

So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.

The narrative suggests two reasons as to why Joseph's brothers hate him so much. One is good old-fashioned sibling rivalry: they are jealous of him because they believe that their father, Jacob, loves Joseph more than he loves them. But the narrative gives a second reason that his brothers can't stand Joseph: he is a dreamer and they don't like the dreams he has been having.

Inexplicably, however, the lectionary committee (in their infinite wisdom) cut out the middle part of today's narrative. So if you come to this text without already knowing the story then you may not recall what it was Joseph had been dreaming. Jacob has settled back into the land of Canaan after two decades away from there. Joseph is now seventeen years old, and no one seems to deny that he is a spoiled brat and a tattler. And then in verses 5-11 of the thirty-seventh chapter of Genesis, the verses not included in today's reading, the narrator says:

Once Joseph had a dream which he told to his brothers; and they hated him even more. He said to them, "Hear this dream which I have dreamed: There we were binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly my sheaf stood up and remained upright; then your sheaves gathered around and bowed low to my sheaf." His brothers answered, "Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us? And they hated him even more for his talk about his dreams. He dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: And this time the sun, the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." And when he told it to his father and brothers, his father berated him. "What," he said to him, "is this dream you have dreamed? Are we to come, I and your mother and your brothers and bow low to you to the ground?" So his brothers were wrought up at him and his father kept the matter in mind.

(Jewish Publication Society translation)

Now as we all know, some dreams are best kept to ourselves. Some are just too weird to share with others. But Joseph apparently relishes this dream and can't wait to throw it into the faces of his brothers, apparently as evidence of his superiority over them.

Now to preach this sermon I am going to have to spoil the ending. I need to tell you (if you don't already remember it) that the dreams do come to pass. Joseph is taken out of the pit and sold to the Ishmaelites who take him to Egypt. Long story short, it turns out he is not only a dreamer but a pretty good interpreter of dreams and that gift will get him out of jail after he is imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit. He is then promoted to a cabinet position in the Pharaoh's administration—Secretary of Agriculture. After the economy enters into a serious seven-year recession and famine threatens the land, his father and brothers come down from Canaan to Egypt and because of his political position, Joseph is able to save them from starvation. And guess what? They'll bow down before him!

So one way to preach this story is as a transition from Genesis to Exodus: literally that is how the Joseph story functions in the Bible. We move away from the patriarchs and the land of Canaan, and the children of Israel end up in Egypt. That is where the story will pick up with the call of Moses and the Exodus event. I'm sure there are countless sermons that could be preached on this

transition including sermons about family dynamics and in particular the complexities of large blended families.

But I want to raise a fairly serious theological question with you today. The Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob materials reflect a more primitive social context and worldview. In that world, Abraham seems to hear God's voice as clear as day: "Go to a land I will show you." Or, "take your son, your only son whom you love, and go with him to Mt. Moriah." God speaks, Abraham obeys. That is what makes him the father of faith.

But Joseph moves in a more sophisticated cultural milieu—and I would argue that is a world more like the one we inhabit. By the time we get to Joseph, God's way of communicating is more hidden and less direct; instead of "go" or "take" we get these dreams. It isn't even clear initially that God is behind the dreams that Joseph is having, the root cause of which may well have been (for all we know) too much garlic in the hummus. The point is that the meaning of dreams is never literal and rarely obvious and so dreams always need to be interpreted in order to figure out what is of God. So Walter Brueggemann argues that what this text is really attempting to do is to raise a crucial and far-reaching faith question: what does it look like to trust God in a world where it isn't quite so obvious what God is up to? When it isn't always clear what God is asking of us?

Think about that for a moment. I hear it all the time from people who begin to encounter the Bible in more serious ways, whether from confirmands or students at Assumption College or in Bible studies here in this parish. If, like Abraham, we could really "hear" God and know what God wants of us, then maybe we could muster up the strength and the courage to act. But what if the harder part is figuring out what God is up to—and what God wants of us? The fancy theological word for that is "discernment." But all that word really means is that most of the time we have to try to figure things out when at best we get dreams that need to be interpreted or epiphanies that give us glimpses and half-guesses into what might be God's will for us. Most of us don't get clarity from God—and when we do we are probably wise to be suspicious of our own certitude.

