



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

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THE NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Dreamers and Doers

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b

Joseph must have been the kind of guy older brothers hate and mothers adore—especially for their daughters. He was young, good-looking, intelligent, and capable. He was dependable and honest and concerned for others. Granted, when he was 17 and began having those odd dreams about sheaves of wheat and celestial lights bowing down to him, he let his own self-importance get to his head. His own brothers hated him for that. Being sold into slavery and a couple of stints in an Egyptian prison cured him of that problem, however. All in all, Joseph was a good guy.

We know the story of Joseph the dreamer, wandering the hillsides around Hebron in his long-sleeved coat. It may have been multi-colored as well, but the text indicates that the famous coat was significant because of its long, wide sleeves which were likely a symbol of special favor. You don't wear a coat with long, floppy sleeves if you plan to be doing manual labor such as herding sheep or milking goats or fighting off wild animals. A coat such as Joseph wore was reserved for people who enjoyed a life of leisure. None of his brothers had anything similar to his special coat.

Joseph was his father's favorite, the firstborn of his beloved wife Rachel. Sadly, his mother died in childbirth with his brother Benjamin, which only made her two youngest sons more special to their father Jacob. It sometimes happens that a parent has a child to whom he is closer or with whom she shares a special bond. A wise parent, however, knows how to love each of her children generously and how to treat each of his children fairly. Jacob had not mastered those skills. We do not know anything about Joseph's childhood except that he tattled on a few of his older brothers when they got into mischief. Not always a wise thing to do! He must have spent some of his time strolling around Hebron, daydreaming about the day his big brothers would bow down to him. As the youngest of three boys, I could have told Joseph that while you might dream such dreams, you had better keep them to yourself.

One day his father sent him to Shechem to check up on how his brothers were doing. It was not a frivolous errand, simply meant to give

Joseph something to do. It was a responsible job for Shechem was at least fifty miles away. He made it safely to Shechem only to discover that they had moved on to other pastures in Dothan, another twenty miles north. While he was still a ways off, his brothers saw him coming. Who could miss that outfit in the harsh wilderness of Canaan? Instead of being happy to see their younger brother, the men said, "It's the Dreamer. Let's kill him!"

We can't condone the brothers' feelings about Joseph, but we all know that little brothers can be pesky and irritating and Joseph fit the bill. While they were working hard for the family, they saw Joseph doing nothing more than sashaying around town in that gaudy and impractical coat, dreaming about his glorious future. What we don't often realize is that Joseph's older brothers were dreamers too. Obviously they dreamed of vengeance. They dreamed of getting rid of Joseph. When they saw him coming, they began to conspire to kill him and tell their father that he had been attacked by a wild animal. They dreamed about what life would be like without that impudent brat hanging around.

What else might they have been dreaming about that led them to such homicidal plans? Were they dreaming about the day they would not have to chase after smelly sheep and milk cantankerous goats? Were they imagining what it would be like to stay close to home and enjoy an easier, better life as Joseph was doing? Did they dream of their father loving them as much as he loved Joseph and Benjamin, and loving their mothers as much as he loved Rachel. Perhaps they thought that getting rid of Joseph would re-direct some of Jacob's love and concern toward them. Fortunately, Reuben (the oldest son of Leah) had kinder dreams and planned to outsmart his brothers and rescue Joseph and take him home. Before he could execute his plan, however, Judah saw a passing caravan and suggested they sell their younger brother into slavery. I think my brothers entertained similar thoughts when I was little!

We know the rest of the story. Joseph became a servant in the house of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. Falsely accused of assaulting Potiphar's wife, Joseph landed in jail where he befriended Pharaoh's butler and baker who had somehow offended their master. We do not know whether Joseph continued to dream his dreams, but he did have a skill at interpreting the dreams of others. Eventually he was able to interpret Pharaoh's dreams of impending famine and coordinated efforts to stockpile food in order to avert a national disaster. He also saved his own family in the

process and made it possible for God's promise of a nation of his people to become a reality.

Joseph's is vitally important in the biblical narrative for it reminds us that all of us—even God—are dreamers and that our best dreams eventually do come true. I am not talking about whimsical dreams of the things we would like to have or fantasies of what we would like to do. I mean those big dreams about what life means for us and the people around us, the dreams of what God is doing and wants to do.

