

“The Dangers of Dreaming”
Genesis 37:1-36
© Stacey Steck
Preached August 10, 2008 at San Jose, Costa Rica

I suppose it takes the right combination of personal characteristics to qualify as a real dreamer. Martin Luther King, Jr. of course comes to mind, what with his oft-quoted speech invoking his dream. You need to think big, always be optimistic, and be able to persevere, all of them attributes of that great US dreamer. Perhaps in light of our story from Genesis, we might add the phrase, blissfully or youthfully ignorant, to that list of characteristics, for Joseph surely exhibited one or both of those forms of ignorance. I would like to give him credit for simply being genuinely enthusiastic and apolitical, but I think he really was ignorant of the response he would receive from his brothers, especially as far as he was down the pecking order in the family. Yes, his father loved him most of all, but he was still number twelve of twelve, a position the early church might assign to a kind of fulfillment of God’s purposes, but which in Joseph’s day meant if he inherited anything, it would be very little. Maybe his subconscious knew he had very little coming his way, and that the only way he’d be on top was by tattling on his brothers, or putting them in their place in his dreams. And so, in a manner of speaking, using his ignorance like a shovel, he digs his own grave, so that his brothers may toss him in. Dreaming can be dangerous.

We have been following the story in Genesis for several weeks now, and we have seen a few themes emerge: the continuance of God's promise of land, and family, and blessing that was made to Joseph's great-grandfather, Abraham; the continuing peril of that promise, through sterility, questionable choices, and dysfunctional family dynamics. We have seen the promise kept alive by God whose grace overcomes all these obstacles, despite the unworthiness of the major characters, and who chooses the promise bearers we probably would not have chosen, either for being born in the wrong position, or for their bad behavior. We have even seen God exclude threats to the promise, putting Lot, Ishmael, and Esau on the margins. And in this great story, you get the simultaneous feeling that of course God can make the promise come true, but also that you don't know how long God can hold out, with all the ways the people in the story try to screw it up.

And so, once again today, God's promise lurks in the background: there are now twelve sons, a movement toward the promised great nation; there is a threat to the promise: the brothers taking matters into their own hands and the first-born Reuben's failure to save his brother, putting his inheritance status with his father at risk; and finally an ambiguity about Joseph, on one hand that like all his ancestors, he will be chosen despite not being the likely candidate, but also another possible case of God's expulsion of a threat to the promise. Today's story ends on a note of uncertainty, one not even resolved in the next story, which takes a detour from the main thrust of the adventure. It is as if those who put together the story in Genesis

want us to feel the years of unresolved stuff that Jacob felt, before he will be reunited with his beloved son. Perhaps it was a reminder of just how tenuous was life in the desert back in the day, and how blessed by God they were to make it out alive when the tension finally gets resolved.

The backdrop to the whole story, of course, is the fulfillment of God's dream, not the ones Joseph dreamed, but the one which God dreamed way back in the beginning, a dream of shalom, of peace and human well-being originally planned for the Garden of Eden, but relocated under Plan B to the promised land of milk and honey, and under plan C to Jerusalem, and under plan D to the new Jerusalem with its streets of gold and rivers of life. Behind the whole biblical story is God's dream for us of safety and security, of vineyards and houses, of authentic community. Unfortunately for us, it often seems to be a dream deferred, a dream of which we catch but glimpses, but a dream with such power that it keeps us striving for it. It is a dream that frequently gets mixed up with our own competing dreams, but a dream that exists independently of us, even if we are its main characters. Joseph's dreams may have been part of God's dream, but it is on that larger dream we must keep our attention fixed, just as did those who chronicled the story of that dreamer Joseph and his scheming brothers.

There is a curious aspect of Joseph's dreams that should give us pause, and that is that the story doesn't actually tell us they come from God. Usually, the Bible says something like, "And God came to so and so in a dream, and said..."

Or, “An angel of the Lord visited so and so in a dream, and said . . .” Here, all we are told is that Joseph had these dreams, and it is only because we know how the story ends that we know that Joseph’s dreams coincide with God’s dreams.

Perhaps Joseph’s father Jacob didn’t tell the family story very well or very often, so that his sons would recognize that it seemed to be God’s preference that the youngest would be the promise-bearer, or perhaps he did tell it well, which is why they wanted to kill him. In either case, the ambiguity of the text leaves us to wonder if Joseph’s dreams are, in fact, in harmony with God’s dream, and it is the same ambiguity that lingers with us today as we dream a future for Escazú

Christian Fellowship, as we seek to discern God’s vision, God’s dream for us. It took many, many years before his family saw that Joseph’s dreams were in synch with God’s, that they came from God and not their brother’s insecurities about being the twelfth of twelve, and it took one of the longest tales in the Bible to reach that same conclusion. In the meantime, like Joseph in his pit, and later on his way to Egypt, we must live on faith that even if our dreams are not God’s, that God’s dream will be the one that is realized.

It is that ambiguity which makes moving forward with our dreams a dangerous proposition, both in announcing them, but also in living them. You see, just as it took Joseph’s family quite a while to become convinced that his dreams were aligned with God’s dream, it may be quite some time before we receive confirmation that we have indeed discerned well, and that we are on the right path.

I have only the slightest doubt that we could choose some wrong path, and it probably wouldn't be long before God corrected us. But I have greater confidence in the possibility that we will choose the right path, but be diverted because of our ignorance and the interpretations by others of the dreams we announce. Will we have the stamina, like Joseph, to survive the pit, to survive slavery, to survive prison, to rise to a position of confidence and trust, all long enough to be the blessing God wants us to be? Remember how the Joseph story ends: He goes to Egypt, dreams a few more dreams, becomes Pharaoh's chief economic advisor, and ends up being responsible for staving off starvation for thousands of people, not only in Egypt, but in his hometown as well.

All of this is to say that come October, or whenever we decide together to move forward on the dream we believe God has dreamed for us, that there will be some danger that will accompany us. It may be that we will ruffle feathers by seeming to place ourselves above others. But so be it. It may be that we will incur the animosity of others, even fellow Christians, by the audacity of our dreams. But so be it. It may be that we will be thrown into a pit, naked and hopeless, by those who feel threatened by what God has asked us to do. But so be it. We will face opposition if our dreams are in harmony with God's dreams, but those are not the most dangerous threats. More likely, the more challenging threats will come from within. You see, it may also be that we will lose our nerve, and abandon the plans we will have made. May that not be so. It may be that we will derail our dreams

with a house divided, as Jacob's house almost succeeded in doing. May that not be so. It may be that we never climb out of the pit, but abandon hope and the dream of shalom. May that not be so. But perhaps most perilous of all is being afraid to dream at all, for fear of all these threats, for fear of failure, for fear of conflict. May that not be so, for when we can no longer dream, we will have truly lost something, for we will have lost sight too of God's dream, the dream upon which millions upon millions of people depend, and the dream upon which our ministry to them rests. When we can no longer dream, it will be because we have forgotten that despite Joseph's blissful and youthful ignorance of the danger of sharing his dreams, or maybe even because of it, those dreams came true, and the story of God's dream continues in the world and in our lives. May God bless our ignorance and help us to have the courage and faith to persevere in seeing God's dream come alive in our community. Amen.