

## “The Boundaries of a Dream”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

BASED ON THE THEME, “NEW BOUNDARIES FOR A NEW YEAR”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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### Genesis 41:14-38

<sup>14</sup>Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was hurriedly brought out of the dungeon. When he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. <sup>15</sup>and Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.” <sup>16</sup>Joseph answered Pharaoh, “It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.”

<sup>25</sup> Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “Pharaoh’s dreams are one and the same; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. <sup>26</sup> The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. <sup>27</sup> The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, as are the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind. They are seven years of famine. <sup>28</sup> It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. . . . <sup>32</sup> And the doubling of Pharaoh’s dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about.

<sup>33</sup> Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. <sup>34</sup> Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land, and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plenteous years. <sup>35</sup> Let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and lay up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. <sup>36</sup> That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to befall the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine.” <sup>37</sup> The proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. <sup>38</sup> Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the spirit of God?”

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**E**veryone dreams, even those who say they never dream, at least that’s what the sleep experts tell us. And dream interpretation is a hot commodity in the self-help book world. But I am more interested in the dreams we have in our hearts while we are awake than the ones we have in our minds while we sleep. Those dreams are the ones that give hope to life or cause us to lose hope when they are crushed.

This morning we ask ourselves what are the boundaries of a dream? On

this day before the Martin Luther King holiday it seems appropriate to reflect on his dream and its boundaries today. I also want to reflect on the boundaries of dreams in a wider context too, because dreams lost, or crushed, or unfulfilled have a great impact on faith. So let’s talk both about the dream of justice and equality that MLK articulated and the very personal dreams that we all have in our own personal lives.

The night before he was assassinated Martin Luther King

addressed a relatively small crowd of about 2000 people in a Masonic Temple in Memphis, Tennessee. The crowd was small because of torrential rains and the threat of tornadoes. In his speech he spoke prophetically of his own future and the future of his dream. He reflected on the number of times his life had been threatened and concluded that it didn't matter. He did not want to die, he said he would like to live a long life, but he said, "I'm not concerned about that now; I just want to do God's will....So I'm happy tonight! I'm not worried about anything! I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!" At 6:01 p.m. the next night James Earl Ray, an ex-convict, shot King dead on the balcony of his hotel room in Memphis. King died, but the dream didn't die. The dream was rooted in God's will and so it couldn't die.

In some ways I am not racially qualified to comment on that dream, but I can say I share it especially because one thing in particular that Martin said resonates for me. He reminded us that injustice doesn't just oppress the one who is oppressed. It also oppresses the oppressor. His effort wasn't just to free the African-American from oppression, but to free his or her oppressor from the oppression of his own causing. It is a dream that has taken major steps toward being fulfilled, though there is still a long way to go. I believe it is a dream that did not die with MLK because it was rooted in God's will.

In the same way, God may have given Joseph the ability to interpret dreams, Joseph was right, it was God

who gave the dream. It was God's dream to give and so it was God who saw that it would be fulfilled. This is the faith we must hold to not only in relation to injustice and oppression but also in our own personal lives.

A few years back I shared the story of Frederick Buechner's life with you. Buechner is a pastor and writer and teacher, but he did not grow up in a Christian family. His ancestors considered themselves "radical freethinkers." While they were very successful financially and socially, religion was irrelevant to them. Buechner later would say this meant they had no "resources on which to fall back when life worked them over as it tends to do for all of us."

Buechner experienced the power of life to work us over at a young age. In 1936, at ten years of age, on a Saturday morning Frederick was supposed to go to visit the campus of Princeton University with his father. His father had been an honor student there in his day.

However, the Great Depression had already worked his father over pretty well. He had not been able to keep working and making the income he had made in the past. He began to turn to alcohol as a way of covering his disappointment, which of course, only made things worse. A wise person once said, "You can't drown your sorrows in alcohol you can only irrigate them." With no other resource and with no dream left, his father could not face going back to see old classmates. He got up, dressed and went into the garage, turned on the motor of their old

Chevrolet, and sat down on the running board. His family found him there after the fumes killed him.

Years later, whenever people asked Buechner how his father died, “He would always say, ‘He died of heart trouble.’ That was at least partially true. You see, he had a heart and it was troubled.”

