLT.

Professor Ellen Davis wrote, “A stable self develops through one means only; the difficult discipline of obedience to those who are ahead of us in our journey toward God.”³ I was born August 8, 1968. And, Dr. King’s voice and the cacophony of people and voices that inspired his faith and commitment to nonviolence and the dignity of all human life have so profoundly shaped the person I am today. It was just my mother and me striving to make a living in our two-bedroom apartment from Washington, DC, to Hyattsville, MD. Dad was there too, but they would split up by the time I was ten. Mom did everything in her power not to allow me to grow up a bitter, angry boy, cussing, chasing women, and surely not chasin’ a fictitious American dream of individual wealth and prosperity. She taught me to believe in the reality of God’s Dream for the dignity and sanctity of every human life to love my neighbors and my enemies. Yet, I still face fear daily that I, too, may not live as long as I prefer the more I get involved with God in working for jobs and freedom, poverty alleviation, dismantling racism, and Christian community development initiatives. The road remains treacherously rocky for far too many people of all creeds, colors, and socio-stratifications these days. There is no other dream worth living and dying for than God’s vision for peace on earth and goodwill for all humanity. As followers of Jesus, we are called to demand gun sense in America, to demand the removal of unjust obstacles to voting rights, to work feverishly for the creation of affordable housing, health and wellness care for all people, and to provide gainful employment for new and returning citizens. As Geico says, it’s what we do! We put rocks in place so people have sufficient stability, spiritual covering, and the blessed assurance of being made in the image of God. People need tangible provision and hope right now, not “one day.” Friends, we have some serious work to do to right the wrongs of injustice, overcome hatred, and the destructive actions of the dream supplanters and false dream weavers that aim to distract and deceive us of our birth rites in the family of God.

³ Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*. (Cambridge: Cowley Publications), 2001, p. 100.

The title of King's sermon the night following his assassination was *Why America May Go to Hell*. Life is hell on earth for too many people today. 2015 was not a dream but a real nightmare for 41 homicide victims and their families, the most in 20 years in Durham. 2015 was a horrible nightmare for Charleston, SC, in the hate crime slaying of 9 church members of Mother Emanuel AME Church. We need to make sure we have plenty of oil in our lamps to stay up late through the night to watch and pray for God to intervene on our human predicament to eradicate and dismantle injustice, human hatred, and exploitation that leads to violence.

Is it a dream that we can go upstream and find out who's responsible for polluting the waters we fish and drink from? Is it a dream that we can hold ourselves and others accountable for deceptive practices aimed to keep unjust systems in place and poor people in their place? Is it a dream that we can find a way to love our neighbors as well as our enemies? Is it a dream that rich and poor will always be, but that poverty can be eradicated? Is it a dream that we, the people of God, by God's grace, can keep America from going to hell?

Is it another dream, a fictional fantasy that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him may have eternal life? Is it a dream that God has been at work through this great downtown Durham church by history and by choice? Is it a dream that countless women and men for generations have kept stepping, climbing, marching tirelessly to build beloved community? I hesitate to name any one of them as not negate any number of them. But given our location, I have to implicate a few who have helped build heavenly staircases here in Durham. Our beloved **Rev. Joe Harvard, Bishop Elroy Lewis, Rabbi John Friedman, Rev. Mel Williams**, and our beloved and now belated sister and community minister, **Dr. Sharon Elliott-Bynum**, who valiantly created Healing with CAARE, a tangible balm in Gilead right here in our own backyard. Dr. Elliott-Bynum helped me see the heavenly staircase. How I miss her presence. She was a realist and a visionary. She brought heaven on earth for so many of us.

I can hear Dr. Elliott-Bynum's voice now saying,

Healing with CAARE isn't another dream now chil'
I'se climb'd on,
And reach'd my eternal landin,
Where this is no more dark
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on those church steps
with your head in your hands
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I'se gone', honey,
Look after our people,
Care for the sick,
Make sure support systems are in place for the poor,
Make room for the homeless,
Life for you and your children won't have any stairs if you stop
workin'
So, carry on preachin' Good News to the poor,
But, don't just preach it, live it!

If you're looking for a place to help build heavenly staircases here in Durham, I commend you to support Healing with CAARE. There is no shortage of fantastic non-profit agencies in Durham. Did you know that there at 400 non-profit organizations in Durham with missions focused on youth? On this MLK commemorative weekend, I appeal for your time, talent, and treasure on behalf of our local agencies and community ministries dedicated to youth development, ending poverty, loving our refugees, and eliminating health disparities. I appeal to you, my brothers and sisters, to double down on your commitment to love and serve your neighbor.

No, there is not another dream because there is not another Gospel. Jesus Christ, the same, yesterday, today, and forever. No, I didn't eat any ice cream last night. My eyes see the glory of the God who has already come

in human form and dwelt among us, bled and died on the cross for our salvation. It's only been a couple weeks since we celebrated Christ's birthday. We're now in Ordinary Time on the Christian calendar, but it is Extraordinary Time huddle up, mobilize and take collective action with people of faith and goodwill from the North, South, East, and West Durham. It's what we do. Sure, we have an adversary working against us. But, if God be for us... God has given us, the spirit of love, power, and a sound mind to keep Durham from being a living hell and to make Durham be a city of healing and an example to the nations.

Thank you, First Presbyterian Church, downtown by history and by choice for over 100 years. Congratulations. The quality of your next 5 to 10 years will be determined by the level of your conviction to co-create God's dream for our city. It will be determined by an act like Jacob's to anoint and rededicate your lives as living stones set firmly on the chief cornerstone of Jesus' power and love. There is hope for Durham, if churches lead the way in sacrificial acts of loving kindness and redemptive work for stability, healing and holiness. Depending on whom you ask, there are 400-600 churches in Durham. The ones that will thrive will be those seriously engaged and participating in the work of building beloved community the other six days of the week for the glory of God and the sake of the world.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen.

Rev. M. Keith Daniel, Executive Director of Operations and Strategic Partnerships for StepUp North Carolina (SUNC), is ordained in the American Baptist Church tradition. Prior to joining SUNC, he served as Executive Director of DurhamCares. He has also served as the Director of Community and Campus Engagement for Duke University Chapel where he also directed the Chapel's core student ministry, PathWays, from 2005-2012 and served during the 2012-2013 academic year as the Interim Director of the Office of Black Church Studies and the Program Manager for Duke's 50th Anniversary Commemoration of the Integration of Black Students. Rev. Daniel earned his B.A. as a student athlete and member of the 1989 ACC Champion Duke Football team, the Master of Higher Education Administration from North Carolina State University, and the Master of Divinity from Duke Divinity School. He is in the final thesis writing stage of completing the Doctor of Ministry at Duke Divinity School. Rev. Daniel and his wife, Lorna, are natives of Washington, DC, and reside in Durham, NC, with their two teens, Madison II and Loren.

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