

Again With The Dreams!
Genesis 40-41
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
October 1, 2006
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Our Scripture reading this morning returns us to the story of Joseph – a story that we began to hear way back on Sept. 3; a story which is, of course, connected to the stories that came before it – the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – and the stories that come after it – the stories that you and I see written in our lives.

Let's begin with a reminder of who Joseph is and where he finds himself. He is the favorite son – one of 12 sons of Jacob. He has been, at least in his brothers' experience, a royal pain in the neck. So much so, in fact, that when he reaches the age of 17, the brothers first contemplate murdering him, but then sell him as a slave. After this, they report to dear old dad that the favored son has died in a tragic accident. Some time after being sold as a slave, Joseph finds himself the victim of a sexual harassment incident that winds up with him serving an unspecified amount of time in jail. When today's reading begins, he is 28 years old, a prisoner in the dungeons of Pharaoh. He is a stranger in a strange land. He has been, it would appear, forgotten by everyone. In fact, at the end of chapter 40, he has been forgotten by his brothers, by the Midianites who brought him to Egypt, by Potiphar, by Potiphar's wife, by the butler whose dream he interpreted, and, it would appear, by God. This is incredibly sad and incredibly unjust. As Joseph himself points out in chapter 40, he's done nothing to deserve any of this. So far as we can tell, he keeps doing the right thing – but he only gets deeper and deeper into trouble. And he sinks deeper and deeper into the pool of forgotten characters in our world.

You might disagree. "How can you say he's forgotten, Dave? You don't know his family! You don't know the situation!" No, but I know people. Look, he's been gone for eleven years. Eleven years ago, in 1995, seven members of this congregation died. I'll give twenty dollars this morning to anyone who can name more than two of them. Most of you didn't know the people who died eleven years ago. This is not to say that they were not beloved; it is not to say that they were not important; it is merely to say that we are people who are trained to look ahead and must, in fact, look ahead as we seek to survive and be faithful. Eleven years is a long time to wait. We forget a lot in eleven years. The main question of chapter 40 hangs on this: did God forget Joseph, too?

As readers of Genesis, we begin to see a glimmer of the answer here in the stories of these dreams. Remember, it was dreams that got Joseph into trouble in the first place – dreams wherein Joseph saw himself as being elevated above his family. Now, after some sordid mess with Judah and Tamar and some mistreatment at the hands of Potiphar's family, Joseph once more encounters dreams.

We've heard about three dreams this morning: Pharaoh's butler, who dreams of serving in Pharaoh's court again; his baker, who dreams that the birds

have taken the bread baked for Pharaoh, and finally, Pharaoh himself, who is troubled by visions of fat and skinny cows and by glimpses of healthy and tattered corn.

More dreams. What is it with God and dreams? How many times in Genesis have we seen someone having a vision, a dream, a sign from the Lord? How many times do you think people had those dreams, visions, or signs and simply ignored them because they just didn't grasp the meaning? I mean, really – dreams are not very efficient. What's with these dreams?

Let me make a couple of observations about dreams.

First, dreams are not ends in themselves. That's one of the differences between the program you watch on television and the vision that comes into your head as you sleep. When you sit down to watch the news, ER, or Saturday Night Live, you think that you are simply investing (or wasting) a few moments of your time and then you will move on with your life. In all probability, the rest of your life will have nothing at all to do with this evening's episode of "Desperate Housewives." But some of you will probably watch it anyway. It's there to entertain or distract you. But a dream is there for something else – it's not a diversion, not an amusement, but something else...that leads to...

Second, dreams – particularly the dreams that we find in Genesis – are one of the ways through which God intrudes in people's lives. Think about that – we've mentioned it before. Here's young Joseph, an irritating, but probably well-meaning kid, and he gets these dreams back in chapter 37 about sheaves of wheat and sun, moon, and stars. He didn't ask for them – but he got them – and they were definitely an intrusion into his life. They changed his life – even when neither he nor anyone else in the family knew what they meant. Professor Walter Brueggemann puts it this way:

[Dreams] are means in the narrative to speak about a new understanding of the future. We are accustomed to think about the future as formed by effort and choice, or at least derived from the present. The narrative attests to another way of the future. It insists that the future lies beyond human competence either to bring or to halt. The future is inscrutably in God's hands and not human hands. God's ways bring underived newness.¹

So dreams are not an end in themselves, but a means – a means by which God speaks into the present about a future that is at this point unimaginable. One other observation we might make about dreams in this text is that they come to both kings and pawns. The servant and the master both have dreams in these chapters – everyone is troubled by an unwelcome visitor, a strange vision. Everyone wonders what these visions mean. If Brueggemann is correct, and dreams bring us a new understanding of the future, we must confess that such understandings come to people at every station of life – from the Pharaoh on down to the men who live in his prisons.

