

Session 2: Dreaming With God:

For the Facilitator:

Christians pray the “Lord’s prayer,” the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, we begin with the words: “The Kingdom come, Thy Will be done.” What do we mean by that? In Jesus’ time the image of God as a benign monarch, a ruler who knew what was best for people, was one that people could access readily. This image of God took root in sometimes destructive ways for the many centuries that Christianity was the dominant religion of the ruling powers. But in our time we have what most of us see as a reasonable distrust of absolute power, so the idea of a “kingdom” does not have the resonance it has had at other times in Biblical tradition and Christian history. How might we better express that consent to a divine purpose suggested in “thy kingdom come?” A number of recent writers have proposed that instead of using kingdom-language or even gender neutral “reign of God” language, we invite imagination into the picture, and imagine God as having a vision or a dream for our human life, one that we are constantly called to live into (see quotes from Brian McLaren, Desmond Tutu, Evelyn Underhill in “Resources” section).

Brian McLaren and others have suggested that if we read the whole, overarching story of Scripture we can begin to see that it is a story about who God wants to be for God’s people: It is in fact a story of God’s dream for human life. It is a vision of humanity as created in the image of God, to be companions and collaborators with God in the shaping of a harmonious and beautiful Creation. This session invites participants to “dream with God,” to use their imaginations in a prayerful way, in awareness of the whole Biblical story of a God who desires good things for us. This requires us to confront brokenness in our world and in our lives.

Resources for Further Exploration

Verna Dozier, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (Cowley, 1991; Seabury Classics 2006), especially pp.

Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (Harper 2010)

“Why I am Missional,” in *A Generous Orthodoxy*. (Zondervan 2006)

Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*. (Image, 2005)

Leslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Eerdmans 1995)

Scriptural Foundation: *Genesis* 1-3 (as background); 2 Chronicles 36:15-23; Micah 4:1-5; Isaiah 11: 6-9.

Gathering: 10 minutes

Invite people to join in the Lord's Prayer – say together as usual – joining hands.

Then invite people to reflect on the meaning of the part of the prayer that says “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done”. What do we mean by that? Invite reflections

This session invites each of us to imagine in our own way what “the dream of God” looks like in our own context, and to do so against the background of the Biblical story

Materials:

Clay or play-dough, drawing paper pictures for collage-making clippings, markers, crayons

Text of “In the Cool of the Evening” (See “Resources” section)

[Video of KHS reading the poem.]

[Copies of quotation form Brian McLaren (and/or others) provided in “Resources” section].

Writing materials

Exploring (30 minutes):

The “story” of Scripture: (See “Theological Resources” section) How would you tell the story of the Bible in 10 minutes or less (try as a pair-share activity if there is time)? OR if this seems too daunting, what is your favorite Bible story? How would you say that story is connected to a larger story told in the Bible as a whole?

Facilitator: you may draw on the “Resources” section to re-tell the overarching story of Scripture as a story of God's effort to call humanity back to a way of living that is grounded, whole, just and faithful – and of humanity's resistance to that call. Resources: Theological Background provides one way of doing this, based loosely on Brian McLaren's *A New Kind of Christianity*. (See Resources: “Theological Background)

Consider this vision of God's dream for humanity, told in Isaiah 11:6-9, or Micah 4:1-5.

Much of the Bible can be read in the context of the overall pattern of fall, restoration, and ultimate redemption: ours is a God who desires to save and heal us.

Bible Study: (15 – look together at 2 Chronicles 36: 15-23 (See Resources: Section 3)

Going Deeper (this should be the main focus of the session) “Dreaming With God” (30 minutes)

To focus on the “Dream of God” theme: Read aloud long poem “In the Cool of the Evening” (See “Resources”)

Note to facilitator: it takes about 4 minutes to read the poem aloud. The length is meant to move people into a place of meditative attention. Use video, OR, with advance planning, divide the poem up and have different voices read different verse-paragraphs. The important thing is that people listen to the images in the poem, in a prayerful spirit. You may give copies of the poem to participants if that helps them to focus their listening.