Stay with me on this! Brueggemann argues that this Joseph narrative is about "God's hidden yet decisive power that works in and through, but also against human forms of power." The flip side of that same claim is that Joseph's call is hidden, even from him. To say this in a much simpler way: God is at work in this text, but that doesn't become clear until the end. God is working in and through (and sometimes against) all of these mixed-up characters to bring about a new reality, but that work is mostly hidden from the sight of the characters in this story and even to some extent from us as readers. Now the text doesn't say that God *made* the brothers do this terrible thing of selling their brother off. The text doesn't negate free will. But it does seem to be insisting that God can use even our bad choices to bring about good, that God can use our sibling rivalry and petty jealousies and ineffective parenting and all the rest and still bring about good.

In other words, this narrative is exploring the nature of God's providence. That word is one I think we need to rediscover and reclaim in our theological vocabularies. It comes from two Latin words, *pro-video*, literally "to see before." *God sees.* Not passively but actively; not sitting way up in heaven distant from our daily lives but right here, in the midst of it all. That doesn't mean God is some kind of puppet-master who is pulling all the strings—making us do what we do. But through it all, God sees and God acts. God's hidden yet decisive power keeps working in

families—not just when we get it all right (which we rarely do) but even through the messes we make.

I think most of us probably believe that at least to some extent—or at least we want to believe it—at least when it comes to personal lives. God has a plan for us. It may be harder for us to make the claim that this narrative makes that God’s activity isn’t confined to individuals and families, however, but global events as well. This is headed toward a story of God’s liberating activity of bringing a band of slaves out of an oppressive political situation and into freedom. It’s harder when you read the newspapers or watch the news to believe that God is involved in global events, working in and through (and sometimes against) human forms of power in order to bring about peace on earth and good will to all. But the great challenge of faith in our time is to trust that God is seeing to things we can’t yet see. As in this story, when it is only at the end of this narrative that the characters in this drama get how it all fits together as part of God’s plan—so it often is for us as well.

So Brueggemann makes the claim that a narrative such as this one creates a listening community that is invited “to live between the hint of the dream and the doxology of the disclosure.” I love that! We see the “hint of the dream” in today’s reading—Genesis 37. (Well, actually the lectionary committee didn’t even give us that much but it is in the text!) Next weekend we’ll read from the 45th chapter, what Brueggemann calls the “doxology of disclosure” part of the story. Unlike today, when we don’t hear mention of God, next week it will all be about God: God did this, God was at work in these events, praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise God who has provided for us and who saves us from our foolishness and so on and so forth.

But we live most of our lives between hint and doxology, don’t we? We work on letting go and letting God, some days with little more than a hunch or a dream or a prayer to go on. We live our lives as followers of Jesus Christ asking for discerning hearts so that God can work more in and through (rather than against) us to bring healing to our lives, our community, and our world. Faith is hard when like Joseph we find ourselves in a pit, abandoned by those we thought were supposed to love us. Faith is hard when the doctor says cancer or our spouse says “I don’t love you anymore” or our kid is in real trouble or the world seems bent on destruction.

But God sees further down the road than we can see and that is good news for us. We don’t have to worry about making it all fit together—as long as we are moving toward doxology we can let God worry about the disclosure part. Our work is to move from the hint of the dream to praise. To proclaim the mystery of faith: that Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Which is simply another way of saying what Julian of Norwich said in the midst of the bubonic plague: all shall be well. Or as Francis of Assisi prayed in a time of war and a church in profound need of healing: *Lord, make me a channel of your peace.* Faith in God’s providence doesn’t make us passive: rather, the hints of God’s kingdom that we do get sustain us for the work God gives us to do, as we live toward the doxology of disclosure—toward the plan God has for our lives and for this world.

To be continued...