¹ *Interpretation Commentary on Genesis* p. 323.

As we gather on this World Wide Communion Sunday, I'd like to suggest that maybe this communion itself is a dream – or at least a means by which we can participate in the dream. Years ago, Sally Fields starred in a film entitled *Places in the Heart*. She portrayed a farm widow who faced incredible adversity and injustice, but who did not lose sight of her dream of caring for her family. The film ends with a shot of the village church sharing in communion – an image that seems at least hokey, at best pedestrian. But then you notice what's happening in this scene: in a town that has been sharply divided by race, whites and blacks are sitting together. Dead people are shown as partaking in the sacrament with their living relatives and friends. Director Robert Benton uses this film to suggest that the Lord's Supper might just be a dream, or a vision of God's as-yet-unimagined future.

Let me talk about that for a moment. What did we say was true about dreams in our Genesis reading today? That they were 1) not ends, but rather means to an end; 2) a means by which God's purposes were brought to humanity, and 3) given to people of every station in life.

Today, we celebrate communion in the sure and certain hope that this meal is not an end in itself. This little bit of bread and tiny cup of juice is not here to sustain our physical body. We do not have these tangible objects so that we will not suffer hunger or thirst. No, we gather around this table because we believe that in doing so, something else will happen. We come to this table in the belief that sharing in this act of devotion, we can look back at what Christ has done for us and look ahead to a future in which we are more connected to God's purposes for us. This sacrament is not an end in itself – it is a means by which God reaches us.

Why do we approach the table? Because we hold to the hope that when we finish this meal, we will know more of God's purposes for our lives. If we come to worship and in particular come to communion in a posture that says, "Same old, same old...", then we are bound to miss the depth of the experience that God has for us. Just as dreams are given so that God's future is unveiled, so too communion is given to the church so that we might have hope.

Some of you are not where you want to be right now. When we read about Joseph in prison, unjustly accused, you think you know what that's like. You are fighting a bad situation at work. You are in a relationship that seems to be characterized by missed opportunities. You think that it's been a long time since someone has heard the cries of your heart.

Guess what: Communion is not an answer to any of that. Your experience at work or school or in relationships will not be objectively changed by the morsel of bread and little bit of juice. But, like a dream, it may be that God will use this sacrament to communicate to you the sense that there is an alternative future ahead – one which will not come of our own devising, but in God's time.

The other thing that we said about dreams that applies to communion is that it comes to people in every time and place. As we celebrate world wide communion today, we do so with senators and congressmen and judges and prisoners and people of every conceivable race, occupation, and station in life.

Sure, we're looking at the person sitting next to us, and maybe we're missing the one who we wish was here, but the truth is that we are sharing in the sacrament with the whole people of God.

Do you remember a few moments ago when I suggested that one of the key questions in this passage from Genesis was whether or not God had forgotten Joseph? Perhaps as we come to the table, we need to ask ourselves who it is that is forgotten today. Do you remember your brother or sister with whom you have had a terrible disagreement? Do you remember those who have been sold into slavery? Do you remember those who are in positions of leadership and responsibility? All of those people are present at this table. Do we remember?

In the readings we've had for this morning, we've heard Joseph talking a pretty good game about relying on God. You get the sense that, at least in Joseph's mind, God has not forgotten him. But at the end of the day, how is Joseph freed? When the butler remembers him. It is through the word of a neighbor, a fellow human being, that Joseph is freed to act into the future that God has revealed in his dreams.

Today, let me invite you to see communion as a dream that challenges you to remember and honor the hopes of peace, freedom, forgiveness, or whatever other dream God has put in your heart. As you take the bread, hold onto that vision of grace and wholeness that is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is for you. But don't stop there. Remember that you are also called, like the butler, to speak a word on behalf of your neighbor. You are called to remind those whom God loves that they are not forgotten. You are called to be a liberator.

May God use this meal, this dream, this hope to challenge you and to care for your brother or sister. Amen.