

Kick Off Sunday

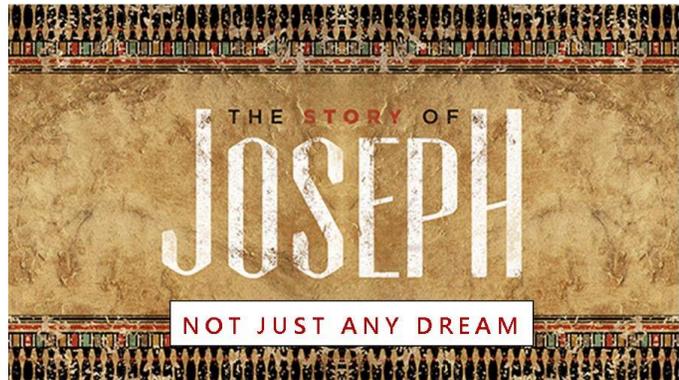
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 8, 2019

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

**Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8**

**Genesis 37:2-11**



### **The Story of Joseph: Not Just Any Dream**

This reading is from Genesis, chapter 37, verses 2 through 11:

*This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father.*

*Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.*

*Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.*

*He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?" So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

Throughout all the seasons of our lives, O God, you are there. You are the giver of all good gifts. Particularly when we struggle to see your hand in the events of our lives, you are there. Keep us always looking, listening to our dreams. You are right where we are Lord Jesus, and help us live into hope, always praising your gracious care. Amen

Siblings...can't live with 'em...can't live without 'em. Some days it's Amigos! And other days it's more like...well, you know. Unless you are an only child, you know. It can get mighty crowded in the backseat of that car.



There was a couple who had just learned they were going to have another baby. Their 4-year-old overheard his parents talking. He didn't say anything until a couple of weeks later when a neighbor asked him if he was excited about having a sibling.

“Yes,” said the little guy, “and I know what we’re going to name it. If it’s a girl we’re gonna call her Emily. If it’s a boy we’re gonna call it Quits.”

Jacob’s family didn’t – call it quits. In fact, Joseph had 11 brothers. Eleven! And at least one sister. Can you imagine *that* grocery bill? Joseph’s father Jacob was also called Israel. Jacob-Israel wasn’t exactly a model father. Maybe you remember his story. He was the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. This is the First Family of Israel, and Jacob is the scoundrel who tricked his blind father, Isaac, into giving him his brother Esau’s inheritance.

Now as Jacob’s family grows, sibling rivalry becomes high drama. Decades later, Jacob has four wives, including two who are sisters -- literal sister wives. “This is not recommended even in the best of circumstances,”<sup>1</sup> but wait -- it gets worse. There was only one of the four wives Jacob truly loved. Her name was Rachel; Jacob worked for 14 years to win her. A long time after they were finally married, Rachel had two sons: Joseph and Benjamin. Jacob doted on those two boys and favored them. And the rest of the family had to pretty much fend for themselves.

Tolstoy famously observed that, “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Jacob’s family broke the mold. When our story begins, Joseph, the favorite son is 17 years old, old enough to know better than to be this annoying. Not that I’m making excuses for what his brothers did; there is no excuse. But I’m getting ahead of myself. You’ll have to come back next week to hear all about that!

The first thing we discover in today’s reading is that 17-year-old Joseph has been ratting out his older brothers to Jacob, and Jacob rewards him with a colorful robe with long sleeves. The Hebrew is stronger. It means majestic robe, or royal robe. Here’s what artist Dean Meeker

thinks it looked like. You can't do much farm work in a get-up like that. And that was the point. Chances are that wasn't the only perk the little fink enjoyed. Likely he got to stay out later and got away with more than any of the rest of them.

Joseph's brothers hated him. That famous coat of many colors – that was just a piece of it, but an important one. Symbols matter. This one marked Joseph as Jacob's pet, a painful reminder of the brokenness of the typical – maybe more than typical – brokenness and dysfunction of Israel's First Family.

No one's immune, of course. Every family has its share of issues. Writing about her own family Anne Lamott said:



I adore these people. I have also had fights with some of them over the years, have said terrible things, have been accused by one of great wrongs, and told I would never be forgiven. We've had the usual problems: failed marriages, rehab, old resentments, miserable, lumpy family secrets, harshness and intensity....We're just another motley American family enduring.<sup>ii</sup>

Jacob's sons are done enduring...especially when their little brother shows up with his grand dreams. Remember: this is a farm family; they think in fields and herds and sheaves. Joseph says:

“Hey guys, guess what? I had a dream we were binding sheaves together. My sheaves stood tall, and yours were smaller and bowed down to mine. Whadaya think that means?”

“It means we hate you!” The writer keeps using that word, unacceptable word, “hate,” *sane* (saw-nay') in Hebrew, an ugly word and an all too popular word.

Hate is not just an ancient problem. I'm sure you've heard that there has been a huge increase in hate crimes in the US recently -- from mass shootings targeting minorities, to swastikas painted on buildings and homes. Just last week a young, same-sex couple was attacked and badly beaten on U Street in DC for no reason other than they were there, and they were gay.<sup>iii</sup> Reported hate crimes have increased over 200% in some areas of the U.S. Hate is not new, but it is on the rise.