Bruce Dahlburg points out that the stories of Joseph provide a purposeful counterpoint to the early stories of Genesis. In the temptation story, the woman and the man are urged to eat of the fruit because they will be like God and will know good and evil. When Joseph eventually confronts his brothers with what they did to him he points out that while they meant it for evil, God turned their cruelty into good (Genesis 50:19-20). In the creation story, the humans are charged with caring for the earth, a task that became difficult toil after their expulsion from Eden. Joseph, on the other hand, makes use of creation to harvest and store the bounty of the earth so that in lean years the people will have plenty of food to eat. God's initial promise to Abraham, and subsequently to Isaac and Jacob, is that he will make of them a great nation so that through them all the nations of the earth will be blessed. Finally, because of Joseph's actions, the Hebrew nation becomes a reality and God's ultimate plan is put into motion. All in all, Joseph is offered as an example of God's dream for us, a person who captures the vision God has for his people and, despite challenges and adversity, remains faithful to God to make those dreams come true.¹

We are all dreamers and doers. Some of our dreams are frivolous, the imaginings of what we might do or be if things were different for us. Some of our dreams are selfish, focused only on fulfilling our wants and desires. Most of our dreams, however, our best dreams, are tied to the vision God places in our hearts of what life is intended to be—and can be—when we remain faithful to God.

I understand the dreams of Joseph's older brothers. We have all felt as if we have been treated unfairly at times. We work hard and try to do what is right and yet other people who do far less and even create some chaos seem

¹Bruce T. Dahlburg, "Genesis: Commentary," in *Mercer Commentary on the Bible*, Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson, eds. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 116-117.

to prosper more. We long to be loved and appreciated for who we are and yet ache as the affection we desire is lavished on someone else. We want a good life for us and our families but somehow never seem to get ahead while other people seem to fall right into “the good life” through no effort of their own.

From his brothers’ perspective, Joseph represented all those people who get what we deserve and have what we want. He was not perfect, and he did irritate his brothers as most younger brothers will do. From God’s perspective, however, Joseph was the unlikely one who remained faithful to God and focused upon what God was about in the world. When life was bleak, he depended upon God for help. When opportunities came his way, he looked to God for guidance. When faced with responding to the people who had wronged him, he allowed his compassion rather than his vengeance to guide his actions. When given an opportunity to do simple things which resulted in great benefits to many people, Joseph chose to do what was best for everyone rather than to do what was possible simply to enrich himself.

We are all dreamers and doers. Our dreams often determine what we will do. God invites us to dream God’s dreams, to envision the world as God has hoped it would be, to build relationships God intended from the beginning, and to enjoy the world God has given to us all as a gift. The dream is already here. It was fully implemented in Jesus Christ who came to wake us up from our spiritual sleep to enjoy the dream of life in God’s household. In the lessons he taught, the things he did, the compassion he shared, and the sacrifices he made, Jesus woke us up to the reality of God’s presence among us. Our joyful task is to make that reality our dream and to be about the work of making it come true for ourselves and for all of God’s children. Dream and do in the name and spirit of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

August 10, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Cause your love, which is deep and true, O God, to bubble up within us and guide us in every way. Pour out your love into our hearts so that we might learn how to love. Wrap your love around us and keep us safe until we are safely within your eternal grace.

We thank you, Lord, for the love which you do lavish upon us, love that not only redeems and restores us, but love which also chastens and corrects us. We are grateful for your compassion which understands our predicaments and your mercy which enables us to transcend our foibles and correct our errors. We are thankful, O God, for the gift of your love.

We pray that people the world over might open their eyes, their minds, their hearts to receive your love. We pray that hatred would cease, vengeance become distasteful, and greed unappealing. We long for that day when your children stop warring and sit down together at the banquet table of fellowship. We pray that peace will soon come to this earth.

Out of the abundance of your compassion, we pray that you will bring healing where possible and wholeness where needed. Give strength to all who are weak of body and spirit, confidence to everyone who is uncertain and afraid, and comfort to each of us whose heart has been broken. Cause our hope to rise so that it appears as light to dispel our darkness and a beacon to show us the way.

You have always been faithful to us, O God; help us to be faithful to you. As you have so generously loved us, enable us to love you in return. You have provided all that we need for this life and fitted us for life to come. Help us to recognize the many gifts that are ours so that we might fully become the people you have created us to be; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.