

10th Sunday after Pentecost
August 13, 2017
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28
The Rev. Carenda Baker

It had started out as a day much like any other day. His ten half brothers had gone out to pasture their father Jacob's flocks. Seventeen year old Joseph stayed behind as usual to look after his younger brother Benjamin and their father.

Things had been growing more and more tense in the family, especially between him and his older half-brothers. It was not easy, living in his family. They were not well-blended in any way. Three stepmothers, a half sister and ten half-brothers, none of whom were very fond of him. His brothers barely tolerated him. Most days they ignored him and if they did pay him any attention, it was with contempt that their eyes met his. He'd heard the stories about his father's colorful past, the rivalry and tension between Jacob and his brother Esau. He'd heard about the long-held enmity after Jacob tricked Esau and their father out of the birthright, which should have gone to Esau. Joseph knew Jacob had run away from home to escape Esau's wrath. Esau had vowed to kill him. Jacob had told him stories about sleeping outside at night while he was on the run. How he had dreamed of a stairway to heaven with angels going up and down. Joseph knew his father had experienced God as very real and present right there in that place where he had slept. Joseph knew his father's limp came from an injury he had suffered wrestling in the night with - someone sent by God. Joseph knew how much Jacob had loved Rachel, and that he worked fourteen years for Laban so that he could finally marry her.

Joseph knew he had a favored place in his father's heart, if for no other reason than the fact that his mother Rachel had been Jacob's one true love. After she died, Jacob had given him a beautiful full length tunic with long sleeves, a lovely tailored garment. Joseph didn't exactly strut around and show off the coat, but it was a wonderful surprise and he loved his father for giving it to him. His brothers eventually found out about the coat. This made them even more jealous of him. Maybe they wanted more of their father's attention themselves. And then he started having unusual dreams. Weird dreams like he'd never had before. Sheaves of wheat in the field, standing up on their own and bowing down to his sheaf. Sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him. He tried to put them out of his mind, but they kept playing over and over in his head. He wondered what they could mean. Surely it wouldn't do any harm to at least tell his father and brothers about the dreams. Maybe someone could interpret them. Things seemed to go further and faster downhill after he told them about the dreams. The atmosphere at home became icier, and harder to live with.

Jacob sent him out that day to see how his brothers were faring with the flock. He told Joseph to report back to him after checking on his brothers. When he finally found them, they were tightly huddled together, as if they had been discussing something important. Did he really not know? They hated Joseph and “could not speak peaceably to him”. Their jealousy had been fueled. The anger had taken hold. They had embraced, coddled and rehearsed it, and all the while it quietly took over their lives. They felt entitled to hate, justified to desire Joseph’s ruin, and energized to seek his downfall. Quietly, they had declared war on Joseph. It would be him or them.

As he approached his brothers, and before he knew what was happening, they grabbed him, some holding him while the others stripped off his robe. He was strong, and though he fought and resisted with every fiber of his being, he never had a chance, one against ten. They grabbed him roughly by the arms and held him tightly, dog-trotting him over to a deep cistern. Quickly, even though he kicked and fought as hard as he could, with little effort they picked him up and threw him into the cistern. It was dark and damp at the bottom. He cried out, pleading for them to pull him out, but they just laughed at him. “Dream your dreams now, little brother,” they taunted. He kept calling out to them, but after awhile he couldn’t hear their voices anymore. They had just left him there to die. But not long after, he heard different voices coming closer and closer, voices he did not recognize. Someone threw a rope into the cistern. He looked up and saw a stranger peering down at him, motioning him to tie the rope around his waist. He expected to see his brothers standing round as he was pulled up out of the pit, but he was surrounded by strangers. They quickly and roughly took hold of him, bound his hands in front of him, and used the rope to lead him behind their caravan of camels. He was marched away from his home and all that he loved. His life was no longer his own. He had become a slave, the property of someone else.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we knew every family’s story would conclude with a happy ending? Families face stressors from within and from without. Discord and dysfunction left to fester can turn into animosity, and even violence, abuse and oppression.

When a family is torn apart like Jacob’s was, the path that lies before the family is to walk the way of grief. A family can live in denial for a while, but at some point, the anger, the “what ifs” and “if only’s”, come out. Eventually these give way. Physically and emotionally worn out and worn down, the waves of sadness wash over us, battering us with the reality of loss and life forever changed. Every person in this family of Jacob’s was grieving in one way or another. You can be sure the whole spectrum of human feelings was present at some point: anger, fear, regret, guilt. Feeling lost. Lonely. Helpless. Hopeless. Disoriented. Wrestling with what has happened.

