

Series on Joseph

May 27 – Dreams

Genesis 37:1-11

Over the next few weeks I am inviting you to examine the life of Joseph, the son of Jacob, not Joseph the father of Jesus. His life is told in great detail in the last chapters of the book of Genesis. I would suggest that you take the time to read it in one sitting. Most of us only remember some of the high points of his life. We first encounter Joseph as a teenage dreamer and see, through the ups and downs of his life, his growth, his convictions and ultimately his faith and compassion. From him we can learn a lot about being faithful in challenging situations. If God could take one such as Joseph and transform him, then we can celebrate how God is at work in our lives and those we care about.

Do you remember what it was like to be 17? For most of us, our teenage years were not some of our best. With hormones raging, feeling the need to break away from parental limits and seeing yourself much more mature than you really are, we are a toxic stew of reactivity. We say and do things that, when we look back at them some years later, make us shake our heads with wonder. This is where we enter Joseph's life and it will explain some of what happens next.

But first, a little bit of history just in case you are not totally up to date on your Old Testament characters. Joseph was the son of Jacob. Jacob was the brother of Esau, and they were the sons of Isaac, who was Abraham's son. Now that we have our genealogy straight we can begin. Jacob had many wives but his first and beloved was Rachel. She could not have children for many years. She finally conceived and gave birth to Joseph. Later she had another son, Benjamin, and she died during his birth. Joseph was the spoiled son amongst his 11 other brothers. We don't know how many girls were born to the family, only one is named! Joseph was the favorite and first born of the beloved wife of Jacob. Everyone knew it and it seems likely that the brothers resented him because they assumed he would inherit the bulk of their father's estate. Jacob had even gone so far as to give Joseph an elaborate outer coat that would show to all how special he was. When the Bible was initially translated into English, the

scholars appointed by King James used, as their source, a Latin Translation of the Bible done by Jerome about 1300 years before. This was the Bible currently in use in the church. From their translation, we got that this coat was of many colors. When you go back to the original Hebrew, we find it was a coat with long sleeves that we can guess was richly embroidered. It is not the kind of garment one would wear as a shepherd. This gift from Jacob would show how he favored Joseph and did not expect him to do hard work. As you can see, family dynamics would not have been good. But it get's worse.

Besides being spoiled, Joseph was a snitch. One time he was sent out to work with his older brothers. He returns bringing a bad report to their father about them. It never says whether or not the report was justified. What is clear is that the writer was showing why there was such antipathy between Joseph and his brothers. We will see the terrible direction this anger takes next week.

We then learn that Joseph, like his father, is a dreamer. With Jacob, we think of his dream seeing a ladder going between heaven and earth. Three different times dreams play a key role in the Joseph story. Each time there are two dreams to emphasize their importance. Dreams, at this time, were usually understood to be messages from God and not the result of an interior psychological process. So, it is surprising that the brothers interpret Joseph's dreams as if they are the product of Joseph's own arrogance rather than a divine word about destiny.

The first dream about the sheaves of grain anticipates the food/famine theme later in the life of Joseph. This dream will come true when the brothers have to go to Egypt for food because of a severe drought and have to bow to Joseph. Right now the brothers understand it as a threat to their place in the family. Something his long robe already hints at. The other dream adds Joseph's parents to those doing bowing to him. They all get angry at Joseph for having such a dream. Even Jacob chastises him for his arrogance. The brothers are not mad at their father for treating Joseph specially. None of them are mad at God, the sender of the dreams. No one asks what God might be saying through these dreams! Instead, we hear of their anger at Joseph which will boil over when later they decide to get rid of the dreamer and they believe eliminate the

dream's predictions. Some parts of these dreams will come true but other parts do not, such as Jacob never bows down to Joseph. Perhaps the problem is not so much his dreams as Joseph telling them to people who would be mightily affected by them if they are true!

Two things more about these dreams. One, this part of the story shows his immaturity and his being 17! He couldn't keep his mouth shut. If you are having such a dream and believe God is sharing what the future is like, the last people who would want to hear about it are those who are predicted to later have to grovel at your feet. The other thing it shares is that even though God is not mentioned in the early part of Joseph's story the dreams show that he was in touch with God even if he or those around him didn't acknowledge it.

So, what does all this have to say to us today? I see two questions being posed in this story. The first is, "How is God talking to you?" Back then dreams were one of the ways people felt God communicated. What about today? Is it through the words of a friend? Is it through something you read? Is it an insight that comes to you during a time of prayer and meditation? Perhaps it comes in other ways. One of the things this story shares is that the promptings of God are not always obvious and sometimes others do not even acknowledge God is involved. Often, only later can we look back and see how God was at work in our lives. It requires some intentionality on our part to be open to God.

Here is the more important question. How does God want to use you today? To dream is not to live in a world of fantasy. It is to imagine a world infused with God's spirit. To dream is to imagine how God is using you to make the world a better place. I think of the Joseph story and who would have guessed a 17 year old spoiled, self-centered teenager would come to play such a vital part in Israel's later existence? Who would think a 70, or 80, or 90 year old living in Sequim could make such a difference in a life or a lot of lives? God wishes you will respond to what God is asking you to do. What is it? Even you might not know, at this point. But in being open and taking the first step, we are being faithful.

The story of Joseph begins with a challenge for us being open to God – in spite of who we are, not because of who we are. When God nudges us, it is often to do things we may not want to do, or we can't see how what we are asked could make any difference, or we have doubts about how this action relates to the nudge from God and so we give all sorts of excuses and do nothing. God is asking us to trust and respond and see how God is using this moment.

I recently read a story about a woman who volunteered to help children with their reading at her local grade school. She had just retired and wanted something to do. She tried to make it fun. Her story times became the highlight of the week for the students. Over time their reading scores improved dramatically. She made a huge difference and only afterwards did she remember praying as she retired that God would use her remaining years in some productive way. The volunteering was a nudge. She didn't even realize it was of God. She responded and lives were changed.

So often we talk about the faith of people in the Bible. We admire many of their characteristics. This story is a story of someone totally different, one we would not gladly welcome to our family table, at least when he is 17. God isn't even mentioned in the introduction. Yet God was with him and used Joseph. How is God talking to us? How can God use us?