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Sunday, August 13, 2023

Genesis 37:1-28

Joseph: Dreams and Family Strife

Rocky River Presbyterian Church

Holy Moly: Dreams and Family Strife

Genesis 37:1-28

"I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.' I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. I have a dream today."

Martin Luther King Jr. was a man who had a powerful dream – a dream that went on to inspire a generation; a dream that still defines the moral dilemma in so many ways today. As a faithful Christian and Pastor, Martin Luther King Jr. understood the power of dreams and the ways God moves in and through them. I would bet, as he stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on that hot day in August of 1963, that he also understood how dreams can inspire people while at the same time be the cause of so much fear and discord.

This was not a talent that our dear Joseph seemed to have. He did not seem to have a clue how other people felt. You see, Joseph was the favored son, of the favored wife of Jacob. He was the 2nd youngest, but the story tells us he was the apple of his father's eye. This boy was showered with affection and gifts while his older brothers of another mother were expected to do all the work. When he was finally sent out to work with his brothers, the first thing he does is get them in trouble with dear-old-dad. He brings back a bad report about them to their father. And then, to make his relationship with his brothers worse, he starts having these dreams; these dreams that he apparently cannot keep to himself.

First, he dreams that he and his brothers were in the fields harvesting wheat when his sheaf rose higher than the rest and their sheaves bowed down to his. Of course his brothers are going to hate him when he shares this dream with them. I find myself getting annoyed with Joseph and I'm not his brother. But Joseph does not stop dreaming. And either unaware of the animosity, or in spite of it, Joseph shares the second dream. In this one the sun, the moon and the eleven stars all bow down to him. At this point, even his greatest admirer, his father, rebukes him.

I understand that Joseph is a celebrated ancestor of our faith, but we have to admit, he was obnoxious. It was easy for his brothers to hate him. It was easy for his brothers to hate his dreams.

The brothers perceived that these dreams threatened the natural order of things. They threatened the way things had always been, the way things were supposed to be. The brothers assumed the dreams were about Joseph's ambition and the preferential treatment he enjoyed. Can you blame them? This is how Jacob dealt with Joseph all the time. They had no other frame of reference. Joseph's brothers want to kill the dream, to stop it from becoming a reality. While we might not be driven to kill someone because of a dream, this kind of angst is not beyond our experience – Martin Luther King Jr. is proof of that.

It's a dangerous thing to dream. It's a dangerous thing to share a dream or vision for the future that challenges the way things are now. These kinds of dreams can make people uncomfortable, they can make people drive their feet into the ground and do unreasonable things. In Joseph's time his brothers were unreasonable. They contemplated killing him, but ended up throwing him into a pit and selling him into slavery, thinking this would be enough to put an end to the dream. James Earl Ray took the shot that he believed would put an end to Martin Luther King Junior's dream.

And if those dreams had only been about those two men the story, and this sermon, might have ended here. But the good news of the Gospel is that God's dreams for humanity are bigger than the wrong actions of misguided individuals. God does not appear in Joseph's dreams yet we know God's hand was directing the action. Joseph's dreams were God's dreams and God's dreams do not die in some pit, or wither on the slave train to Egypt. Martin's dreams were God's dreams and God's dreams don't end because of a rifle.

Instead, as God has always done, God uses the perfect messes we create to work out God's dreams and visions for the world. In the remaining chapters of Genesis we see how the actions of Joseph's brothers were redeemed by God to work out God's plan of salvation. And in the years since Martin's death we have seen how God has used his life to inspire change in our world.

God has not stopped dreaming - we have not stopped dreaming. As we live out our faith here in Rocky River, it is time for us to once again listen for God's dreams for us... it is time for us to trust each other enough to share our dreams, to listen to one another's dreams as we seek together to discern God's dream for us today. As you prepare for the next phase of transitional ministry, as you prepare for the future to which God is calling this community, dare to dream. Dare to spend time in prayer with God, listening for where God is calling you. Dare to spend time in Bible study together, wrestling with God's stories and their importance in your life today. Dare to spend joyful time in community remembering the power that comes from being surrounded by a family of faith. Dare to make space for new people and new ideas to enter this community knowing that God's house is big enough for all. Dare to dream and have the courage to follow where those dreams might take you.

Amen.