

# Here Comes the Dreamer

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**Third Presbyterian Church**  
**August 13, 2017 (Tenth Sunday after Pentecost)**  
**Genesis 37:1-28**

What kind of a dream could possibly make this band of brothers so angry at Joseph that they would throw him into a pit so deep he couldn't climb out? What kind of a dream could possibly make Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, and Zebulun throw their younger brother into an escape-proof cistern devoid of water, and then casually sit down to eat as if nothing had happened?

Cisterns are scary things. The small farmhouse in rural South Dakota in which I grew up until I was 12 wasn't connected to a municipal water source. Instead, we had a cistern to hold our water supply. It was a pit, a well dug underneath the floor of our front enclosed porch. It had a cover that was flush with the floor – and we had a big old red couch sitting over it, to keep it at bay from curious ones who might be tempted to pull its cover off. I don't remember how big it was – but my brother remembers it was about six feet deep, four feet across, with a cover about a foot and a half wide. To a child, it seemed enormous.

Whenever we were running low on water, we'd make a quick call to Harvey Ortman, who would drive onto the yard with his water truck to deliver a fresh supply of water. He'd run a big hose from the water tank, through the door of the porch, and into the cistern. It meant my parents had to move the old red couch aside, and move the cover over so Harvey could drop the big hose down inside.

My sisters and I were morbidly fascinated with the process. We were terrified of falling in, but we still wanted to watch. We knew another family who'd experienced a tragedy with theirs, so the danger was always front and center whenever Harvey and his truck came around. I'd breathe a sigh of relief every time he was done, closed the cover, and moved the heavy old couch back in its place.

The thing is, even if that cistern had been empty, it still would have been dangerous. What kind of a dream could possibly cause Joseph's older brothers to feel so threatened that they'd toss him in an empty cistern and keep him there until they sold him like a piece of property for twenty pieces of silver?

Now, there are no innocent ones in this story, not even Joseph. He's spoiled by dad, robed in a technicolor dreamcoat. He's a tattletale and a bragger. And in his dream, as we heard Becky tell in the children's story, his brothers' bundles of harvested corn bow down to his, and the sun, moon, and eleven stars bow down to him. The family pecking order is about to change.

"If he had dreamed of the status quo everything would be fine," writes Luke Powery, "but...this change is what disturbs Joseph's big brothers. It is a change they don't believe in."<sup>1</sup>

Walter Brueggemann says this threat is about the power of dreams – the political power of dreams. "A dream is a power which neither tradition nor force can finally resist," he writes. "[This dream] is a public one about power. As we might expect, these dreams are dreamed especially by the powerless one in the family. Dreams permit the imagining of new political possibilities

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<sup>1</sup> Luke Powery, <http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupLectionaryReading.asp?LRID=61>

which immediately threaten the old and call it into question. So the dream threatens the brothers and the empire.” They resist the dream, for they know “the threat of hope...They are the older ones. They have had things as they wanted them. Against their age and power, the boy is helpless.”<sup>2</sup>

It seems to me that across the millennia since it was first told, this story keeps getting retold in new ways, yet it’s the same old story. A dream disturbs and disrupts. A dream jeopardizes the present power structure. What kind of a dream does that in our world?

What kind of a dream leads to yesterday’s violent and racist and death-dealing protests by Neo-Nazis, Klansmen, and white supremacists against the removal of a Confederate statue in Charlottesville, Virginia? What kind of a dream leads to that? What kind of a dream results in the passing of voter suppression laws in 22 states? The dream of racial and economic and social equality for black and brown people.

What kind of a dream brings about angry threats of detention and deportation, even of dreamers brought into our country without documentation when they were children? The dream of opportunity and safe shelter for immigrants of different religions and ethnicities.

What kind of a dream interferes with the economic benefits of class and means? The dream of affordable health care for every person, no matter how little money they have.

What kind of a dream gets Marian Kramer and Bill Wylie-Kellerman thrown into jail? Their dream that families in Detroit should have water for their bathrooms, and for cooking.

What kind of a dream leads to bathroom bills and transgender bans? A dream that refuses to let some people be considered “less than” because they don’t conform to binary categories.

