

Barbie and the Wisdom of Divine Dreams

July 30, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Lexi Boudreaux

Texts: 1 Kings 3: 5-12

Our text from 1st Kings this morning begins with a dream. Historically, I've had a particular fascination with the function of dreams in the ancient world and how they have given people windows into a relationship with the divine. In my undergraduate studies I was a research fellow for a book being written by a professor of mine on Artemidorus' *Oneirocritica*. A professional dream interpreter who lived in the 2nd century CE, Artemidorus gathered wisdom from dream diviners from all sorts of social status as well as his predecessors in order to produce the 5-volume guide. The book that my professor was working on contained an original translation and commentary on this encyclopedic treatment of the subject of oneiromancy or prophecy through dream-interpretation in the ancient world as well as commentary on the text.

One of my favorite quotes from the text is "shaggy and luxuriant eyebrows are good for everyone, and most of all for women." (p77) There are fantastical and sometimes mind numbingly mundane descriptions of dreams described when gods appear, the dreamer experiences a change or comes across particular items of significance or a whole host of other circumstances, and then meaning is made from them. In other words, there is a suggestion for what might occur in the real world for the dreamer in their lives as a result of what happens in their dreams. The divine or the wisdom of some greater power meeting us in our dreams continued to follow me in my studies at Harvard divinity school when I took an elective on the cultic worship of Asclepius, son of Apollo, in the 4th century CE. He was a hero and demi-god dealing in the realm of the healing aspect of medicine. He is often accompanied with a snake wound around his walking staff, a symbol of healing and wisdom. Perhaps you've seen it on an ambulance or a hospital emblem? In any case, in ancient Greece people who suffered from various illnesses would undertake a pilgrimage to these healing temples associated with Asclepius, not to seek medical treatment initially, but to lay at the center of them and to dream, hoping that the god would visit them in their rest and give them

the wisdom about their condition that they so longed to obtain. Many claim to have been healed by this practice, of seeking wisdom in dreams and communicating what they have learned to healers at the temples, standing at the ready to implement the necessary treatments. I learned a lot of interesting facts in that class, like the pool of Bethesda in the gospel of John was later used as one of these healing temples to asclepius, but what stood out to me the most is that healing, the process of being made whole requires a kind of surrender to not only the wisdom of the divine, but requires us to do so within and on behalf of community. These healing spaces were not for an individual, but for anyone seeking answers. People slept in the chambers side by side and dipped in pools together after journeying often in groups from their homes to these sites of dream and hope, unsure of if they would ever return to what they have known. And so now we turn again to God who came to Solomon in a dream while he was at rest from his vocation as King of Israel in our reading from 1st Kings this morning.

This form of communication between the divine and human beings spanned cultures in the ancient world even showing up here in our own sacred text. Dreams were believed to be thin places, spaces where the divine and the world could intersect and access one another, where the sacred and the mundane co-mingled. Dreams were places where a person could be seen by God and their needs could be expressed and met, and in some ways, it seems to me that dreams seemed to be a way to pray, to be heard by God. In his dream, Solomon was prompted by God to ask for what he would like to be given. Solomon goes on to name the virtues of his father, King David and acknowledges that he is just starting out as a leader even though he has been given the very important responsibility of leading God's people in community. Considering these circumstances, Solomon replies to God, "Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil." In other words, he asks for wisdom in order to serve God's people appropriately. In return, God announces that they will give him a discerning and wise mind as well as riches and honor for the rest of his life because he answered rightly and not selfishly. It seems that it is good to be like Solomon in this moment, but from what we know about King Solomon, he turns out to not be the best role model for good behavior. Yes, he was talented in writing poetry and was known for his access to wisdom- about half of the poetry and wisdom books are

attributed to his school of thought, but he was also known for his faults and many mistakes. In other words, he was very much human. He fell short of what his people expected of him and yet he desired the wisdom of God above all else.

Pivoting for a moment away from Solomon and his dreams, I had the pleasure of going to see the Barbie movie alongside many people this past week. Warning that this might contain spoilers but I'll try my best. The film has grossed about 529 million the first week it has opened, greatly surpassing the record for biggest opening film for a female director. There was certainly a reason for that. It was incredible. The handmade bubble gum pink set design, the societal commentary, the silliness of Ken's obsession with horses, the way that the film acknowledged the complicated nature of being a woman and also made room for the Ken to come to a realization about his own identity as well. Despite there being so many memorable aspects of the movie, this one scene in particular is sticking with me. In the final moments, Barbie wonders what her ending will be in the story and is taken by Ruth Handler, the original creator of Barbie, to this dream-like place. During their time there together, Barbie asks Ruth to make her human, that she wants to be "the one imagining with other people, not just to be the idea." During their exchange through some help from Ruth, Barbie realizes that being human is not something that she has to ask for, but it is something that she can feel and discover within herself. I can't help, but see the similarity of Ruth Handler, Barbie's creator meeting her in a dream-like place where Barbie asks her for wisdom on how to fully engage with her world and community to God and Solomon's exchange in 1st Kings.

There was certainly an existential religious flavor to the scene. While imperfect Solomon desires a wisdom that would enable him to serve his people and to be fully human, Barbie was seeking wisdom from the one who created her so that she could claim her own humanity and be in community with the people who she hoped to help. God's presence follows us everywhere in our experience of life and death. What might happen in these moments of transition in our lives (the start of taking on a new leadership role like Solomon or the ending of a chapter of our lives like Barbie) if we ask for the wisdom of God to enter in? What might happen if we look for God's presence

even in our dreams? Not necessarily the ones that happen when we are sleeping, but the ones that happen when we do the imagining together? When we do not just conform to being an idea of who we think the world wants us to be, but when we are actively living out the fullness of our humanity in community? The kingdom of God has shown itself to exist in places that challenge the current reality of the world, places that reveal a capacity to imagine an existence where all honor God's wisdom in discerning our way forward in community and in being human. What might happen if we dwelled in those places more often? Perhaps we would find that more often than not God's wisdom and compassion meet us in places that require us to dream. Amen.