Joseph's brothers hated him. The Genesis writer makes no attempt to hide that fact. His brothers hated him for the privilege Joseph enjoyed, a privilege that Joseph may or may not have known he had. We hear a lot about privilege too...particularly White Privilege. It is defined as “an undeserved advantage for a system built on inequality and injustice,” In any system, whether it's a family or a nation, when someone has privilege and others do not -- it never ends well.

Joseph's brothers hated him for his privilege and for the fact that he subverted their position and power. In ancient culture older brothers always inherited the leadership of the family as well as

the family property. Joseph's dream of his brothers bowing down to him – that was absurd and wildly subversive, in “the first shall be last, and the last first” kind of a way. The ancients believed that dreams told the future. Joseph's dream upended cherished custom and culture. His brothers hated him for it. Their response to him was not that different from White Nationalists chanting, “Jews will not replace us.” Only the brothers' chant was, “Joseph will not replace us!”

Wanna bet?

Spoiler alert: Joseph's dream will come true because, “*God is naturally subversive,*” wrote Walter Brueggemann. The accident of birth is not a title to privilege. God is working a basic inversion, “challenging every socially sanctioned arrangement.”<sup>iv</sup> In the Bible the ‘younger ones’ means those without rights on their side, such as the poor, widows, orphans, immigrants – these are always first in God's heart. As Paul so aptly put it in 1 Corinthians 1:28: *God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are.* In the ancient world, the younger ones were low and despised, but by the power of the dream the younger supplant the older. The last became first.<sup>v</sup>

Looking across the panorama of scripture's story you can see that Jacob's family is far from the only time God has done this – there's Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Leah and Rachel, David and the sons of Jesse, the prodigal son and the older brother. There are more. God has:

*Brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly; ...  
filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.*<sup>vi</sup>

But that doesn't mean that the powerful “older brothers” of this world are going to like it, not for one minute. In fact, they will rise up and attack with murderous rage – even with a cross.

Still the dream remains – it survives because Joseph's is not just any dream. It is God's dream, the vision of an outrageous reordering of human values. “It's a dream where the impossible happens – the weak become strong, the lowly are raised up, the powerless are crowned with glory.”<sup>vii</sup> It's the dream of a world where love and forgiveness overcome resentment and division, where the meek inherit the earth and the merciful, not the powerful, receive mercy.

This is a great story, an unforgettable story – with many twists and turns. It's a story of betrayal and salvation, love and sacrifice. In the end, it is a story of hope, of God's relentless love and the power of forgiveness. Over the next several weeks we are going to be looking deeply at the story of Joseph. Many of you know by now that the Woods Drama Ministry is preparing “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat” for October 3<sup>rd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup>. Get your tickets before they're gone! You don't want to miss this! “Joseph” is a magnificent play, and it's an even more amazing biblical promise. So be here every Sunday and we will explore it together.

Throughout the scriptures there are stories of people who dreamed. Joseph was not the only one. His namesake, Joseph of Nazareth, had a dream that led directly to the salvation of world. Jacob dreamed and so did the Pharaoh, Solomon, Daniel. The Magi who worshiped Jesus were... *Warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another way.*<sup>viii</sup>

For the most part those were bold dreams of captives freed, the end to poverty and suffering. Hope for all.

Dr. King had a prophetic dream – a dream that we would not be judged by the color of our skin, but rather by the content of our character. The dream cost him his life. Some thought that his dream was too hard. Like Joseph’s brothers, they tried to murder the dream, because they mistakenly thought that God’s dream would cost them their own place at the table. Like Joseph’s brother’s they didn’t understand that God’s gifts, God’s blessings, are unlimited, abundant, overflowing.

So the dream endures -- because it is God’s dream.

There have been times, especially lately, when the church has struggled to keep the dream alive. So much seems to be against us. Hate is in vogue. Brothers betray you, and other family members and friends try and sabotage the dream. Neighbors are apathetic, some are even hostile to the dream. It’s easy to feel discouraged.

In times like these it’s good for believers to remember that it’s not up to us. The dream is God’s and the dream is in God’s hands. Jason Voong is a blogger and pastor who writes for young people. He talks to kids – maybe Joseph’s age, about carrying the dream. Be bold, he says:

“When God gives you a dream, God does it because God believes you’re capable and worthy of running with that dream. Whether we feel like we’re the right person for that dream or not, God seems to think so. I’ve heard it said many times that God doesn’t call the qualified, God qualifies the called. That means that *if God is the only one who can qualify you, God’s the only one who can disqualify you too. And the good news is that He doesn’t.*”<sup>ix</sup>

It’s a new program year full of exciting possibilities. God is with us, calling Woods to dream boldly...a dream of hope. God’s family, live into hope...in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen?

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<sup>i</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*,

<sup>ii</sup> Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, Riverhead, 2006, 235

<sup>iii</sup> Jackie Bensen, “DC’s Local LGBTQ Community Concerned About US Attorney’s Handling of Hate Crimes” [www.nbcnews.com](http://www.nbcnews.com)

<sup>iv</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis Interpretation Commentary*, John Knox Press, 1982, 216

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>vi</sup> Luke 1:52-53

<sup>vii</sup> Allan Boesak, “The Reuben Option,” *A Cloud of Witnesses*, Eerdmans, 1994, 133

<sup>viii</sup> Matthew 2:12

<sup>ix</sup> Jason Voong, <http://pursuitnyc.org/2017/07/18/pick-up-the-dream/>