

DREAM POWER

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Text: Genesis 37:1-28

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 37:1-28

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?" So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" 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." But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him" —that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God!

Dreams are very powerful things. Dreams are often vague and elusive. They are not things that can be measured and studied in a laboratory, and yet they can affect the world we live in. Dreams can change a person's life, and in turn that person can change the lives of those around them. Families, communities, even nations can be changed by a dream. Yet, often dreams can take us to places that we do not want to go. Steve Bartman grew up in Chicago and so he is a lifelong Cubs fan. As a kid, he probably dreamed of playing for the Cubs. That did not work out, but he loved the Cubs, loved Wrigley Field, went to games as often as he could. One night his love for the Cubs dramatically changed his life forever. It was nearly 14 years ago on October 13, 2004. Bartman was at the sixth game of the National League championship series between the Florida Marlins and the Chicago Cubs. Chicago had already won three games in the series. One more win and they would be going to the World Series. It was the eighth inning, and the Cubs were ahead 3 to 0. Luis Castillo was up to bat, one out with a runner on second. He hit a pop foul ball down the third base line. Outfielder Moises Alou ran for it. If he caught it Castillo would be out and the Cubs would be just 4 outs from winning the game and becoming the National League champions. But as the ball came close to the stands, Steve Bartman reached out and deflected it so that Alou was unable to make the catch. So Castillo was not out. He drew a walk, and the Marlins went on to score 8 runs, winning the game 8 to 3.

As the Marlin's score increased, the animosity in the stands toward Steve Bartman began to grow so that when the game was over he needed a police escort to get out of the stadium. The next night the Marlins won 5 to 3 and went on to win the World Series against the Yankees. For the next few months, life was horrendous for Bartman. He issued an apology saying that all he was doing was watching the ball unaware that the Cubs' outfielder was nearby. After making that statement, he did everything he could to maintain a low profile. He declined interviews, any public appearances and refused any offers for commercials or endorsements. The Cubs issued statements acknowledging that they did not blame him in any way. After all, they did allow 8 runs after Castillo got on base. Even so Bartman was hounded by Cub fans. He received a barrage of abuse and death threats. At one point they needed six police cars on his street to protect him and his family. Over the years he has continued to decline any sort of publicity or to make any money off of the incident. Any gifts that were sent to him, he donated to the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. He has never been back to Wrigley Field since that fateful day. His dream turned into a nightmare.

This week our scripture lesson is about a dreamer whose life became a nightmare. He was the son of Jacob who I preached about last week. You might remember from Sunday School the bitter rivalry between Jacob and his brother Esau. Jacob was afraid that Esau was going to kill him and not without reason, but that is another story. It always baffles me a bit when I hear about people who are screaming that the church must maintain what they call "Biblical family values." When I look at the stories of various families in the Bible, they are nothing anyone should try to imitate. Most of the families in the Bible are really messed up. But if you think the nastiness between Jacob and Esau was bad, it was nothing compared with the sons of Jacob. Of course, Jacob himself was a great deal to blame for the beginning of all this bitterness and rancor. Jacob had twelve sons, but there were four different mothers involved. Again, that is a whole other disgusting story found back in chapters 29 and 30 of Genesis that I won't go into right now. Anyway, of these four women we are told there was only one that Jacob really loved and that was Rachel. So the two sons of Rachel were his favorite and the oldest was our dreamer, Joseph.

Now you don't have to read very far into our text for this morning before you realize that this was going to be a problem, a big problem. First off, Joseph was a tattletale. Didn't you just hate it when you were a kid and someone said, "I'm gonna tell on you!"? You were having fun. Everything was cool. Yes, you were probably glad that no grownups were around, but what they didn't know didn't hurt them. Then your little brother pipes up, "I'm telling," and thoughts of extreme violence went through your mind. Our text says, "Joseph brought a bad report" of his brothers to his father, so naturally they were furious with him.

As if that were not enough, Jacob spoiled Joseph. Our text says he gave him “a robe with long sleeves.” The old King James Version says, “a coat of many colors.” The Hebrew is strange here, and we really don’t know what it was, but suffice to say, it was nice and expensive and none of his brothers got one. How could they not be jealous?

Finally, Joseph was a know-it-all, arrogant, big mouth. He kept having these dreams, where he was on top and the rest of the family had to grovel before him. What’s more, he kept telling everyone about it. If he had kept it to himself, that would have been one thing, but every morning as they were eating their cornflakes at breakfast, Joseph is going on and on about this fantastic dream he had and how everyone thought he was the greatest. So this anger and jealousy of his brothers turned into deep seated hatred. It was just not a figure of speech. They literally wanted to kill him.

Jacob seems to be completely oblivious to what was going on. The family made its living predominately by raising livestock, mostly sheep. A bunch of places are mentioned in the text, but essentially the sons have taken the flocks to a location that is around 60 miles away from Jacob, or about 3 days walking. Jacob sends Joseph off to check up on his brothers, which was not a good move at all. The brothers see this as an opportunity to take care of Joseph once and for all. “Here comes the Dreamer. Come, let us kill him...” they say, “Then we shall see what will become of his dreams.”

(Incidentally, this verse “Let us kill him and then we shall see what will become of his dreams” is on a plaque, at what was the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, TN. It is the spot where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968. As followers of Jesus Christ we must keep the dream of Dr. King alive. We must resist the hatred of white nationalism that is on the rise in this country as seen by what happened in Charlottesville VA this weekend.)

