

Dreamweaver

Psalm 105:1-6 and 16-22

Genesis 37:1-28

God of vision and wonder, of mystery and invitation, dreamweaver God ... Wake us up to your dreams for us... give us the vision to dream them and the courage to live into them so that your kingdom may unfold even now in our midst. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer.

I belong to a family of dreamers. By that I'm not actually commenting on whether or not we have pie in the sky ideals or wish upon a star, though that may well be true. No, I'm talking literally about the propensity of my family members to remarkable Technicolor dreams that are so vivid that they often remain with us after we awake. As a matter of fact, when I was growing up, our dreams were often the subject of discussion at the breakfast table, believe it or not, as we'd munch our Cheerios and share the crazy, outlandish, provocative dreams that we just could not shake out of our minds. From time to time, my long-suffering husband still patiently listens while I recount some bizarre dream that woke me up and won't let me go... Thank you, Jeff, for listening.

Dreaming is a very individual experience, and although many people don't remember their dreams, research indicates that we all do dream about 2 hours each night, which averages about 6 years spent dreaming over the course of a lifetime. Now there are many theories about what dreams are and why they occur. These theories range from a random firing of neurons, to the subconscious unconscious mind making sense out of our conscious waking experiences.

Most of us have our own theories, based on our personal experience of dreaming. Anecdotal evidence says Einstein find the solutions to problems while he was dreaming. I myself have woken up from a dream knowing how to solve that final problem on my algebra homework, or having finally mastered the imperfect subjunctive in my French grammar.

Some people recognize in their dreams a release of suppressed emotions that can't be expressed safely in real life—venting your hostility to your boss for example. And many of us have experienced those repetitive dreams in which we are caught doing the same thing over and over, or running and running and getting nowhere—as in our sleep we work through the anxieties that beset us. I used to have nightmares about preaching in front of you all - having forgotten to prepare a sermon, or realizing I was standing here in my pajamas. My favorites are the flying dreams. All of my family are flyers, though we each do it differently—some hover, some swim, some just take off like superman. Flying dreams are fun.

In our sophisticated, scientific world today, we don't mine our dreams for meaning as much as people used to—unless you're a Jungian psychologist, perhaps. But in fact, until very recent times, dreams were understood to be important for the dreamer and for the community that surrounded him (or her). Dreams brought direction or promise or warning, or all three, and depending on your perspective, were scary or exciting, liberating or threatening.

Scripture is full of important dreams that call the dreamer and those around him to pay attention. From *Genesis* to *Revelation*, we encounter paupers, prophets, priests and kings who dreamed dreams—dreams woven out of the imagination and will of *God*.

Today, we zoom in on a family in the land of *Canaan* almost 4000 years ago, to listen to such a dream recounted in *Genesis 37*, reading the *Message* paraphrase:

... This is Jacob's story and it continues with Joseph, seventeen years old at the time, helping out his brothers in herding the flocks. These were his half brothers, actually, the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought his father bad reports on them. Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he was the child of his old age. So he made him an elaborately embroidered coat. When his brothers realized that their father loved him more than them, they grew to hate him—they wouldn't even speak to him.

Joseph had a dream. When he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said, "Listen to this dream I had. We were all out in the field gathering bundles of wheat. All of a sudden my bundle stood straight up and your bundles circled around it and bowed down to mine." His brothers said, "So! You're going to rule over us? You're going to boss us around?" And they hated him more than ever because of his dreams and the way he talked. He had another dream and told this one also to his brothers: "I dreamed another dream—the sun and moon and eleven stars bowed down to me!" When he told it to his father and brothers, his father reprimanded him: "What's with all this dreaming? Am I and your mother and your brothers all supposed to bow down to you?" Now his brothers were really jealous, but his father brooded over the whole business.

His brothers had gone off to Shechem where they were pasturing their father's flocks. Israel said to Joseph, "Your brothers are with flocks in Shechem. Come, I want to send you to them." Joseph said, "I'm ready." ... So Joseph took off, tracked his brothers down, and found them in Dothan. They spotted him off in the distance. By the time he got to them, they had cooked up a plot to kill him. The brothers were saying, "Here comes that dreamer. Let's kill him and throw him into one of these old cisterns; we can say that a vicious animal ate him up. We'll see what his dreams amount to."

Reuben heard the brothers talking and intervened to save him, "We're not going to kill him. No murder. Go ahead and throw him in this cistern out here in the wild, but don't hurt him." Reuben planned to go back later and get him out and take him back to his father. When Joseph reached his brothers, they ripped off the fancy coat he was wearing, grabbed him and threw him into a cistern. The cistern was dry; there wasn't any water in it.

Then they sat down to eat their supper. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites on their way from Gilead, their camels loaded with spices, ointment and perfumes to sell in Egypt. Judah said, "Brothers, what are we going to get out of killing our brother and concealing the evidence? Let's sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let's not kill him—he is, after all, our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed. By that time, the Midianite traders were passing by. They pulled Joseph out of the cistern and sold him for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites who took Joseph with them down to Egypt.

