



“God’s Dream”

***Brenda Loreman
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

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Genesis 37:1–4, 12–28 (NRSV)***

If you’re like me, and you grew up with at least one sibling, then you probably have a series of family stories that could fall under the heading “Brethren Behaving Badly.” For example, Pepper Swanson tells me that when she was young, her older brother and sister had her darn near convinced that she was not the natural child of their parents, but had been purchased from gypsies. Since there actually were gypsies living in the area where she grew up, this was not outside the realm of possibility.

If you ask him, Mike Foster might tell you the story about how his younger brother came to have a scar over his right eye. It involves a street hockey game and a shovel handle, and was entirely an accident, really.

In my own family, my brother, who is six years older than I was, once handcuffed me to a tree in the woods and left me there to be eaten alive by cougars. Well, he did handcuff me to a tree once, in a wooded spot on our cousins’ property in Montana, and I’m sure that cougars lived somewhere in the state. I don’t remember exactly how the story ended, but, obviously, I was released from my captivity, and, remarkably, I still love my brother.

While our stories of sibling squabbles don’t really rise to the level of throwing your little brother in a pit, selling him into slavery in Egypt, and convincing your father he was eaten by wild beasts, still, most of us can identify with the feelings and conflict that the siblings have in our text for today. If you’ve ever felt that a parent or grandparent favored another, if you’ve ever been a tattletale or tattled upon, if you’ve ever been aggravated by a younger sibling, if you’ve ever been teased by older siblings, if you’ve ever even had a little harmless fantasy about ridding your life of a particularly annoying person, then you can see something of yourself in the family of Jacob and his sons. If none of these situations is familiar to you, well then, wow. God bless you.

During the summer months, the selected lectionary scripture texts from the Hebrew Bible have been the stories of the founding families of Israel—the four generations beginning with Abraham and Sarah, and moving through the lives of Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and his large family, and finally, the story of Joseph. If you’ve been coming to church regularly this summer, Brenda Loreman. “God’s Dream,” 7/07/2011, Page 1 of 3.

you've already heard two of these stories—Jacob and his dream of a ladder of angels, and last week's story about Jacob wrestling with God at the Jabbok. One of the wonderful aspects of reading the stories of our spiritual patriarchs and matriarchs in the book of Genesis is that these are not people whose lives are so exemplary and moral that we despair in ever being able to follow them. They are instead very ordinary people who sometimes make extraordinarily bad choices. What makes them extraordinary is not necessarily their behavior, but their relationship with God and the way they continue, throughout their lives, to develop and transform in that extraordinary relationship. And that's the quality that makes them worthy of emulation. Otherwise, reading Genesis straight through reads a bit like a trashy beach novel rather than a source of help and guidance for our spiritual lives. Still, it's hard to find the good news hidden in the stories of so many brethren behaving badly. It takes some digging and reframing to allow the text to speak to our lives today.

Today's lesson begins the story of Joseph. Joseph's story covers the rest of Genesis, from chapter 37 through the end in chapter 50. The problem with reading only the selections of text that are offered in the morning lectionary is that we miss important parts of the text that are key to understanding it. If you haven't done so recently, I encourage you to find some free time and read Genesis chapters 12-50. It's some of the most engaging narrative in the Bible, and you will probably make some new discoveries.

For example, you may have noticed while listening to Drew read the scripture for today that the garment that Jacob gives Joseph is referred to in our text as "a robe with long sleeves." What happened to the famous "coat of many colors?" After poking around through various versions of the Bible, I discovered that the original Hebrew word describing the garment is vague and obscure and has given rise to a number of different translations. The New Revised Standard Version, which we usually use at Eden, calls it a "robe with long sleeves." The New International Version says "richly ornamented robe." The Message, a contemporary translation, uses "an elaborately embroidered coat." The Latin Vulgate, penned sometime in the 400s, says "many-threaded tunic." It's the King James Version, so familiar to many of us, that calls the garment a "coat of many colors."

