

## Dreams and the Land of Promise

Our God seems to love dreams and dreamers. The history of salvation is interwoven with these dreams and those who believed them, because God's plan is too good and too great to be received and followed with only our rational minds.

Yahweh took Abraham outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." (Gen 15:5). Later, as the sun was going down and a deep sleep fell on Abraham, God presented to him his plan of salvation: "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age." (Gen 15:13-15). And so God's plan was fulfilled in those who dreamed or interpreted dreams, just as with the two Josephs: one who saved his people from hunger, and the other who became the foster father of him who is the Bread of Life.

God's dreams are about a land that feels like home and a people to whom we can belong. But they are neither rosy dreams nor easy to interpret, at least not at first sight, because they are full of mystery and promise, driven by the tension of desire. They are dreams that lead those who dare to trust and believe into the land of hope, the land where God's seeds can grow and bear fruit a hundred-fold.

But God's dreams are not ethereal. Our God is Emmanuel, God-with-us, the God of the incarnation. His dreams come to us to be embodied in our lives; that's our task. At the same time, they remind us that our ways are not his ways, neither are our thoughts his thoughts (Is 55 8-9). God has more to offer, yes, much more: "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

But what if God's dream and ours do not seem to match? What if God's promise looks scary or there are obstacles in the way? Honestly, that is meant to happen. God is the most original plot writer. The Bible and the lives of the saints are full of stories with unpredictable endings, where the most unexpected outcome is not the exception but the rule, and our human predictions and procedures are turned upside down and remade time and again. Hey, our Savior was born from a Virgin, laid on a manger, lived a hidden life for thirty years, and after doing nothing but good, He was condemned to die on a Cross to rise on the third day!!! That's the pattern of the Christian story and God's dream for us. We like the ending—Easter joy and peace—but what about the previous chapters?

A couple of days ago we had a Mass reading from the book of Numbers. I had never stopped to pray with it before, but when I did, oh my! I realized it is such a perfect expression of our frequent reaction towards God's dream for us, the promise that it is behind his call. This is the reading:

*The LORD said to Moses [in the desert of Paran,] "Send men to reconnoiter the land of Canaan, which I am giving the children of Israel. You shall send one man from each ancestral tribe, all of them princes." After reconnoitering the land for forty days they returned, met Moses and Aaron and the whole congregation of the children of Israel in the desert of Paran at Kadesh, made a report to them all, and showed the fruit of the country to the whole congregation. They told Moses: "We went into the land to which you sent us. It does indeed flow with milk and honey, and here is its fruit. However, the people who are living in the land are fierce, and the towns are fortified and very strong. Besides, we saw descendants of the Anakim there. Amalekites live in the region of the Negeb;*

*Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites dwell in the highlands, and Canaanites along the seacoast and the banks of the Jordan."*

*Caleb, however, to quiet the people toward Moses, said, "We ought to go up and seize the land, for we can certainly do so." But the men who had gone up with him said, "We cannot attack these people; they are too strong for us." So they spread discouraging reports among the children of Israel about the land they had scouted, saying, "The land that we explored is a country that consumes its inhabitants. And all the people we saw there are huge, veritable giants (the Anakim were a race of giants); we felt like mere grasshoppers, and so we must have seemed to them." At this, the whole community broke out with loud cries, and even in the night the people wailed.*

*The LORD said to Moses and Aaron: "How long will this wicked assembly grumble against me? I have heard the grumblings of the children of Israel against me. Tell them: By my life, says the LORD, I will do to you just what I have heard you say. Here in the desert shall your dead bodies fall. Forty days you spent in scouting the land; forty years shall you suffer for your crimes: one year for each day. Thus you will realize what it means to oppose me. I, the LORD, have sworn to do this to all this wicked assembly that conspired against me: here in the desert they shall die to the last man." (Nm 13:1-2, 25-14:1, 26a-29a, 34-35).*

Please, don't misunderstand, I don't want to scare you, and neither does God. Grace, mercy, deeds of power are God's constant offer to us. But He respects our freedom, and his message to his People (and to us) is very clear: "I will do to you just what I have heard you say." Yahve wanted to lead his People out of slavery. He had heard his cry, and come down to guide them into the land of freedom, using Moses as his spokesman. What did his People do? Were they grateful? No! At every step they complained, they looked back, they wanted to choose slavery again because it was more comfortable than depending on God. They wanted a predictable god, a god they could control, molded in their own image. Aren't we the same?

Still, God bore with them, and He bears with us, because He loves us more than we will ever understand. As we read in the book of Deuteronomy, "He sustained him in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste; he shielded him, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of his eye. As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him; no foreign god was with him" (Dt 32:10-12). The Lord carries us up to the edge of the land of promise, the land He had promised to Abraham and his descendants. It is a land *flowing with milk and honey*. God sets it before us, but He doesn't force us to enter in. Why do we hesitate? Because there are obstacles, because it is not an immediate reward, because fighting will be necessary if we want to call that new land our own, our home, the place where we truly belong. In other words, the land of promise doesn't look like the land of our own easy dreams. Just like the People of Israel, we can choose to forget the many saving deeds we have already experienced. We can choose to listen our own fears instead of trusting in the power of God. We can condemn ourselves to wander in the desert of our own egos. Or we can press on in a strength that we know is much more his than ours.

Today we celebrate the feast of the Transfiguration. I wonder if, during the days of anguish before the Lord's resurrection, Peter, James, and John remembered their Master transfigured in dazzling light. Maybe doubted and thought that it had all been a beautiful dream—Luke's gospel does tell us that, "Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep" (Lk 9:32). And yet, at the moment of the Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah were speaking with Jesus about his Passion and death (Lk 9:30-31) because in God's love, in God's plan, there is no opposition between the greatest expression of his glory and his greatest suffering. All is for us. All was necessary, as Jesus told the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 26:24). And all is necessary for us too, including the fortified towns that must come down in our hearts, and the giants that will try to hinder our progress.

At times as we move forward in our discernment and respond to our vocation, we may feel like a grasshopper compared to the obstacles we fear we will have to face. Well, know that it has happened before, that God counts

on it and even wills it, so that we can truly experience “that this extraordinary power [within us] belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Cor 4:7).

God has prepared a land of promise for you and for me, a dream that weaves our human weakness with his grace and the mystery of his glory. It is up to each of us to believe and follow his dream, even better, to let the dream of God’s love for humanity carry us beyond ourselves, leaving behind the self-inflicted deserts of our selfishness, fears and limiting thoughts. His dream will not disappoint. It contains an unfailing promise: “nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37).

Saint Joseph, you who believed in the impossible revealed to you in a dream, pray for us!

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