

What Were You Born To Do?  
Genesis 37  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
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Before Steve Lignos went to Africa, he asked me how long we'd be preaching out of Genesis. When I said I didn't know, he said he wasn't coming back until we were finished with this book. Well, the good news for those of you who are already missing Steve and Stacey is that we have arrived at the last significant shift in the Genesis story. Chapter 37 is the beginning of the end of this book that has kept us company for a year now. The rest of this book is not about Creation or any of the pre-historic events that are described early in the book; it is not, as we have previously seen, a collection of stories about the patriarchs such as Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. No, the rest of this book is about Joseph and what God is doing in and through Joseph's life.

As we look at this story, we've got a problem. Many of us know this story well. We like this story. In fact, we've hummed along with Donny Osmond or Jason Padula or someone else singing *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. Our first challenge this morning is to step back from Andrew Lloyd Weber and look into the text. What is really being said here? How does this story speak truth into our lives, and call us for service in God's world?

If you have your bibles, I want you to open up to Genesis 37. Take a look at that chapter, and you'll see that there's a glaring omission. I looked at this text in my laptop, and did a word search for "God". I found a dialogue box popping up that said, "Word has completed a search of the entire document. The search item was not found." Neither was "Lord" or "worship".

The first thing I want us to notice about this chapter, then, is that God is hiding. Those of us who know the whole story are well aware of the fact that the narrator of the story wants us to know that God is behind these events, and that's good news. But as Joseph's saga begins to unfold, God is nowhere to be seen.

And it's not just us who can't see God right now. Neither Jacob nor any of his children seems to have the slightest idea that God is directing the show at this point. Their family life is a sorry mix of parental miscues and sibling rivalry and downright deception.

You heard what happened. You know that Joseph is, at this point, a seventeen year old kid who is clearly his father's favorite. He's the son of his father's old age, and he just can't do anything wrong. He gets these dreams, and he tells the family about them. We know that the dreams come from God, but that's because we've read the end of Genesis. At this point, all Jacob and his sons know is that Joseph sees some strange things in his sleep.

The second thing that I want us to notice is that these dreams that Joseph have are, to say the least, inconvenient. The dream is a problem to everyone involved with it (which may have something to do with the fact that God is hiding at this point). Joseph, the snotty-nosed kid brother who everyone loves to hate,

just seems to make it worse for himself when he trumpets these dreams all over the family dinner table. In his dream, he saw his brothers and his father bowing to him! That's not going to win many popularity contests at the family reunion.

For the brothers, the dream is a source of conflict and anger. Already this kid is irritating beyond belief, and now he's got delusions of grandeur. Every time they hear about these visions, it just digs in a little more. Who the heck does this kid think he is, anyway? Eventually, their anger is so severe that they get rid of Joseph altogether – at least that's what they think.

For Jacob, the dream was a source of pain – but pain that had some sort of a message ringing around in it. Did you hear verse 11? “So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.” Jacob knew a thing about twisting and plotting and planning; has the last-born son who claimed the first-born blessing, he knew about rivalry and intrigue. Now that drama is playing out in his family and he has the sense that something is up, but he's not sure what.

For Joseph, the dream appears to be a death sentence. Yes, from where we sit, it's easy to say, “Don't you see God at work here?”, but if you took a vote of all the people in Genesis 37 as to the impact that the dreams have on the family, and it would be a landslide: Joseph's dream has really messed this family up. It is an inconvenient, polarizing dream, and we'd probably be better off if this dreamer had just spent a little more time watching TV and a little less time alone. Everyone is affected by this dream, and with the exception of the Midianites, no one experiences anything but grief as a result of this dream.

So far, this is what we've got: God is hiding, and the dream is a problem. The final thing I want to draw from the passage before we turn to some application is that dreaming is what Joseph was born to do. Early on in the chapter, we see all the things that he is trained to do: he is a shepherd, he is a helper, and he is a tattler. His brothers scoff at the notion that he was born to rule or reign over them – and they are correct. Although at the end of the day that's what ends up happening, that's not what Joseph was born for. No, Joseph was born to be a dreamer. Joseph was born to carry this message so that all the events of chapters 37-50 might unfold. Joseph's dream results in the saving of his family and in the survival of the promise that God made to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Our world does not have too much patience with dreamers. It's not very productive or efficient. More than one of my elementary school report cards came home with a note indicating that “David seems to have a problem with daydreaming in class.” I have come to understand that when they wrote that, my teachers did NOT mean that I didn't daydream well enough. My dreaming was a problem for them and a barrier to my education – at least in their eyes.

We talk about dreaming as though it's a complete waste of time: “Hi, Rebecca...Uh, I was wondering if we could go out sometime...” “You and me, Dave? In your dreams!”