I'm getting a little sidetracked talking about biblical translation, but there is an important point here about the coat. However it's translated, the coat is special. None of the other brothers has received such a special garment from their father, whether it is of many-threaded fabric, richly embroidered, many colored, or full length. It's a sign of the special favor that Jacob has given to Joseph, and it's one of the reasons his brothers resent him. Another reason for the brothers' resentment is that Joseph is, apparently, a tattletale. He's much younger than his brothers, a lad of seventeen, the child of Jacob's old age. He is sent out to help his brothers with the flocks, and he comes back with a bad report to his father. I know from the experience of being a younger sibling that no older brother likes a tattletale.

A third reason for the brothers' resentment is not part of today's lectionary selection, yet it is an important part of understanding the story today and the whole trajectory of Joseph's narrative. Verses 5-11 of chapter 37, which have been left out of today's excerpt, relate two dreams that Joseph had. Rather than keeping the dreams to himself, he chooses to share them with his family, which causes him even more trouble with his brothers. In the first dream, the brothers are binding sheaves of wheat. Suddenly, Joseph's sheaf stands up tall, and the

sheaves of the eleven brothers gather around his and bow down to it. In the second dream, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars all bow down to Joseph. Jacob and the brothers interpret these two dreams as meaning that Joseph is a bit big for his britches—or his coat of many colors—and intends to claim a level of power in his family that is not rightfully his. The brothers' jealousy and resentment builds until they make some extraordinarily bad choices.

Besides serving as plot motivation, these dreams serve several other purposes in the narrative. One is that they carry a theme that is prominent throughout the patriarchal stories of Genesis—the theme of favoring the younger, weaker member of the family. Throughout the generations, it is the younger son who gains favor from God, which defies the cultural norm of the elder son receiving the blessing and birthright of the father. God does not operate by human rules, but chooses to disrupt the status quo and give power to the weak.

Another function of the dreams is that they foreshadow the critical next events in Joseph's narrative. Eventually, Joseph will recognize that he has a prophetic gift for dream interpretation. His gift will gain such renown in Egypt that, eventually, he will be asked to interpret the Pharaoh's dreams. He will correctly identify the signs in the Pharaoh's dreams as meaning that Egypt will have seven years of overabundant harvest, followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh will give Joseph great power, and Joseph will save Egypt from the famine, and eventually he will have the opportunity to save his own family, who travels south to escape starvation. To hear how things finally turn out, you'll have to tune in next week.

Joseph's story is often used as evidence that God is a master planner—that everything that happens in the world is part of God's plan and happens at God's will. This has been, and remains for many people, a typical view of the nature of God: God is all-powerful, and everything happens by design. The problem with this view is that all the suffering and trauma that Joseph experienced—his brothers' terrorism, being thrown into a pit, sold into slavery, and his years in a dungeon in Egypt—were also part of God's plan. This is an understanding of God that I wholeheartedly reject. I do not believe that God intends for any person, or any creature—or any planet for that matter—to suffer. I do not believe that God is a master planner, who controls every minute detail of our lives and manipulates us like a puppet-master. Instead, I think of God as a master dreamer. And God's dream for us is always for healing and wholeness and reconciliation and well-being. God's dream for us is for the highest good, and for a realm in which God's concerns are the priority. Even so, God created a world that tends toward randomness and chaos, and peopled it with creatures exercising free will. Free to choose, we often choose extraordinarily badly, and we often suffer—either because of humanity's bad choices, or because of the chaos of the created world. Into the randomness and fickle human will, God drops a lure for us to follow, a lure of God's dream of a garden in sunlight and a world where the weak do not suffer. We have only to follow that lure, live into God's dream, and choose a life of relationship with the Divine. It will not necessarily end our suffering, but it will make it more bearable. Following God's lure and living into God's dream will transform our lives and encourage us to transform the lives of others. And this is the good news for us in Joseph's story. Joseph—and eventually, his brothers, too—follow God's lure and chooses God's dream of healing and reconciliation. May we go out and do likewise. Thanks be to God.