

“Responding to the Dream”
Daniel 2:1-16/Matthew 27:15-26

Picture the scene. You are a major league baseball rookie playing your first game. You have just helped Team USA clinch a spot in the Summer Olympics when you get word that you are being brought up to the big leagues. Your parents are in the stands and you have brought eight gloves because you don't know what position you will play. Early in the game, you get your first hit. A couple of hours later, you step up the plate again. It is the bottom of the ninth, there is one man on base, your team is trailing by one and there are two outs and you hit a home run that wins the game. It's the first walk-off homer by a rookie in the first game in your team's 138-year history. While it sounds like a movie script, it actually happened to the Phillies' Luke Williams eleven days ago causing my favorite team to walk off the field in shock. “You can't make this up,” Williams told reporters after the game. “It's pretty incredible...It hasn't been the easiest journey, but this is pretty awesome...It felt like a dream.” (Matt Rappa, “Phillies rookie Luke Williams Shocks Braves with Walk-off HR,” www.thatballsoutthere.com, 6/10/21)

Dreams are a frequent companion to life. Some occur while we are asleep and others when wide awake. Some are realized and others dashed. Some bring joy while others yet cause a cold sweat. Dreams are also the unifying thread in our Scripture readings today. Neither speaks of baseball or walk-off homers, of course, but life-and-death matters for two servants of God. Thus, we turn to hear what they have to suggest about how we best respond to dreams.

The first comes from the Book of Daniel, describing events from 2500 years ago when the people of God are in Babylonian exile. The title character along with several of his fellow exiles has been placed in the service of King Nebuchadnezzar. Last week, we read of how Daniel and three of his friends objected to a food ration ordered by the king. That defiance could have cost them their life, but it worked out and that scene ended with the words “Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams.” Today's account tells of how that ability saved his life.

That scene opens with reports that Nebuchadnezzar has had some troubling dreams. As we all know, some people remember their dreams and some do not. I am usually in the latter category. The most frequent ones I do recall are when I show up at church—here or elsewhere--and discover I'm supposed to preach that day, but have not been told ahead of time or dreams when I arrive ready, but encounter all kinds of barriers that keep me getting to the pulpit on time. As someone who prefers to plan my words and to start punctually, both dreams wake me up!

Nebuchadnezzar remembered his dreams, too, or at least one as “his spirit was troubled, and his sleep left him.” Throughout the ancient New East, including Mesopotamia where Babylon was located, dreams were widely thought to convey messages from the gods, warning of impending disaster or telling of some future blessing or advising one on important decisions. Thus, sovereigns of that era had among their advisors individuals whose job was to interpret dreams. Maybe Nebuchadnezzar had more dreams than most or liked diverse opinions as we read that he had magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and Chaldeans ready to help.

After this particular nightmare, Nebuchadnezzar brings in his team and says, “I have had such a dream that my spirit is troubled by the desire to understand it.” “O king, live forever,” one replies, “Tell your servants the dream, and we will reveal the interpretation.” His confident tone suggests it to be their usual opening line, but the king wants more. “If you do not tell me both the dream and its interpretation,” he responds, “you shall be torn limb from limb and your houses shall be laid in ruins.” He goes on to say that if his dream team is able to provide both pieces of information then they will receive gifts, rewards and honors. The king repeats his demand.

“Let the king first tell his servants the dream, then we can give its interpretation,” the man suggest, but the king repeats his terms. “There is no one on earth who can reveal what the king demands,” the dream expert exclaims. “The thing that the king is asking is too difficult and no one can reveal it except the gods, whose dwelling is not with mortals.” Nebuchadnezzar flies into a rage and decrees that all of the wise men in the land are to be killed; an order that apparently would include Daniel and his friends. That exile soon asks the executioner why the king is so upset and then for reasons not explained, is able to gain an audience with the sovereign who agrees to give him some time. In the coming weeks, we will hear of how Daniel learns the content and meaning of that dream, but on this day, we stop with the problem.

Our other reading recalls a moment when a dream plays a role in Jesus’ fate. In Matthew’s gospel dreams are always seen as a message from God and each of the six occurrences happen when Jesus’ future is at risk. Four of them involve Joseph: when informed of Jesus’ true paternity, when told to take Mary and the infant to Egypt to escape Herod, when he gets word the king has died and it is safe to return home, and then a final dream about where to settle. Matthew also offers the detail after wise men have found the infant Jesus and presented their gifts of then being warned in a dream not to tell Herod where they have found the infant. Each of those times in the narrative is depicted as offering a direct word from God and perhaps that is what the gospel writer means in our passage, too, the final time Matthew tells of a dream.