Frederick did go, as his father had, to Princeton, went on to teach at Lawrenceville Prep School, and he published a novel that was critically acclaimed. It looked like he was going to have a very bright future, so he resigned his teaching post and began to write full-time. But soon a serious case of writer’s block hit him and he became very despondent. One of his friends finally said to him, “You might like to go to Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. There is a wonderful minister there named George Buttrick.” Buechner’s friend said Buttrick spoke with such hope and energy it was contagious. Buechner had almost never been to church before, but he went to hear Buttrick and something did touch his heart. In the middle of one of the sermons Buechner had a genuine religious “epiphany.” God “happened to him” so to speak. The experience was so powerful Buechner went to see Buttrick. As they talked Buttrick saw great potential in Buechner and helped him receive a Rockefeller Foundation grant to attend Union Theological Seminary. Here this young man who hadn’t been to church a dozen times in his life was suddenly studying for ministry.

For the first time in his life Buechner encountered Holy Scripture. What amazed was the utter honesty of Scripture. Even the greatest heroes were depicted with all of their strengths and all their flaws. But he was struck even more when he realized that “with this God called Yahweh, the seemingly worse things were never the last things. God always seemed to have something else that God was able to do.” In fact, the image of an ingenious alchemist is what came to his mind. Alchemists were those ancient “scientists” who tried to take lead and somehow transmute it into gold. Buechner recognized that throughout the Bible, again and again, “when it seemed like people were at the absolute end of their ropes, that this Alchemist God had a way of doing something even with the worst that human beings had done, and bring out growth and bring out redemption.

Almost all of us have had dreams die. “Life has worked us over” as Buechner puts it, and it often leaves us wondering, “what now?” John Claypool, who shared much of Buechner’s story in his own sermon, shared his story of being “worked over” and finding his life redeemed. Claypool says, “We are all carrying a sack of rocks of sadness and disappointments.” His own daughter died of leukemia at the age of 32. Claypool “learned in that dark and difficult experience that, as bad as it was, I was not alone, there was something else at work that was capable of taking bad things and bring good things out of it.”

Claypool said people asked him what they always ask in the face of a

tragedy. “Where was God when this happened?” Claypool says, “Well, of course, the truth is God is love, in my judgment, which means God is non-coercive. Every time there is love, there is also the gift of freedom. I think God took the risk of giving our species freedom because of God’s confidence in that ingenious ability to take bad choices that we make and somehow transmute them into growth and into blessing and into redemption.” He goes on to talk about how the Biblical story of Joseph illustrates this.

Joseph’s father, as you probably remember, spoiled him. Out of jealousy, his brothers sold him into slavery. But God had given Joseph that ability to interpret dreams and so God took the evil that had happened to Joseph and used it to bless both Joseph and others. In the last fateful encounter with his brothers, Joseph tells his brothers this. “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” And they are reconciled, another sign of God’s redeeming power at work.

Claypool said many people asked him about how he dealt with the part of grief that comes out as anger. He said he had to recognize that anger was naturally part of it, a sign of frustration that things were not the way they ought to be. He said what he did was to openly acknowledge his frustration. He always reminded himself that the depth of his grief corresponded to the depth of his love.... “The more profoundly we love, the more profoundly we go into grief when something is taken away that we love. But what helped me more than anything,... was realizing that she was a

gift and not a possession.... [It was] something I did not deserve, something that was not in any way an entitlement. It was a sheer and total gift.”

Claypool says realizing she was a gift not a possession it did not lessen his sadness or make him stop wishing she was still alive, “but what it did do was save me from a lifetime of bitterness and resentment that frankly wouldn’t change anything. Resentment is acid in our souls. It wouldn’t have brought her back, it wouldn’t have made me any better. Thinking of her as a gift and not a possession freed me from spending the rest of my life with my fist in the face of God and led me to open my hands in astonished gratitude that I had ever gotten to know her at all.”<sup>1</sup>

This is where we meet the boundaries of a dream. And this applies whether we are talking about the dream of Martin Luther King for a wider justice for all people, or a personal dream for ourselves or one we love. If it is a dream that God has dreamed, no tragedy can prevent it, no difficulty can deter it. God will take whatever comes along and continue to convert it from lead to gold. God will continue to transform tragedies to triumphs for his name’ sake.

Let us not fear to dream. Let us not let seemingly shattered dreams make us bitter or angry. Let us continue to seek the dreams that God dreams for our lives and let no boundary steal our vision. AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> John Claypool, “The Worse Things are Never the Last Things,” csec.org/csec/sermon/claypool, Feb 24, 2002.