

The Impossible Dream

Sermon 92 | Greystone Baptist Church | February 28, 2021
Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-18

Monty Roberts loves to gather guests in his home and often tells a story about a young boy who was the son of an itinerant horse trainer. He grew up going from stable to stable, race track to race track, farm to farm, ranch to ranch training horses. As a result, his schooling was constantly interrupted. Just before graduating from high school, a teacher asked him to write a paper about what he wanted to be and do when he grew up. The high school senior went home and wrote a seven-page paper about his dream of owning a horse ranch. With great detail he drew diagrams and described the 200-acre ranch. He had meticulously planned where all of the buildings would be in relation to the stables and the track. He even designed a floor plan for the 4,000 square foot house that would sit on the property. This blueprint bore his heart and soul. It contained every dream the boy ever dared to dream.

He handed it into his teacher the next day at school, feeling vulnerable and proud.

Two days later the paper was given back to him with a large “F” on it and a note that said, “See me after class!”

“The boy went and met with the teacher asking, ‘Why did I receive an F?’

The teacher said, ‘This is an unrealistic dream for a young boy like you. You have no money. You come from an itinerant family. You have no resources. Owning a horse ranch requires a lot of money. You have to buy the land. You have to pay for the original breeding stock and later you’ll have to pay large stud fees. There’s no way you could ever do it.’ Then the teacher added, ‘If you rewrite this paper with a more realistic goal, I will reconsider your grade.’

The boy went home and thought about it long and hard. He asked his father what he should do. His father said, ‘Look son, you have to make up your own mind on this. However, I think it is a very important decision for you.’ Finally, after sitting with it for a week, the boy turned in the same paper, making no changes at all.”

While handing it over to the teacher who’d asked him to re-write it he said, “You can keep the F and I will keep my dream.”

It’s at about this point in the story when Monty typically confesses to whoever is listening: “I tell you this story because you are sitting in my 4000 square foot house in the middle of my 200-acre horse ranch. I still have that school paper framed over my fireplace.”¹

You can keep the F and I will keep my dream.

¹ *Top 100 Motivational Stories*, p.104-106

Every time I read this story that line stops me in my tracks. First because I was raised to be a polite, southern woman who would never speak to a teacher with such confidence and disregard for the grade. More importantly though, because of the courage it takes to insist on a dream – even in the face of certain failure.

There is something about dreamers though, that inspires the rest of us to press on, to believe, to hold onto hope even in the face of overwhelming odds.

The Bible is full of dreamers, some like Jacob who wrestles with God in a dream-like state and awakens with a limp. Others, like Joseph the father of Jesus have dreams too, dreams that share the news of Mary's pregnancy and the need to flee the wrath of Herod. Our Biblical stories are fueled by dreams and visions that guide the plot, often helping the main characters escape harm and experience God's will for their lives.

There are other kinds of dreamers, though, in the Bible. There were dreamers like Moses who could see a different way of life, a new reality for the Hebrew people suffering under Egyptian oppression. Dreamers like Mary who embraced a scandalously dangerous pregnancy because of the possibility that her son might become the savior of the whole world. Yes, our story is written and upheld by dreamers who refused to surrender the dream because somebody told them their dreams were impossible.

Maybe there is another dreamer whose story unfolds within our sacred texts, one with dreams so big even the laws of nature cannot prevail as earth itself is created, floods are summoned, seas are parted, slaves are freed, wilderness becomes home, and death loses its power as the final word. Yes, it seems that ours is a God with a mighty big dream.

Perhaps a dream that if written down and turned in as on a term paper, you and I might look at and say, "F... This is an unrealistic dream."

In a way, that is what Abram and Sarai did when they first learned about God's dream for their lives. "I will make you exceedingly numerous," God said to this pair of nonagenarians, "You shall be the ancestor to a multitude of nations and Sarah will give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." Upon hearing this dream Abram fell on his face... and laughed.

You all probably know the story as well as I do. So you know that by the time we arrive at today's reading Abram has already given God an F and asked him to rewrite the paper. The first time he was presented with the idea, Abram took matters into his own hands claiming Hagar as his own and fathering a son with her, seeking to appease God's dream with his man-made provisions. But here, God says, "No, that's not the dream I have for you... yes I will bless Ishmael making him fruitful and numerous... but it is with your wife Sarai that this particular dream will come to life." God is in essence saying, "You can keep your F... and I will keep my dream."