After poem has been read: 1-2 minutes of silence. Then facilitator can say:

Jot down a few things that have stayed with you in hearing this poem: or circle a part that particularly spoke to you.

Now: Think back to the question “What is your passion”: the thing that makes you say, “this MUST change. “ Keeping in mind the poem’s vision of a God who desires good things for us, create something that communicates the healing of a place of brokenness you have identified Without thinking about feasibility or proposing a program.

Using clay, markers, or a journal, and spend 15 minutes or so creating something that communicates God’s dream for the brokenness you’ve identified. Or if you are journaling you may choose to take one section of the poem and write about how that connects to your sense of God’s dream. Share with a partner or the whole group, depending on size of the group.

Invite participants to share with the group what they have created (not required, but an invitation).

Note to Facilitator: It is important that this exercise focus on what people can imagine as God’s true will/desire for a situation. It should not be about problem solving, what is feasible, or “what I can do about it” but simply “What would this situation look like, specifically, if it were in accord with God’s dream? Try to steer people away from questions about what could/couldn’t work.

Closing Thoughts (Use chart pad): What are we hearing?

From what we are hearing, what ideas of God and God’s dream do we have in the room? Where is their shared vision? Where is there wonderful variety?

Closing Prayer

Stand in a circle, and invite prayers for a broken world – whatever brokenness we have seen. Close by praying, slowly and with attention, the Lord’s Prayer.

1. Some Quotations about Praying God's Dream for our Lives

Brian McLaren from *Found in Translation*

I frequently try to put the prayer of the kingdom (what we often call "The Lord's Prayer") into my own words so that I don't just recite it on autopilot. But I often struggle with how to paraphrase the clause "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Since the language of "will" can take us down a trail of control, domination, and coercion, and since I don't believe those ideas are in Jesus' mind, I have looked for other words.

The Greek word that lies beneath our English word "will" can also be translated "wish." But to say, "May your wish come true" sounds fairy tale-ish and creates other problems. But I have found the idea of "the dream of God for creation" does the job nicely. "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven" could thus be rendered, "May all your dreams for your creation come true." This language suggests a more personal, less mechanistic relationship between God and our world. It would resonate, for example, with a mother who has great dreams for her child, or an artist who has great dreams for a novel or symphony he is creating.

The call to faith is the call to trust God and God's dreams enough to realign our dreams with God's, to dream our little dreams within God's big dream. The call to receptivity is the call to continually receive God's dreams—a process that seems to be a lifelong one. The call to baptism is the call to publicly identify with God's dream and to disassociate with all competing isms or ideologies that claim to provide the ultimate dream (including nationalism, consumerism, hedonism, conservatism, liberalism, and so on). And the call to practice is the call to learn to live the way God dreams for us to live.

Brian McLaren, "Found in Translation" (*Sojourners*, March 2006) *Translation* ((Online at <http://sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0603&article=060310>

Evelyn Underhill, from *The Spiritual Life* ((1937)

The life of this planet, and especially its human life, is a life in which something has gone wrong, and badly wrong. Every time that we see an unhappy face, an unhealthy body, hears a bitter or despairing word, we are reminded of that. The occasional dazzling flashes of pure beauty, pure goodness, pure love which show us what God wants and what He is, only throw into more vivid relief the horror of cruelty, greed, oppression, hatred ugliness . . . Unless we put on blinkers, we can hardly avoid seeing all this; and unless we are warmly wrapped up in our own cozy ideas, and absorbed in our own interests, we surely cannot help feeling the sense of obligation, the shame of acquiescence, the call to do something about it. To say day by day "Thy Kingdom Come" – if these tremendous words really stand for a conviction and desire does not mean "I quite hope that some day the Kingdom of God will be established, and peace and goodwill prevail. But at present I don't see how it is to be managed or what I can do about it." On the contrary, it means, or should mean, "Here am I! Send me! -- Active, costly collaboration with the Spirit in whom we believe. (From *The Spiritual Life* (Fifth Printing, Morehouse, 1995) pp. 81-3