It comes from that painful day we call Good Friday when Jesus is being handed back and forth between religious and political officials. In our text, Jesus is with Pilate, the governor or prefect of Palestine. Matthew tells of a tradition in which the prefect could release one prisoner as a goodwill gesture during Passover. After asking the crowd if should release Jesus or an insurrectionist named Barabbas, Pilate receives a message from his wife. “Have nothing to do with that innocent man,” she says, “for I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.” Pilate doesn’t send a message back, but instead lets the crowd shape his decision. Seeing that things have spun out of control he washes his hands before the people and says “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.” He then hands Jesus over for crucifixion.

There are shared themes between those two passages. In both, a distressing dream occurs and its interpretation has life and death consequences. In both, there are troubling behaviors displayed by rulers and messages implied to have come from God. There are differences, too, for the king’s dream, as we will see, predicts the future while the dream of Pilate’s wife offers a word of truth about Jesus’ identity that fails to stop the injustice unfolding before her husband. So what do those accounts say to us about how we best respond to the dreams of today?

Let me first make clear that I do not have any expertise in dream interpretation. If you are seeking such insight, I would encourage you to look elsewhere. My own guess, too, is that the vast majority of our dreams are not divine in origin. I do not exclude the possibility that God can still use our sleep to convey a message. Perhaps you have experienced times when you acted upon a particularly vivid dream and found that the outcome you carried out in daylight proved to be just the right course of action. I celebrate that outcome for you while still suspecting that most of our dreams reflect only the endless creativity of our subconscious.

Yet in both of the passages that have been our focus today, the dream brought in one outside the decision-making process who provided an important word about God’s intention. Daniel is a Jewish man being held in exile who is able to reveal God’s purpose when court officials cannot. Pilate’s wife is a Gentile, who speaks truth about Jesus’ innocence while Jewish authorities remained determined in their goal. Both of those individuals uttered divine truths.

Thus, those events suggest to me that one of the best ways to respond to dreams—ours or others—is to explore if the nocturnal or daylight message is consistent with what we know to be true about God. Does it point to the way of love and justice? Does it build up the community and encourage a better way? Does it call upon the best in humanity and encourage all to use their gifts for strengthening relationships? If it does not meet any of those criteria then the dream is not from God. On the other hand, even if a dream checks all of those boxes, there is no guarantee the idea is divinely inspired. Yet when we see a consistency between what our faith teaches and what we are feeling led to do, we can be empowered even so to act on the dream.

On Friday, federal employees experienced an unexpected day off as a few hours before President Biden signed into law a bill creating a new federal holiday. In an unusually bi-partisan effort, both the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate overwhelmingly passed a resolution earlier in the week and the President's pen made an eleventh such holiday of Juneteenth.

As many of you know, Juneteenth recalls how on June 19, 1865, Major General Gordon Granger rode into Galveston, Texas, bringing news of the Emancipation Proclamation. That decree by President Lincoln 2 ½ years earlier had ended slavery in the states in rebellion against the Union. Six months earlier Congress had passed the 13th Amendment that would end slavery in the rest of the country, and two months before Granger spoke the war had concluded and the President died. None of that news had reached the enslaved of Galveston until that day and thus with his words, a quarter million people were freed instantly and a massive celebration began. The following year marked the first observance and in the decades that have followed it has grown to include parades and fireworks and picnics including red food and drink to symbolize the blood shed with slavery. In 1980, Texas became the first to make Juneteenth a state holiday.

Present at the White House signing were congressional leaders and a 94-year old African-American woman named Opal Lee. As a child, the Texas native remembered Juneteenth as a time of great celebration and joy, but on the Juneteenth of her tenth year watched as white people set fire to her home. For forty years that educator was active in her county's group that oversaw the local Juneteenth, but in 2016, at the age of 89, decided that her life's mission was to be like that of Granger. "I just knew I had to spread the word about Juneteenth to everybody." The best way she felt to do that was help Juneteenth become a federal holiday so she launched a walking campaign in cities along the route from her home in Fort Worth, Texas to Washington, D.C.

She started with her church and her pastors and other community leaders. They walked 2 ½ miles to symbolize how long it had taken the news of the Emancipation Proclamation to reach Texas. The next day they walked 2 ½ miles again. Communities across the land soon began their own walks, all to encourage Congress to create the federal holiday. Even during pandemic her efforts continued. Along the way, Opal Lee became known as the Grandmother of Juneteenth and last week her efforts and those of countless others paid off.

In an Instagram post she reflected on the moment: "WOW! I am beyond excited to see my lifelong dream & mission of making Juneteenth a national holiday...After years of preaching the importance of Juneteenth as a unifier for our country I'm thrilled to see our country finally recognize it as the national holiday it should be. Thank you to everyone who helped us achieve this incredible milestone to spread unity, love, and equality. Now, let's celebrate freedom from the 19th of June until the fourth of July!" (Vanessa Romo, "One Woman's Decades-Long Fight to Make Juneteenth a U.S. Holiday," www.npr.org, 6/17/21)

To which I would simply suggest that God's dream is for it to last much longer.