What kind of a dream meddles with individual convenience and monetary profits and positions that deny the science of climate change? The dream of bequeathing a healthy planet to our children.

As Brueggemann says, if you’re well off, you prefer what **is** to what **may come** by way of dreams. The way to deal with a dream is to kill it. Kill the dreamer and thereby the dream.<sup>3</sup>

What kind of a dream threatens the old and calls it into question? A God-sized dream.

Every time I study a Scripture story, I either learn something I didn’t know, or I relearn something that I’ve forgotten. In today’s Joseph story, I relearned that God isn’t even mentioned. There is no overt reference to the divine. We are in chapter 37 of Genesis, and in the whole Joseph cycle of stories, of which today’s is a part, God never gets mentioned until chapter 50.

And yet, although unseen and obscured, the purposes of God are at work. Regardless of what Joseph’s brothers did in response to the dream, regardless of what Joseph himself thought the dream meant for him, God’s power would work in spite of and through their actions.

Now, I’m tempted to give you the end of Joseph’s story, if you don’t already know it. I’m tempted to race through the twists and turns of the next 13 chapters of Genesis all the way to chapter 50 and let you know how it all ends. In fact, one commentator even went so far as to suggest a preacher shouldn’t preach on this text unless they were also preaching on next week’s text.

But I’m going to resist that temptation. For you see, this is how God-sized dreams seem to work, much to my personal dismay. God’s action is often hidden and unseen. Sometimes we get to see and recognize it in hindsight. Other times, we don’t know how it turns out, just as Joseph

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*, 298-307.

<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*.

and his brothers really had no clue as to what that dream of sheaves and stars would ultimately mean. The best thing we can do is to go back time and time again to the witness of Scripture, hold fast to the promise that what God has accomplished before, God will do again.

Where are we in Joseph's story? Are we killers of dreams? Even if not through violence, are we killers of dreams through our apathy and silence?

Or are we dreamers of dreams? And if we're dreamers of dreams, are they big enough? Are they God-sized?

I've mentioned before that I'm spending two years studying with a group of clergy leaders from around the country. When we were together in July, we had a chance to meet with Bishop Eugene Robinson. You may remember him as the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church, and he's recently been named Vice President for the Department of Religion at the Chautauqua Institution.

And in his meeting with us, he asked us each of us to tell him what our biggest dream was for the justice work we were leading in our respective communities. I shared about my involvement with Great Schools for All, and my dream that we would ultimately see state legislative action so that we can have diverse, equitable education for all children across all economic lines, no matter what zip code they live in.

My colleagues Luke and Beth shared their dreams of ending opioid addiction in their communities in the Southern Tier and in Maine/New Hampshire.

Shawn shared his dream for medical cannabis legislation in Pennsylvania so that a child from his community can get the relief from pain that she needs.

Wongee shared her dream of full inclusion in her denomination for LGBT clergy and for an end to forms of discrimination against women of color.

Timoth shared his dream of increased adoptions of special needs children in the foster care system, even as he and his husband have adopted three such boys.

We went around the room, the nine of us sharing our respective visions, which if realized, seemed to be significant – to me, at least. And then do you know what Bishop Robinson said? He said, "If I have one thing to say to every one of you, it's this: Dream bigger!"

What I think he was saying was "Your dreams are too small. Your dreams are human-sized. Instead, dream God-sized dreams." I think his experience taught him the power of a dream that enabled him to walk through crowds of hate-wielding protesters wearing a bullet-proof vest underneath his clergy vestments. I think he knew something of the power of a dream that meant the wider Church would move a step closer to becoming a community of justice and liberation.

Brueggemann says that's the hidden purpose of God that's initiated through Joseph's dream – the creation of a community of liberation. "Neither Joseph nor his family knows what they are dealing with," he writes. "The narrator gives no hint that this is from God... But there is no doubt about his governing intent and capacity. It is God who guards the dream (and the dreamer) until the dream is public. He (Joseph) did not need to see fully to receive the dream."

Scripture is filled with God-sized dreams. John of Patmos had one that he wrote in the last book of the Bible, in Revelation 21: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more... See, I am making all things new."

Will we be killers of dreams? Or dreamers of dreams? And if we are the latter, how big will they be?

Amen.