Like Joseph's brothers, we deny the power of dreaming. I'm convinced that's why many men my age think that the correct way to behave in this life is to

work hard all day and then come home and have dinner, turn on the TV, have a beer, and fall asleep. We didn't always want to be that. We used to have hopes about changing the world and being connected and making a difference...but that seems so unreal. It couldn't happen. It's not going to happen. So I'll have a beer and watch the game.

Make sure you hear me say that there's nothing wrong with a beer and the game...only if it comes between me and the dream.

Some of us are able to function like Jacob. We have heard the dream, but we are not quite sure what to do with it, so we "keep the matter in mind". We hold onto it, but aren't sure how to act on it.

Today, I'd like to suggest that you – each of you – were born to dream. In fact, I'd say that in some way, you are a part of the dream that Joseph had. God's intentions are that somehow, in you and in your life, other people – all people – will be blessed. That's the dream. That's the promise.

This is Labor Day weekend, and it's as good a time as any to stop and think about the fact that most of us do not get paid to dream. We are paid to work in the office or to teach in the classroom or to sell things at the store. But if we reduce our lives to the things that we are paid to do, we limit our ability to serve God faithfully and we limit our ability to live into the dream.

Some of us are in jobs where it's easier to see God working through us. I've never been a nurse, but I've often seen the face of Christ in the face of the nurse who comes in at just the right time and offers skilled care and encouraging words. I've never worked as a teacher, but I've seen how many of you see your call to teach as one to shape the culture and the future by affecting young lives and by teaching them to dream. But what about the rest of us? How, exactly, are we honoring God in our work? How do we point to God's promises in our lives when most of our workday life is just plain boring and uneventful? How do we point to God's promises as telemarketers or middle management or retail clerks?

Let me suggest three ways that we might break out of a mindset that says that our jobs determine our value and ability to be faithful.

First, can we give courageously? I have a friend who is in a management position with a company that he doesn't like all that well. He does work that he finds disinteresting. What he really wants, he says, is to be a missionary – to work at a hospital somewhere where he's on the front line, saving lives. But he can't get out of his current position. But this is what he can do – and what he did do: he has hired now dozens of men and women and given them a way to feed and clothe and insure their families. He has given dozens of families the chance to return a tithe to God's mission and service. By hiring gifted and qualified people for the right job, he has become a blessing to many – to those he has hired, and to those who are in turn affected by his hiring. More than that, he has learned to give away a significant portion of his income. He makes more than he needs, so he is able to give more than he has to – beyond a ten percent tithe, for instance.

Can you do that? Instead of seeing your job as a butcher, a baker, or a candlestick maker as a let down, as something that keeps you from being involved in shaping the world, can you see it as a means by which you can earn money so that you can give money so that the world can be changed? I know, I'm dreaming...are you?

Another way that you can live into your calling as a dreamer is to buy into that with your so-called leisure time. Can you find an extra hour each week to participate in a small group or a Sunday School class? Now why would you want to do that? Because in that kind of an environment, you'll discover that you can hear new ways that God is calling you to love and care for his world and his people. By being with people who are asking themselves the same questions, you might be able to find yourself more open to God's prompting in your life. That's a pretty good trade-off for an hour a week, I can tell you.\

And lastly, let me encourage you to help the world see the dream by being a person who prays with boldness. I don't know about you, but almost every time I turn to the media, I'm confronted with a hopeless situation. The war in the Middle East is spinning out of control. The environment is wrecked. Did you see the faces of the people on the weather channel last Wednesday when it turned out that Tropical Depression Ernesto was not going to be another Katrina? They were really disappointed that the world wasn't ending, I think. My point is this: that we have been conditioned to think that there are all these terrible problems and one person can't do anything about them. Can you pray with boldness? Will you join me in praying that God would send a brave and courageous leader to the middle east that would invite all the factions to lay down hatred and pick up respect? That God will grant us wisdom to minimize the distress that we are putting the planet through and show us creative ways to bring healing to the environment? Let's not "tune out" in our prayer life – let's stay connected and be willing to dream.

I don't know about you, but there are some times when I read Genesis 37 and I feel like Reuben in verse 29 or Jacob in verse 34 – I want to tear my robes and hide out and say that there is no promise, there is no son, there is no dream. There are times when I am afraid that the dreamers are all dead.

Listen: if you can't, right now, find it within yourself to give courageously, to invest your time, or to pray with boldness, will you at least remember this little teaser from verse 36? "Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt..." The boy is not dead. The dreamer is still alive. The promise has not failed.

It had not failed for Jacob, and it has not failed for you. Live into that boldly where you can; hold onto it tightly where you can't quite act on it yet. And ask God for a dream of your own. It's what you were born to do. Amen.