

Genesis 37: 13-28 "Joseph's Story – Part 1" Rev. Janet Chapman 8/2/20

What are you missing in these days of COVID? I have heard from teachers who are missing the joy of setting up their classrooms, students who are missing group sports and being with friends for that first day back to school, parents who are missing their kids being in school on-site, and people of all ages missing being able to breathe without a mask. We do what we must do out of love for our brothers and sisters. Every Sunday morning, I miss you in person and I miss Children's moments. Sure, I tried a few times doing live stream children's moments but without kids present, it loses that interaction between child and pastor. I miss out on the spontaneity and surprising responses which come from the kids that keep me alert. I remember one children's moment several years ago when I was still serving as an Associate Minister. The children's moment was my responsibility each Sunday and the scripture was the First Testament story of Joseph, son of Jacob. Joseph was a dreamer so to get the kids to think about dreams they have in their sleep, I decided to tell them a dream I had had just 2 nights before. I told them I had a bad dream just like I sometimes used to have when I was a little child. It scared me and I wanted to share it with them so maybe I would feel better. I dreamt that I blew up Rev. Loyd's house (he was the senior minister) and that made me sad. Before I could go on any further, one little girl shot up her hand – there is always one who will never let you get to the point. Knowing full well I wasn't going any further until I acknowledged her, I said, "Yes, Lucy?" She put her hand down and very clearly stated, "My momma told me if you don't have bad thoughts, you won't have bad dreams." And so maybe that was the point, even though it wasn't where I was headed.

Dreams are often a complicated reflection of our subconscious, and although I really enjoyed working with Pastor Loyd, as I look back now, I guess there were some times when I

was quite jealous of him but couldn't admit it then. Jealousy, whether it is in the work or family environment is not just dangerous but can be potentially deadly as our scripture reflects today. The story of Joseph and his brothers is one of the most human and satisfying story in all of Hebrew scripture. It is Genesis at its finest. It begins with a dysfunctional family much like some of ours. In this case, father Jacob has made the classic error of favoring one son over the others, probably because Joseph is the first son born to the woman Jacob truly loved, Rachel. Joseph makes the most of his favored status and becomes a tattletale on the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah who were supposed to be working in the fields but were actually slacking in their duties. Jacob gives Joseph a special robe especially made for him. The King James translates it as a coat with many colors but the actual Hebrew word used here is uncertain and may have meant an ornamental or long sleeved coat. It is only in the Greek Septuagint that the word for many colors comes into play. With apologies to all of those Sunday School stories and to Andrew Lloyd Webber who created Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, the likelihood is that the Hebrew word meant long-sleeved which was a cherished commodity in those days. But no matter, the point is that Joseph's brothers didn't like that he got such a nice gift from Dad. They disliked him so much they were unable to greet him with the traditional greeting of shalom, thus, even the most common greeting got stuck in their throats whenever Joseph showed up flaunting that stinking robe. I wonder, do you identify with Joseph's brothers or were you the spoiled one in your family? My older siblings insist I was the Joseph in the family, getting a horse in high school and a car at the end of college – all necessities in my mind. Honestly, though I am quite grateful they never took their jealousy to the level of those brothers.

If I had the gifts and dreams of Joseph and used them in the way Joseph did, my younger years might have been quite different. Joseph had a gift with interpreting dreams, but they were not always popular with those around him. His dreams predicted that the day would come when his whole family would be dependent upon him to survive. This gave the brothers one more reason to hate him as he suggests they will eventually bow down to the starry success of their little brother. Joseph comes off quite prideful which manages to tick off dear ole Dad and reveals Joseph is not the hero we thought he was. Like Joseph, pastors can get a bit full of themselves as well which leads to missteps along the way. One young pastor boasted in public that all the time he ever needed to prepare for his Sunday morning sermon was the few minutes it took him to walk to the church from the parsonage next door. After a few weeks of hearing his sermons, the congregation bought a new parsonage, 10 miles away!

Joseph's dreams, although cocky, took him to places he never counted on as a young man. The Psalmist has an interesting phrase for it – "until what he had said came to pass, the word of the Lord kept challenging him." Joseph's visions put him through a refining process that he would never have imagined when he had the original dreams. Some of you know that my youngest moved off to Washington DC 2 weeks ago, following a dream to share an apartment with her best friend from college and to live in the big city. She had touted over and over that it would be no big deal to live far away, she would embrace it with open arms. Her first night there was not what she thought it would be. Reality hit her like a ton of bricks when she realized she was on the other side of the country from Mom. She had travelled without me before, but this was different. The weather was a shock as thunderstorms pounded the streets while the air remained hot and sticky. The familiarity of home had been replaced with a whole

new way of life. I remembered the same feeling in Ft. Worth, having traveled by myself from Oregon for grad school. Such travels become a process of refining our rough edges and smoothing out our pride.

For Joseph, his refining process was hard and humiliating. When his dad sent him out to the fields to check up on his brothers and if they were doing their job right, which incidentally is never a good parenting option when siblings are at odds with each other, the brothers spot Joseph coming and plot to get rid of him. But Rueben, Jacob's firstborn, urges them not to kill Joseph, just rough him up, throw him into a pit, and strip him of that coat. The word pit is the same word used later on to refer to the dungeon Joseph ends up in Egypt. After the brothers do this heinous act, they sit down for a bite to eat. The irony of sinning against a brother and then gathering around the table to feast should not be overlooked. Whenever the Bible mentions eating with others, there is always an underlying expectation that the meal will reflect hospitality and love, making it a sacred act, as God intended. Eating a meal while a brother languishes at the bottom of a pit nearby is not just disrespectful, it points to the heart of evil. It speaks to those of us who share in communion every Sunday, but overlook daily the violent humiliation of brothers and sisters because of the color of their skin, their family of origin, their orientation, economic status, or abilities. We nonchalantly eat and drink while there are those who have nothing and are treated as nothing. We share at tables in our homes forgetting that the table is where God reveals love and compassion at its deepest level. While the brothers eat their fill, Joseph is sold into human trafficking and headed for slavery. If we are courageous and honest enough to hear the nuances of this story, we will recognize its patterns being played out again and again in human history, in our own families and communities.

As I watched the proceedings honoring the life of Rep. John Lewis, one of the last of the original Civil Rights leaders, I was struck with how many times Lewis was tossed into the pit of life, beaten and brutalized, but managed to rise above the evil. While some bemoan the fact they are not as well-liked or as popular as others, here was a man who didn't obsess about his popularity ratings but instead focused on the protection of democracy for all and encouraged us all as one family to lay down the burden of hate, a burden too heavy for anyone to bear. "Release the need to hate," he preached, "to harbor division and the enticement of revenge. You are the light. Never let anyone – any person or any force – dampen your light. Hold only to love, only to peace in your heart, knowing that the battle of good to overcome evil is already won." If we could fully embrace such encouragement, maybe we would respond less like Joseph's brothers and even Joseph in his more self-centered moments, and more like dreamers named Jesus, King and Lewis who knew that even though we can kill the dreamer, the dream will persist and have its say.