

“THE MAKING OF A PEOPLE: THE DREAM DEFERRED”

Genesis 37:1-36
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Thanks to a certain musical, Joseph has become one of the better known biblical characters, better known to my daughters' generation even than Moses. My generation, of course, will find it difficult to displace Charlton Heston in the *Ten Commandments*. Perhaps only Noah is better known who has always been a favorite with young children. I think most people know Joseph for his “coat of many colors,” so you may have been disappointed to hear it described, according to today's reading, as a long robe with sleeves. Had the committee of translators for the NRSV had their say many years ago, I expect that Joseph would be little known today. Those who translated the original Hebrew into Greek must have known the marketable value of using a word that meant “coat of many colors.”

Even downplaying the magnificence of the coat, Joseph's story reads more like contemporary fiction than anything else in Genesis. From creation through Isaac, Genesis is very episodic in nature and spare in its character development. Adam and Eve, Noah and his family, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca lack developed personalities. Jacob's story has a more coherent plot and he definitely has character, but the style is still spare.

By contrast, Joseph and the surrounding cast have personalities. We gain more insight into the characters. The plot is somewhat intricate. It all seems more real. One reason for this is that God does not appear as a character in the story. This conforms closely with our modern sense that God acts, if God acts as all, behind the scenes. The plot here is driven by people motivated by very human emotions.

We understand the brothers' hatred for Joseph based on Jacob's preferential treatment of this son born late in life to him. As parents, we're mindful of the dangers of appearing to prefer one child over another. Right away, we see a dysfunctional family perhaps a little like some families we know today.

And we understand their increasing animosity as Joseph, bratty Joseph, tells his dreams that forecast a position of authority over his brothers and even his father. Perhaps we know a family with a Reuben who tries to keep the peace in a conflicted family, or a Judah, whose compromise, however cruel, still mitigates the harm done to Joseph. And we feel Jacob's grief at the loss of his son, and the shame of the brothers in the ruse they play on their father.

Despite the cruelty of selling Joseph into slavery, I think the storyteller intends for us to smugly smile over these events. Surely Joseph didn't expect to be liked for tattling as the story begins. Surely he should have been more circumspect about the coat. And above all, he should have kept the dreams to himself. It's not really funny, but the comedy of

errors does encourage us to see the humor in the story. All the elements for a great musical are present in this opening chapter.

But the “coat” is secondary, and I suppose the translators have done us a favor by turning it down some. The important feature that will carry throughout the drama is of course the “dream.” We know the dream is key if we imagine the story without it. The plot and the drama completely fall apart.

Without the dream, we just have the basic favorite son drama. The brothers are just jealous, not murderous. Without the dream, Joseph doesn’t get sold into slavery and Jacob has nothing to grieve about. Without the dream, what happens in Egypt couldn’t happen because Joseph can’t become the famous interpreter of dreams that eventually sets Joseph in charge of the food production program which insures that adequate reserves are available when the famine arrives. Without the dream Egypt will still as will Joseph and his brothers.

It’s important to recognize that it’s the dream that leads to the feeding of Jacob’s (known as Israel in the story) family when food becomes scarce. On the surface, it looks self-serving for Joseph, but it really represents the hidden activity of God that provides for Israel’s sustenance in time of need.

So one of the burning questions that the storyteller addresses is the question of God’s presence in the midst of crisis. Where is God? Joseph’s story feels very much like a modern answer to the question. Don’t look for miraculous intervention. God is at work in the dreamer through the dream. While the people are very important, in the end God provides. Think Harriet Tubman and the underground railroad. Think Sojourner Truth and the struggle for women’s rights. Think Jonas Salk and the polio vaccine. Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu, Shirley Chisholm and Gloria Steinem, Thomas Starzl, Rachel Carson and the countless unknown and unnamed persons who have had the courage to act for the benefit of others to improve healthcare, advocate for children, and work toward the freedom of the oppressed. The many dreamers, Joseph’s heirs, through whom God blesses the world.

So a few thoughts about dreams or visions. It’s not always clear what the dream is about in the first place. It’s meaning and purpose only become clear as it is lived out. The dream appears self-serving at first in Joseph’s case, but salvation for the family a decade later will depend on Joseph’s position of authority.

If you think about our core values as a kind of dream. Inspiring worship, compassionate service, Mind and Spirit, Arts and Music, Earthcare: these things only begin to take shape as we live them out in the details of our worship, in the mission activities we do, in the things we choose to learn about and the prayers we offer, in the art and music that we celebrate, and the particular things we do to care for the earth.

The second thing I’d like to mention about dreams and Joseph’s dream in particular is that they are gifts from God intended to see us through times of famine. For Joseph, it’s

not just the actual drought that comes later, but he experiences a very dry time in his life before Pharaoh's dream releases him from prison and sets him up as a ruler in Egypt.

He is, as we heard in the reading, sold into slavery. When he arrives in Egypt, he will serve in the prominent household of Potiphar, where Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce him. When he refuses to play along, she accuses him of forcing himself upon her. The scene is actually quite funny. Consequently, he is imprisoned, where he picks up the ability to interpret dreams. Two interpretations are particularly important in chapter 40: one for the chief wine steward and one for the chief baker who had fallen out of favor. The wine steward will be returned to his position where he promptly forgets about Joseph. Two years later, when Pharaoh has his dream, the steward will finally remember Joseph, whose interpretation of Pharaoh's dream not only releases him from prison but sets him up in a position of authority.

So the dream is deferred during the time of Joseph's enslavement and imprisonment. He has no reason to hope, but he remains faithful to the dream.

For his trouble, Joseph moves out of slavery to a position of freedom. This is the same story we'll encounter when we get to Moses and is a major theme throughout the Bible. In Galatians, Paul writes, "It is for freedom that Christ has set you free." Joseph is changed by his time in prison. He is no longer the bratty brother who tattles and flaunts his favored status that we encountered in today's reading. Prison teaches him the meaning of his dream, that it is not about becoming superior, not about "lording" it over others. When the time comes he will see that his authority is for feeding people, and in the end rescuing his family from poverty and starvation. In the end, the dream as it passed through the crucible of hardship changed a dysfunctional family into a cohesive family unit.

What we have in Joseph's story is the making of a family which we'll see paralleled in Moses' story as the making of a people. This is what the dream or vision is driving toward, what the vision of Jesus Christ drives toward: the making of a community of faith. There are individual actors in this story, but it is really about the family, about the people, about the community of faith.

But it is not just the dream that heals Joseph's family. Something else turns the dream into a reality. Something else is vital for healthy communities of faith. And I'll talk about that next week when we finish Joseph's story. I bet if you read the ending in chapters 42-45, you can figure it out for yourself.

Amen.