But back to Joseph; as you know, his brothers do not kill him, however what they did was probably much worse. A caravan was passing by and so they sold him as a slave. Joseph is stripped of more than his fancy coat. He is reduced to sub-human status. He becomes a piece of property. It is hard to imagine a more hopeless situation.

I wish we had the time to read all of what happened to Joseph and I would encourage you to do just that when you get a chance. Joseph is taken to Egypt, and Potiphar, a military officer, buys him for his household. We now see a different side of Joseph. He is no longer a know-it-all, spoiled brat, but an honest, hardworking servant, whose efforts are noticed and appreciated by his master. At this point, it would appear that Joseph was going to be all right. Unfortunately, someone else noticed Joseph, namely Mrs. Potiphar. She attempts to seduce him and when he refuses she claims that he was the one who tried to molest her. So Joseph is thrown in prison.

If being a slave was bad, a prisoner in ancient Egypt was far worse. There were no trials or due process or civil rights. You sat in prison until someone with some authority decided what was to be done with you. If they did not execute you in some very unpleasant way, most of the time you were just forgotten until you died of malnutrition or some awful disease. It was a long way from being daddy’s pampered favorite back in Canaan. Joseph must have wondered if the nightmare was ever going to end.

But the story does not end there, as you probably remember from Sunday School. I will get back to Joseph in a moment. I want to go back to the story I started with about Steve Bartman, because there is more to this as well. Two weeks ago, Tom Ricketts, the owner and president of the Chicago Cubs awarded Steve Bartman his very own 2016 World Series Championship ring, exactly like all the team members received with 108 diamonds. When he presented the ring, Ricketts said, "We hope this provides closer on an unfortunate chapter of the story that has perpetuated throughout our quest to win a long awaited World Series... We felt it was important Steve knows he has been and continues to be fully embraced by this organization." In his own statement Bartman said, "Although I do not consider myself worthy of such an honor, I am deeply moved and sincerely grateful ... I humbly receive the ring not only as a symbol of one of the most historic achievements in sports, but as an important reminder for how we should treat each other in today's society."

It is a story of dream power. Steve Bartman has been a Cub fan ever since he was a little kid. Never in his wildest dreams did he ever imagine there would be a world series ring with his name on it. Yet, it would not have happened if he had not reached for that fly ball. It would not have happened if it were not for the nightmare that came into his life.

But back to the story of Joseph and his dream power; some of his fellow prisoners are officials from the court of Pharaoh. They have troubling dreams that Joseph is able to accurately interpret. One of these officials is restored to his old position, and so a few years later when it is Pharaoh who has a disturbing dream the official tells Pharaoh about Joseph. Once again fortunes change dramatically. He is able to interpret Pharaoh's dream as a prophecy of coming years of famine. Pharaoh is so impressed that he makes Joseph his prime minister, ruling over all of Egypt. When the famine strikes it is so widespread that his family in Canaan are forced to come to Egypt to buy food. It is then that the dreams Joseph had when he was a boy do indeed come true, for his brothers do not recognize him and they bow before him. He is indeed on top, and his family is groveling before him. He could have wreaked any kind of revenge he wanted, but instead he forgives them and invites them to come and live in Egypt.

It is an amazing story with some devastating losses and setbacks followed by amazing successes that take him to the very top. I have heard it many times, and probably you have too. But this time around, as I read the whole section and not just our text for this morning, I noticed a phrase that kept coming up again and again. Each step along the way, even in the most terrible circumstances, it says "the Lord was with Joseph." The Lord was with Joseph when he was sold as a slave. The Lord was with him in Potiphar's house. The Lord was with him in prison. The Lord was with him when he was brought before Pharaoh. In the middle of the whole nightmare God was with Joseph. God continued to bless Joseph, and fulfilled his dreams beyond anything he could possibly imagine.

One of the most difficult questions that we all have wondered about is: why does life have to be so hard? Why do we have to go through those nightmare times of loss and sorrow and overwhelming frustration? Some will say it is because we are being punished for something we have done. Some will say God deliberately makes us suffer to teach us some sort of lesson and make us stronger. But the story of Joseph gives us another way of thinking about the hardships of life.

You see, God was not the one who made Joseph's life so miserable, but God was with him even when things could not get much worse. That is what made all the difference. Through God's dream power, Joseph was able to realize there was another level, another reality to what was going on in his life no matter how desperate the situation. Knowing God was with him, Joseph was able to persevere through the nightmare until the dawn. The results were incredible. Even in Joseph's wildest dreams he could not imagine that one day he would be the ruler of the Egyptian empire, and be in a key position to save his family. And it would not have happened if it were not for the nightmare he had to go through.

God loves us and cares for us and so it is not God who brings hurt and sorrow into our lives. Rather God is with us even in the most painful circumstances and is able to transform that pain into something we can never imagine. If we need any further proof, all we have to do is look to the cross. The greatest nightmare became the greatest dream giving us hope today.

Why is life so hard sometimes? Why are there such terrible nightmare events like what happened in Charlottesville, yesterday? Much smarter minds than mine have pondered question like these. I don't know why there are times when everything just seems to fall apart, but here is what I do know. No matter what we might face, no matter how bad it gets, God is always with us. God does not cause the suffering but God is with us when we suffer. God is with those people in Charlottesville who are hurting this morning. God is with you no matter what you are facing. God can take us through the most horrendous situations and eventually bring us to a place that is beyond our wildest dreams; a place that we could not even begin to imagine. That is the story of God's love, God's forgiveness, God's grace. The dreams God gives us are dreams of hope and power and life and the nightmares of this world fade away to nothing. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.