

Genesis 45:3-11, 15 2.20.25 Bill Uetricht 7 Epiphany

I closed my eyes, drew back the curtain  
To see for certain what I thought I knew  
Far, far away, someone was weeping  
But the world was sleeping; Any dream will do

Some of you will recognize that as an opening song of one of Andrew Lloyd Webber's most successful plays, "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," a play that we actually performed here on a couple of occasions. This work retells the Genesis story of Joseph, with obvious Broadway and Hollywood flourishes added onto it. It is a play ripe for American audiences since it is somewhat optimistic in its worldview. In many ways, everything does come out in the wash in the story. And Americans love the "and-they-lived-happily-ever-after" theme.

The song I sang speaks of the *dream*. Honestly, I have never understood why "any dream will do," but dream *is* essential to the Joseph narrative. Joseph was known for having dreams and being able to interpret them. That's how he got famous with the Egyptians, being put to work by them because of that skill. A particular dream that Joseph had was one in which he, the brother who was thrown into a pit by his other brothers and eventually taken into slavery, became lord over those brothers. In the dream, the one who was oppressed by his brothers gets to rule over them.

In today's first reading from Genesis we get to see that dream fulfilled. Joseph has become a big wig in the Egyptian government, probably serving as the Secretary of Agriculture. His brothers are facing famine, and they have come to Egypt, the fertile land of the Nile, to find food. Joseph's in charge of the food. He has power over his brothers. His dream has indeed come to fruition. *He* gets to decide if his brothers and their families will eat.

And what's more, Joseph gets to decide how he will respond to these brothers who were responsible for a horrible crime perpetrated against him. Now, most of us who know this story are warmed by what we experience in Joseph's response. Many of us see Joseph as this remarkably forgiving guy who simply wants bygones to be bygones. But frankly, the story is much more complicated. Joseph is responsible for a lot of shenanigans, revenge-like actions, before he reaches the conclusion he does in today's text. Joseph was no innocent actor. Frankly, as a kid, he was a spoiled-rotten brat, favored by his dad. And before he encounters his brothers today with what appears to be forgiveness, he messes around with them and ultimately his dad by jailing one of the brothers, threatening to imprison the youngest brother, Benjamin, planting money on one of the brothers so that it looks like the brothers didn't really pay for the food that they are getting, and putting a famous, expensive magical cup into the sack of the brother Benjamin to make it appear that Benjamin is nothing but a thief.

The road to not seeking revenge was long and circuitous. Joseph wasn't just a nice guy who had a soft heart. He was a schemer at times, which, for me, is some good news, because the movement away from the need to seek revenge doesn't always come quickly. Life and people can be tough. What they have done to us can be really awful. Revenge can indeed feel very sweet. Sometimes it is even a part of the dream.

Yet what we experience in the Joseph story is someone who knows a dream bigger than the ones we dream, or he dreamed. Listen to what Joseph says today: "Now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for *God* sent me before you to preserve life. It was not you who sent me here, but God."

Now, I have to admit that I struggle with these words from Joseph. They can be used for such terrible purposes, justifying all kinds of evil. They can be means by which we belittle the pain people are going through. You know. “God is making you a better person through the pain you are enduring. God has a plan for you in the midst of all of this.” Yuck! Knock that stuff off! What Joseph’s brothers did to him was awful. There is no excuse for it. There is no excuse for the bad husband you had who abused you in unimaginable ways. There is no excuse for your mom or your dad who abandoned you when you were young. All of those things are awful and should be named as such.

But there is another story, so says the Joseph narrative, another narrative that we often don’t understand until well after the facts, a narrative we often can’t name until we’re well past the pain that was inflicted on us. That story, that dream is known as God. God sent me before you. God is able to work in the midst of human shenanigans and evil to bring forth life-giving purposes.

I hear this message and am reminded of Richard Rohr’s notion that “everything belongs.” Everything. Including the pain and the struggle. Including the hurt. It is what brought you here. And it is, in part, what has made you who you are, which again, is not to justify what happened to you. But it is to say that there is something larger at work among you in the midst of the pain that will bring life out of death.

That’s what Joseph seemed to trust. And ya, I get it. Sometimes it is easier to trust that when you are the Secretary of Agriculture, when you have made it big. But this claim is one of the fundamental messages of the Christian faith. God raised Jesus from the dead. God took what was awful and miserable and made something new. God raised one who was rejected by human beings. God would not

stop at what people do to love. God raised love again. God's dream is always life.

It was this truth that stopped the schemer from more attempts at revenge. It was this dream that caused him to conclude that he would no longer plot to get back at his brothers but to seek ways to care for them and their families. It was this truth that caused Joseph to kiss his brothers and weep upon them.

Our dreams are often pretty small. They often are about evening the score, making sure people get theirs. Retribution seems to be at the center of our dreams. Just look at the political landscape these days. Retribution is at the forefront. And often that is because too many of us don't have an imagination big enough, dreams large enough to envisage another reality. So, we spend much of our lives seeking revenge because we think revenge is sweet. It may be sweet, but it's not good for us. Listen to John Holbert: "Revenge is a dish best served cold, but whether hot or cold, revenge muddies all waters, clouds hopes, and destroys the possibility of community."

Our limited dreams, our puniness, our inability to see something bigger and life-giving at work in the midst of the struggles, leaves us with a shallow world, hopelessness, and divided peoples. A good future cannot be built on anger, small-mindedness, and the constant desire for retribution.

I suspect that Jesus knew that truth. Otherwise, he could not have been the kind of dreamer that he was. Did you hear him today: "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Speak well of those who curse you. Resist people not by slugging them back, but by not playing their games. Give to those who beg from you. Don't ask for the things that people steal from you. Do to others not as

they do to you, but as you wish they would do to you. Don't judge. Forgive others.

Wow! What a dream! Joseph's dreams came true. This dream will never come true, right? Well, only if you live with stunted dreams. Only if you don't know a story larger than the ones humans can imagine. Only if you get stuck in the puny story of retribution and reciprocity. Jesus knew the bigger story. He describes that story today when he says that God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked, as well as the righteous, and when he proclaims that God is merciful. Jesus knew the dream of God, which is a dream rooted in compassion, love and mercy. It is this dream that will lead to human flourishing, to reconciled families, churches, and nations. It is this dream that will create hopeful futures.

So why would you want to get stuck in dreams of evening the score? Why would you want to be controlled by the desire for revenge? Even the scheming Joseph eventually figured out how shallow that kind of dream is.