

## **Anxiety Dreams and Thomas Merton**

### **September 4, 2022**

Have you ever had an anxiety dream? A dream where you are in a stressful situation that you aren't prepared for?

For example, you find yourself in a school classroom, and your teacher gives you a test, and as you look at it, you realized you haven't studied, and you don't know anything that's on the test. In fact, you haven't been to class all year!

Or maybe you're trying to run somewhere but you can't get your legs to move quickly, so that it feels like you're moving in slow motion.

Maybe you're being chased by some terrifying monster that you can't see. Maybe you're falling through the air or down a roller coaster, and you jerk yourself awake.

We all have anxiety dreams. The details are different; the feeling of dread is the same. My wife Becca used to work as a waitress, and for years after she left that job, she would still dream that she was waiting tables, and she completely forgot to bring out the food to one table, and the customers would be furious with her.

I don't mind sharing with you that my anxiety dreams often take place in church and involve standing up to preach and realizing that I had forgotten to write my sermon. One vivid dream had me arriving at church to find that the bishop was coming, my robes were missing (so I threw a sheet around my shoulders), I didn't have a sermon written, and acquaintances from college were sitting in the church, laughing and shaking their heads at me. Dreams are weird.

Jesus gives two hypothetical anxiety dreams today. First, he says, picture this. You are building a watchtower on your property, so that you can keep an eye out for animals or bandits sneaking in. You clear a large hole. You lay the foundation with large, flat stones. You start to build up the tower using bricks. But then you realize that you're out of money! And every single person in town shows up, and they point and laugh at you and make fun of you! It's enough to make anyone wake up in a cold sweat.

Or imagine you are a king. An army is invading, and you lead your small army out into battle. You begin to fight and quickly realize that you are going to lose. And to boot, you and your soldiers are fighting with pillows and sticks while the other side has swords and shields. What a nightmare!

The moral of the story, Jesus says, is that you always need to plan so that you don't end up in situations like this. Both of those disasters are avoidable, as long as you think ahead and consider what you'll need.

So that's all fun and games, until we consider what it is Jesus is telling people to plan for. He is telling his followers that they're in for a hard life as his disciples. At this point, there are large crowds following Jesus around. They want to see miracles; they want to be fed with multiplied

bread and fish; they want to witness a good verbal sparring match between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus is good entertainment.

But Jesus says, “Don’t come for the show. Don’t follow me because it’s fun and entertaining and festive. If you want to follow me, a lot will be demanded of you, maybe even your life. So your faith, your dedication to following me, must be a priority.”

In fact, Jesus says that you must hate your family members in order to follow him. A lot of commentary has been written on this passage, and almost every writer points out that the word “hate” here is not the same word we use when we say, “I hate you.” If that were the case, Jesus would be negating almost all of his other teachings about the nature of God and how to be a disciple, which is to live with love for all.

Instead, many scholars point out that “hate” means “to love less” or “to distance oneself from.” It’s still not an easy message, that you must distance yourself from your family to follow Jesus, but it’s a far cry from hating your family. And it’s worth noting that that Jesus isn’t saying you need to love your family any less because of your faith; this is a call to love Jesus more and follow him with even more devotion and dedication than you show your family.

This is a call to make our faith a priority in our lives. And that’s a tough call to hear.

Sam Snead said, “In golf, as in life, you get out of it what you put into it.” He should know; he was one of the greatest golfers of all time. That rule applies to many areas of life: practicing sports, learning an instrument, studying in school, learning a trade. The more time and energy you put in, the better you become at it and the more you enjoy it.

The same is true of our faith, which is (in part) what Jesus is getting at. You could talk with God occasionally, when life is hard, and you could participate in a charity project once a year, and you’ll feel a moderate sense of satisfaction. You put in a little; you get out a little.

But Jesus isn’t calling people to a lukewarm faith. He is calling us to make our faith a priority. To give of yourself to serve the people around you to the point that you are uncomfortable. To have the discipline to pray, meditate, talk with God on a daily basis. To connect with people outside of your normal circle of operating, just as Jesus crossed boundaries to express God’s love to them. As our Presiding Bishop says, “Love with a sacrificial love.”

There is a cost to doing that. Living out our faith, our love, our service, our spirituality takes time and energy. In the case of Jesus and his disciples, it also cost them their lives. Our faith takes all that we have. But the reward is abundantly life. Loving community. A sense of purpose and passion. Deep relationships... including within your family. The paradox is that if we are dedicated to Jesus with our whole being, your love for family doesn’t suffer; in fact, it grows as a result.

That is the goal. That is the call. And if I’m being honest, that’s a pretty order. And if I’m being even more honest, I don’t attain that. Most of us don’t. The people who do live out their faith with that kind of devotion are spiritual giants. Thomas Merton. Dorothy Day. Fred

Rogers. The people we quote and respect and honor, because they devoted their lives to their faith and their ideals.

I can share with you that there are two things that get in the way of living with the kind of faith and devotion that Jesus calls us to. Two things for me; they might be different for you.

1) Time, or lack of it. Not enough time to sit and be still with God for an hour each day or even 30 minutes. Too many things to do, tasks to check off, items to accomplish. I have to keep moving and doing and succeeding. Maybe you have that sense too.

I take a bit of comfort in the fact that Thomas Merton, one of those spiritual giants, struggled with this too. He wrote, “Let us frankly face the fact that our culture is one which is geared in many ways to help us evade any need to face our inner, silent self. We live in a constant state of semi-attention to the sound of voices, music, traffic, or the generalized noise what goes on around us all the time. [...] My mind is scattered among things, not because of my work, but because I am not detached and I do not attend first of all to God. [...] How I keep confusing myself and complicating things for myself by useless twisting and turning.”

Thomas Merton. *A Book of Hours*. Edited by Kathleen Deignan (Notre Dame: Sorin, 2007), 148.

That’s the first obstacle that gets in the way of wholehearted being with God and with my neighbors, of following Jesus with my whole being.

2) Phone. Technology, particularly anything with a screen, has become increasingly effective at grabbing our attention and not letting it go. Screens deaden our interactions with everyone, including with God and help us live into that state of semi-attention to the world that Merton talks about. It is easy; it feels therapeutic even to zone out for a bit and veg with our phone or TV. But the cost is our relationships with others.

Those are my struggles; as I said, yours may be different. I encourage to think about what gets in the way of following Jesus with your whole heart. What makes it easier to be lukewarm about faith.

And what I would offer is that on the sabbath (which might be a Sunday or it might be another day), try to cut those things out of your life. Get rid of the busy-ness or the phone of whatever pieces that stand between you and God, or between you and loving people. And simply be. Feed your soul. Pray. Read. Serve. Laugh. Look someone in the eyes. Be present with your whole being.

Maybe then, that night, your dreams might be peaceful and free from anxiety.

Amen.