Desmond Tutu, from *God Has A Dream* (Image Books, 2004)

'I have a dream,' God says. 'Please help Me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy, and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing. I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that my children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God's family, my family.' (Pp.19-20)

2. Theological Background on “Dreaming with God”

Brian McLaren and others have suggested that we let go of preconceived doctrinal ideas, and read the whole, overarching story of Scripture as what it is – a story, a narrative that tells us something about who God wants to be and how people have experienced God’s action in their lives and in the lives of their communities. When we do this we can begin to see that it is a story about *who God wants to be for God’s people*: It is in fact a story of God’s dream for human life, It is a vision of humanity as created in the image of God, to be companions and collaborators with God in the shaping of a harmonious and beautiful Creation.

The story begins with the creation of a world that God called “good,” continuing with the gift of the garden of Eden and humanity’s failure to stay there on God’s terms. It continues with the calling of Abraham to be a blessing to the world, and the story of his descendants. It’s a human story, with ups and downs, shocking sinfulness and violence. Through it all there is a God who keeps calling people back to a deeper dream of freedom and abundant life. From the Exodus story through the story of King David, we see a God who cares about the ordering of our common life and who desires justice even more than worship. When the people’s failings result in the Babylonian exile, those exiled sing of the hope of restoration, and in the overarching narrative, God keeps this promise.

The vision of a God who desires our good is continued in the New Testament, with the coming of Jesus, whose Crucifixion shows how far human society, religious institutions and culture have fallen from the message of justice, peace and love that is at the heart of God. His Resurrection, the founding event of Christianity, tells us that this message cannot ultimately be defeated, and that is the hope we carry, through all the complexities and distortions and abuses of human history – including the twisting and co-opting of the very story of Scripture we’re talking about. Brian McLaren points out that this is not primarily a story of how humanity fell irrevocably away from God and remains helplessly in need of redemption, a reading that we have learned through some theological traditions. Rather, if you read the story and tell it as it unfolds, it can be seen it is an ongoing story about a God who is passionately involved with God’s people, as creator, liberator, and redeemer, a God who continues, in the words of another great Bible teacher, to “call us to return.”

Here then, is my version of an under- ten-minute retelling of the story of Scripture – inspired by Verna Dozier, Brian McLaren and others who have read this story through a literary or storytelling lens, looking at what seems to be in the text rather than how it illustrates the ideas we bring to it. Facilitators can this as a model for the group, or construct their own story. =

The Biblical Story in 10 minutes or less: (Kathy Staudt's version)

In the beginning, humanity was created “male and female,” in the image of God. We were given life and our place in Creation. The story of Adam and Eve, as told in Genesis, seems to be about their failure to go along with God’s plan, and their succumbing to the desire to be gods themselves. They rejected their proper place in the network of Creation, as beloved creatures with a special relationship to their Creator, called and enabled to collaborate with our Creator in shaping and enhancing the abundant life that we watch being created, a life pronounced “good” in the opening chapters of *Genesis*.

The banishment from the garden, the early stories of people rebelling against God and being punished, seem to culminate in the call of Abraham in Genesis, called out from his homeland to become the father of a great people. What we sometimes forget about the call of Abraham is that his people are set apart for a special purpose – “You shall be a blessing,” God says to Abraham– and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:3) (See also Brian McLaren in *A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 111, where he draws on the work of missional theologian Leslie Newbigin).

Right from the beginning, the People of God, the descendants of Abraham, are called to be part of God’s purpose for a healed and blessed world. The unfolding of this purpose ultimately drives the narrative of the Bible.

Enslaved in Egypt, the People of God are led back to freedom by Moses, a leader who is called by God to bring them to a new place, and to renew the covenant between God and the people: “You will be my people, and I will be your God,” is the promise. Torah, the Law of God, received from God through Moses, is understood as God’s gift to the people – the divine expression of loving kindness, from a God who has a stake in the life of the whole Creation. Living according to the Covenant, through the spiritual practices commanded there, the People of God learn a manner of living is intended for fullness of life, and right relationships in the human community – including the just distribution of wealth, and a habit of trusting God. At the beginning the Law is seen not as bondage and rigidity but as a way of freedom, and a way of assuring justice in human society and communion between God and God’s people.