Joseph was a dangerous dreamer.

This story should be familiar to you, whether from Sunday School and your illustrated Book of Bible Stories, or from a theatre seat watching Donny Osmond or one of your sons swagger around in an Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.

This is a famous story because it includes all the eternal emotions and family dynamics that put the fun in dysfunctional. We can just see this snotty nosed younger brother, spying on his half-siblings, telling tales on them, and sucking up to his dad... No wonder his brothers resented him! It is possible that the father Jacob was blind to this rivalry. But maybe he saw in Joseph a bit of himself, for Jacob was a dreamer too—a man who believed in overturning the status quo. After all, he was the youngest brother who had stolen his older brother's claim to inheritance. Jacob was a man who had dreamed his own dream—a dream of angels climbing a ladder, pointing him to the truth that God was his Dreamweaver—casting vision and hope and promise into the turmoil and uncertainty of Jacob's life. Jacob knew the power of a dream to invite into the future ... and so Jacob loved the dreamer and gifted him with a special robe, an ornamental coat with long sleeves and many colors that was like a flag before a bull—enflaming the brothers into even deeper hatred toward Joseph.

One morning, naïve, oblivious, egocentric teenager, Joseph wakes up full of his vivid dream—and around the breakfast table, munching on Rice Krispies, he blurts it out to his brothers. The dream doesn't need an interpreter—it's clear what it means: Joseph has dreamed a reversal, an inversion, a disruption in the way things are according to their universe. It's preposterous, outrageous, it's ridiculous. His brothers sneer at him, mock him, and dismiss him....

Next morning... snap, crackle, pop...another dream. It's pretty amazing that they listened long enough to hear it, don't you think? But that's because in this time and place, dreams have power and they cannot be ignored. Dreams hold promise for the dreamer and those around him. No matter how difficult, disruptive or dangerous, the dream must be shared.

And just as inevitably—as it has been throughout all of history—for those for whom the dream threatens position and power, the dream must be snuffed out and the dreamer must be silenced. It's a story as old as dirt... Dreamers are dangerous. So it seems an ideal opportunity soon afterward, when out in the country, far from home, the older brothers watch Joseph approach across the fields... His bright coat waving like a flag around him, shining forth his favored status, his confidence, his dreams.

The ancient story is well-known: although they'd just as soon kill Joseph, they sell him instead to a caravan of traders who in turn sell him to Potiphar, who is one of Pharaoh's officials in Egypt. The brothers believe they've stifled the dreamer and killed the dream. They go home, and show their father Joseph's brilliant jacket, bloodied and torn, and after respecting the time of Jacob's bereavement, life returns to normal. Get rid of the dreamer, crush the dream.

So they thought. From the comfort of their prosperous home, this large family with vast flocks and material wealth did not anticipate the hard times that were right around the corner. They could not see the famine or the starving flocks or anticipate the economic collapse and rising prices and the political insecurity that were to come. From the time and space in which they stood, they had no way of knowing that their brother Joseph was alive and well and even then being prepared to provide for them—sent on ahead to Egypt for their benefit. They could not understand that the dream was not so much about Joseph's rise to power or their humiliation as it was about God's plan for their providence, God's insurance of their future. They could not understand that the dream was unfolding in spite of them...

It seems to me that although this story is 4000 years old, it is straight out of our headlines and very relevant for our days. This is a year in which we feel the drought of economic downturn, and the fear of famine. This is a year when the winds of change are blowing strong—throughout our world, in this election year in our country, and in our church with our new Faith Enrichment Center and the work of the PNC for our next pastor—and it seems to me that this is a year when we need to sit around the table and share our dreams, discern the vision, discover what God is up to now.

For God still holds a dream for his people. Joseph's story, after all, is about the dream God weaves for us. It reassures us that God's dream is unfolding, even when we don't recognize it. And it warns us that we—like Joseph's brothers—often align ourselves on the wrong side of the dream: we resist change, we fear new perspectives, we work to squash the dream and kill the dreamer. Ever has it been so, from Joseph to Martin Luther King, from Gandhi to Jesus. God's dream always seem dangerous, because while it always brings blessings, it also holds out new possibilities, so that while it is unfolding it will inevitably threaten the existing order, disrupt the status quo, lift up the downcast, embrace the excluded. In all areas of our lives, as we seek to discern where God is moving and how God might be leading us now, we can be confident that God's dream is the one that will poke us out of our complacencies, probe our soft spots, find our growing edges. And we can be confident that God's dream—God's vision for our future—is ever unfolding through us and often in spite of us and always, always for us. God's dream, holding out hope and promise into the midst of our turmoil. God's dream, inviting us into God's future, forming us into his people.