Eventually, like those hearing Monty's story from the living room in his 4000 square foot home, Abram and Sarai came to understand that it wasn't the dream that was the problem... the failure happened within their own imaginations.

Episcopal laywoman, Verna Dozier, wrote that "God has a dream, and we are the realization of that dream." That "the dream of God is that all creation will live together in peace and harmony and fulfillment. All parts of creation. And the dream of God is that the good creation that God created – what the refrain says, 'and God saw that it was good' – be restored... The role of the church," Dozier continues, "is to be the people who work with God to bring that dream about."²

So what is God's dream for us? For you and me? For our beloved church? And can we be trusted with it? Or are we more likely to respond with laughter, saying, "I give this an F, come back with a revised version, a more realistic proposition"?

We are living in unprecedented days. We have lost access to the traditions of our past and been forced to re-set, to re-create, to re-imagine the possibilities for the kind of work we will do, the kind of family life we will have, the kind of worship we will participate in, the kind of church we will become. In moments like these our temptation may be to recreate the past. To rebuild the calendar just as it once was, to redefine our lives with all the same commitments to which we were once held captive. But I wonder if those conventions were precisely what we needed to be liberated from in order to finally accept the impossible dreams of God that have been waiting to come to life within us, through us, among us, and around us?

I'm not saying everything has to change. There are things that I cannot wait to return to, the beauty of our sanctuary, the sounds of our choir singing live in the room, the chaos of little children running around the fellowship hall while adults attempt a meaningful conversation, the sensation of a handshake, a hug, and a high five, the noise of fellowship and the unparalleled beauty of community lived by human beings, together, sharing life, in person. These are some things that I am desperately missing.

But as the sun seems to be coming back out from this dark COVID winter, I am beginning to wonder if there isn't a new dream for us to take hold of... or maybe I should ask it this way: *Is there a new dream ready to take hold of us?*

After all, the dream isn't ours to possess and own, to control and take credit for. The dream belongs to God.

To put it in the words of a well-known preacher, the late Dr. George Heaton:

The dream? It does not belong to me, it does not belong to you. It is God's re-arrangement of all that has entered into our lives and if we are possessed of it, we shall always be moved by that dream so that there shall be no place where we stop

² Jay Cormier, Diocese of Massachusetts and Vernia Dozier retrieved from https://episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/ENS/ENSpress_release.pl?pr_number=92117 , retrieved 2.26.2021

and there shall be no place where we tarry to fashion in permanent form something which must forever change...³

If we consider the bible as our guide, we might find a pattern as it relates to God's dreams. Through all the stories of biblical dreamers enacting God's dreams there are threads of liberation, threads of compassion, threads of mutual respect and hospitality, threads of authenticity and acceptance, threads of brokenness and threads of inclusion. It seems that if we were going to try to sum it up in one little word: God's dream is love.

And as we see that dream unfolding in the lives of Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Mary we begin to notice that each iteration is as unique as the individual person or community entrusted with it. The dream calls each person, calls each church, to look within itself and generously offer all that we have in service of our neighbors. That, my friends, is love.

Love is found in worship and in Sunday School.

Love is found in communion and in baptism.

Love is found in Belgium, as we saw in the video this morning, and love is found in Raleigh as we know from first hand experience.

Love is found as Abram and Sarai accepted the impossible dream,
and love is found as you and I begin to do the same, stopping ourselves from
laughing at just how ridiculous the ideas may sound,
but instead embracing the impossible possibilities
that God is opening up before us, even here, even now.

So if we are to discern God's dream for our lives and for our church we cannot look to the past for the parameters of possibility. Instead we must look to the Spirit who knows all too well how to make something good out of chaos, bringing to life the dream of God through you, through me, through us. Dreamers embodying a holy beautiful dream.

Let's give back the F, and move forward with God's dream.

³ Quote retrieved from Ben Boswell's sermon, *Restoring the Dream*, delivered on September 13, 2020 at Myers Park Baptist Church. p.7.