Of course, we know what happens in the story: time and time again, the people disregard the covenant that God offers. New rulers arise who take on godlike power themselves and flout the covenant; and over the years the people fall away from their calling to be a blessing to the world.

We know how the story goes – there are ongoing cycles: guiding laws and a covenant offered as a way to freedom and justice in human life harden into the tools of a ruling class and religious hierarchy; prophets are ignored; Wisdom cries out in the streets and is not heard. The Christian story is that this persistent love of God, longing to call humanity back to wholeness and freedom, is finally expressed in the Incarnation and Passion of Jesus – in God joining us in our human lives, and suffering all that the world can do to a humanity fully dedicated to the dream of God. The Cross points to the

infinite, long-suffering love of this God; and the Resurrection of Jesus and the sending of the spirit tell us that the dream persists, and that we, as God's people living on this side of the Resurrection, are called to carry it on, despite the obstacles that we may encounter. To paraphrase one of the Eucharistic prayers in use in the Episcopal Church, this is a God who "again and again calls us to return." (BCP, 370)

Within this story, then, we are invited to *discernment*; to the practice of seeing the world, even a broken world, through the eyes of a loving God. For this we need imagination, a creative, lively willingness to "dream with God," a God who loves us and desires to restore us and all Creation to wholeness, but who works through human action and human freedom, and who desires to heal us, to "save" us (the Greek word translated "salvation," in the New Testament, *sozo*, is about healing or "making whole"). We need to look squarely and compassionately at whatever is broken in our world and imagine our way through and beyond the brokenness, to discern "God's dream" for this situation.

3. Bible Study – 2 Chronicles: (Or, The Whole story in 8 verses)

A pivotal story in this reading of Hebrew Scripture is the exile into Babylon. As the Biblical writers interpreted this event, the exile happens because the people and their leaders reject the covenant, despite repeated warnings from the prophets. God, in grief, punishes them through the hand of the Chaldeans, (another name for the rulers of Babylon), taking them into exile. When their time in exile is “fulfilled,” they are invited home. That’s how the story is told, about a particularly painful time in the people’s history.

This passage at the end of 2 Chronicles tells the whole story of exile and return in one chapter, with lurid evocations of the suffering of those massacred and taken into exile, and with lamentation over a loss that has come upon the people because of their faithlessness. Striking in this story is not only the harshness of what the story depicts as inevitable suffering (“there was no remedy”), but also the grief of the God who watches it happen and seeks to call the people home. Here’s part of the story as told in 2 Chronicles

The Lord, the God of their ancestors, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord against his people became so great that there was no remedy.

Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their youths with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or young woman, the aged or the feeble; he gave them all into his hand. All the vessels of the house of God, large and small, and the treasures of the house of the lord, and the treasures of the king and of his officials, all these he brought to Babylon. They burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious vessels. He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.

“In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken through Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom and also declared in a written edict: “The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the world, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him. Let him go up. (2 Chronicles 36:15-23)

The edict of Cyrus of Persia, coming at the end of 2 *Chronicles* and again at the beginning of *Ezra*, after a heartrending account of unfaithfulness and exile, sounds a voice of promise from a God who does not give up on God’s people. This is a moment of hope and joyful return in the life of the people of God – a moment in their story that

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holds up belief in a God that keeps God's promises and perpetually calls the people home.

4. Text For Guided Meditation on “Dreaming with God”: “In the Cool of the Evening”

The following poem, by Kathleen Henderson Staudt, is the fruit of one person’s effort to imagine God’s dream for us – it begins with the moment in Genesis right before the fall, when God is “walking in the garden in the cool of the evening.” The poet’s imagination asks: what was God thinking at that moment? What were God’s hopes for humanity? Listen to the poem, pay attention to what it makes you think of, and especially to the parts that most jump out and speak to you.

In the Cool of the Evening

By Kathleen Henderson Staudt (from *Annunciations: Poems Out of Scripture*. Edwin Mellen Press, 2003).