Wrestling with what had been. Wrestling with what had been hoped for, and now would never be. Jacob knew all about wrestling with himself and with God. Holding Joseph's bloodied coat in his hands, he is utterly inconsolable.

Where is God for you when everything falls apart? When everything goes wrong? When like Jacob our hearts are broken, and dreams die? When like Joseph, we find ourselves bruised, battered, and betrayed by those we expected would be for us, not against us? When like those brothers, we fear being haunted for the rest of our lives by things done and left undone? When we cannot carry on by ourselves, what do we do? Where is there to turn?

Jacob will return to wrestling with the God who has been his companion all along, since before he was even born. He turns back to the God of his father Isaac and his mother Rebekah. The God of his grandparents Abraham and Sarah. God made a promise to bless them so that they would be a blessing to others. When life is shattered, and our dreams lie in a heap out our feet, and God's promise seems to be broken, we go back in memory to let the faith and hope of our forebears carry us. We let the community of the faithful who surround us right now carry us. We cannot carry on by ourselves. We cry, we lament, we give voice to that which our hearts cannot hold nor understand. We hold on to the God of promise, who all along has been holding on to us.

And what about Joseph? Where does he turn now? He too, returns to those rich stories his father has told him: about Jacob fighting with his brother Esau since forever, outsmarting and tricking Esau and his father Isaac to get the blessing intended for the firstborn, running in fear for his life from Esau's murderous rage. Joseph can picture a much younger Jacob wrestling in the night, wrestling with the God who promised to bless him. There in that wrestling Jacob is wounded and given a new name – Israel. And then comes the joy of unexpected reconciliation with Esau – and their becoming brothers once again.

Joseph, remember, still has those dreams in his heart and mind. They were not merely his imagining. He has no idea what they could mean. But he knows that dreams were believed to carry a message from God. Young as he was, Joseph has to live in the present, face toward the future, and somehow let God take care of the past and all that has happened to him..

And what about those dreams? Jacob believes the dream has died. The brothers think they have finally gotten rid of the dreamer. Those dreams of Joseph were sparked by the very mind of God. Joseph's dreams will call him to grow bigger than he was at that moment. His brothers didn't dream, even though they had the same amazing promises

of God. They too had heard their father speak of ladders revealing heaven and earth and wrestling angels in the dark night of the soul. But they remained in ignorance, blind to the dream of God. Instead, they fed on their bitterness and disappointment with their father and the lives they had been given. And all the while, bitterness was feeding on their hearts and souls, draining the goodness and very life from them.

Do you think it could be that the fear that surrounds us today, the reactions to current social and political realities in the U.S. and around the world is a symptom that we are afraid to dream? There's a world full of people like those ten half-brothers, skeptical, non-dreamers. There are far fewer dreamers among us like Joseph. Even the church has forgotten how to dream. There is good reason that presiding Bishop Michael Curry repeatedly invites us to take up God's dream of the world becoming what God intends for it, rather than settling for the nightmare that it seems to be.

What about you and me? Are we dreamers? Are we, the congregation of Trinity Church more dreamers or skeptics or perhaps even fatalists? Do we believe that what we can see right now in front of us is all there is? Or are we willing to dream with God, and trust God with our dreams? Are we paying attention to the dream God has for us and a destiny to fulfill it? Dreams, you know, come from God's heart.

With God, there is always more. This portion of the Hebrew Scriptures, this story of Jacob and his children, of Joseph and his dreams is not over. Brokenness and death and slavery are not all there is. The suffering is real. It will change them all. But it is not the end of the story. It is part of the story, a human and necessary part of the story. But there is much more of the story to be told. We will take up the story again next Sunday and in the coming weeks. You can read it for yourself in Genesis chapters 38-50.

In the meantime, remember that God's dream for all creation is life, love, and liberation. God's dream cannot be stopped. It will lead us through death to life. From what is false and temporary, to what is true and everlasting. This is God's mysterious way – life, death, new life. God is not yet finished with us. Let us pray for hearts big enough, courageous enough to trust God for the future God has promised. With conviction we say these words: for God's alone is the kingdom, the power, and the glory. Now and forever. *Amen.*