Every evening I come here, and draw you to my breast
 What have you noticed today?
I am waiting to hear, for everything you find
 Is fresh and new to you, never seen this way before.
As you tell me about it, Creation grows richer.
And we celebrate together
 In heart’s joy and dancing,
 Here in this garden
 In the cool of the evening.

Have you noticed
 How the tiny white violets open to the sun
 and close at evening?
Have you tasted the freshness of ripened grapes, or berries,
fresh from the vine
 Or smelled Tell me what you have smelled!
Have you been to the sea’s shore yet, and have you noticed
 How smoothly the sandpipers skim before the waves
Or how the pelican hovers, then lets go and plunges--sinking her heart into the sea, where
she is fed?
Have you heard the sea swell pound and seen the
 Waves crest, pink in the sunrise?

Have you noticed yet
A pulsing beat, all through you
This is life:
 My gift to you.

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And as each day there is evening and there is morning
So you will know
 the ebb and flow
of this great pulse.

When it is filling you, you will be strong and eager
 And run out to me boldly
 And leap for joy.

And sometimes this force of life will wane in you
 and you will know
It is time to rest with me awhile.
And I will be glad to welcome you here.

So there will be
 mornings and evenings,
 turnings and passages, and I in all of them.

I am waiting to hear of the first time you notice
The trembling joy of bodies meeting,
 flesh touching flesh.
And how in that union, everything joins and dances, and dances, and dances.

It is not good
 That you should be alone.
I will make more of you
 more of you, yet out of you
Each new person will be part of one before,
 Yet also new,
 glorious, separate.
So each of you will be
 one flesh with all the others
And all will be one body with the earth that brought you forth.

And as in one another
You see yourselves, and not yourselves
So each new meeting, each new friendship,
Will carry in it more of me
As in each new person, each new way of love
 I come again among you.

When you feel a new life growing within you
 Sharing your flesh, swimming and frolicking
 held within you, and a part of you.

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You will know, from the nearness of this growing life
How I am bound to you, and each of you to me.

Wait until you see
 the tiny toes and fingers
The fresh-born miracle of a new child
 As now you come to me
each evening, for food and loving
So the children will come to you, and you will know
 the wonder of a fresh life
 Separate, yet of you
 Seeing more than you had noticed before.

There will be more of you, and they will find each other
And out of one another, bring forth more new lives,
and each one will be different,
 and you will love the differences!

Perhaps, when there are more of you
 You will learn to make
From all this variety of noises and voices
 Songs
And I shall be among you in the singing.

With more of you, there will be
Bodies at play, in games and dancing
You will stretch out arms and move your feet,
Turning and leaping, in patterns and figures
Pulsing to music, drumming a dance
Your bodies moving as my heart moves
Stretching and bounding, rejoicing with you.

I have made you to know it all
 Every detail of this Creation
 All that I have called "Good."

When will you learn the intricacies:
 Puzzles, numbers, patterns, shapes
The delight of randomness
The satisfaction
 Of order and equation?
I will teach you how, and as we gaze together
This living Creation, shifting and changing
infinite in its surprises,
 will unfold.

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Your bodies
 cells and systems,
The universe itself, from tiniest particles
 to unimagined vastness.
I want you to know it all
For all of it is good.

I am waiting
for the first time you bring me
 something you have made, and say
“Look! I made this! It is for you.”
And I will know your pleasure
And that you have known
 the joy of making, my deepest joy.
And so in fresh creation more will be added,
 And we will be joined:
In weaving and in making
 We will be joined.

Every evening, in the coolness, I come and walk
 and wait to see
What you have discovered
 As more and more, you wake up to the world.

I look for you now, running to me
 all aglow with news.
Come, leap to my embrace,
 Drink in my love.
 And tell me all of it.
Laughter shall spring out, and we shall watch creation grow
 And dance and feast together
 In the cool of the evening.

Come to me! Where are you?
 Why would you hide from me?

O my beloved ones
 What is this
 What is this
 That you
 have done?

