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Our First Families of Faith Stories from the Book of Genesis IX. The Dreamer

Selections from Genesis Chapter 37 2 This is the history of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a lad with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought an ill report of them to their father. 3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a coat of many colors. 4 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. 5 Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they only hated him the more. 6 He said to them, "Hear this dream which I have dreamed: 7 behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf arose and stood upright; and behold, your sheaves gathered round it, and bowed down to my sheaf." 8 His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him yet more for his dreams and for his words. 12 Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. 13 And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." And he said to him, "Here I am." 14 So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers, and with the flock; and bring me word again." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. 18 They saw him afar off, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. 19 They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. 20 Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild beast has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." 21 But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." 22 And Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; cast him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand upon him" -- that he might rescue him out of their hand, to restore him to his father. 23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; 24 and they took him and cast him into a pit. The pit was empty, there was no water in it. 25 Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. 26 Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood? 27 Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers heeded him. 28 Then Midianite traders passed by; and they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver; and they took Joseph to Egypt. 31 Then [the brothers] took Joseph's robe, and killed a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood; 32 and they sent the long robe with sleeves and brought it to their father, and said, "This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not." 33 And he recognized it, and said, "It is my son's robe; a wild beast has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." 34 Then Jacob rent his garments, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. 35 All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning."

Let me tell you a story that once happened in the

Blaisdell family. It's **startling** when your college-age child calls you one day to give you a heads up that she might be arrested the following week for civil disobedience. That wakes you up, even if you haven't had your morning coffee! "*What, what?!?*" you sputter. "*Well, you see there is this very large employer here – one of those big mega-resorts – which has enormous influence over the entire county's economy and enormous influence over wage scales and people's lives.*"

"Okay...." you say. "Go on."

"*Well, that resort refuses to pay its housekeepers and gardeners – you know, the folks that keep the place running, that clean the toilets and take out the trash – a wage that you can actually live on, and it refuses to give them any sort of health insurance except for the option*

of a payroll deduction from their already-food-stamp level wages, even though last year the resort made record-breaking profits. I think that's just wrong and some of us are planning to picket and there's a chance we might get arrested."

And your stomach just clenches. You imagine all the bad things that could happen. You may even wonder, to your shame, what the neighbors will think. And so, without much thinking, you stupidly ask your daughter: *"Why in the world are you going to do **that**?"* The answer you get is this: *"Well, these folks are some of the 'least of these' and I really think those of us who are so much more privileged and blessed are called to be our brothers' and sisters' keepers."*

"Where did you get such a silly notion?"

"From Church. From the Bible. From Jesus."

Oh.

And you almost think to yourself, *“Hey wait, that’s just ‘church stuff’; I didn’t mean for you to take all that justice and mercy stuff seriously!”* But you have the good graces, or the shame, not to say that. But then you have another thought, an even worse one: *“Oh child, you’re such an idealist. I know that you think that this is going to make a difference, but it probably won’t. I know you think that efforts like this will hasten folks receiving the fairness that is due to them under the law and the equity that God expects we offer one another as human beings, but it’s so impractical. You’re really just being a dreamer here.”* But, fortunately, you don’t say it. Maybe God stilled your mouth – thank goodness. And maybe it was God who called to your mind at that very moment that line from today’s scripture, uttered by Joseph’s

brothers as he made his way towards where they were keeping their father's flocks: "*Here comes the dreamer. Come, let us kill him.*" "Here comes the dreamer. Come, let us kill him."

Now, let's admit something. Dreamers can sometimes make us uncomfortable. We can sometimes feel judged as wanting by their dreams and by their actions.

Sometimes they can come off as rather cocky, rather know-it-all even. Sometimes they can act in ways that make us just want, as my mother used to put it, "to shake the fool out of them." That was certainly the case with Joseph. Now, some of Joseph's situation wasn't his fault – but some of it was. The part that was *not* his fault was his father Jacob's continuing the dysfunction of this extended family by making it clear to Joseph – and

clear to Joseph's brothers – that he was the favored and favorite child. After all, Jacob gave him this amazing coat, a coat that would be utterly useless for doing any actual work in. The traditional translation of the phrase here says that it was a coat "*of many colors,*" but a more accurate translation is that it was a "*long coat with long sleeves.*" What does that mean? Well, this is not a coat you could wear if you were going to do the job of herding sheep and goats through desert pasture-lands, full of thorny mesquite trees and prickly cactuses. A long coat with long sleeves would make it hard to work as it constantly got caught on those trees and bushes; it could even have been dangerous because it would be easier for the wearer to get snagged while riding and thrown to the ground. This is a coat you would wear to a party, not to push livestock around on the prairie.

Moreover, scholars have learned that the coat Jacob gave to Joseph was in fact a **woman's** coat¹ and was the kind of coat that only royalty would wear. Why? Well, Jacob is mourning Rachel, the wife who had died, the wife who was his first and life-long love. And so he has dressed their son Joseph in a coat that will remind him every day of what a *princess* she was. It's more than a little sad and a little creepy, even.

So **some** of Joseph's being disliked by his brothers – disliked to the point that they would want to do him harm! – really came from his father's actions in making him the favored child, the parental pet. But part of it has to be laid at Joseph's feet too. He was cocky, he was sure of himself, he was convinced that he should be the leader of the family and he would somehow save them

¹See www.woodbrook.org/sermons/1998/980503.htm & www.lectionary.org/SW/08-10/Gen_37.1-4_12-28-h.htm

and he was not shy about expressing such thoughts. But Joseph really should have had the good sense to ditch the long-sleeved, woman's coat when he got out of sight of his father, instead of using it to avoid working alongside his brothers. *"Can you help us here, with this, Joseph?"* *"No, I'll ruin my coat."* And Joseph's dreams; oh-my, they seem so grandly self-important, don't they? Did you hear one of those dreams, there in the middle of our long passage for this morning? *"Hear this dream,"* *Joseph said to his brothers, "which I have dreamed: behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf arose and stood upright; and behold, your sheaves gathered round it, and bowed down to my sheaf."* Joseph also had another dream, recounted in this chapter but which I left out of the reading this morning, which Joseph described in this way: *"I had*

another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

But here's the thing: Joseph's dreams proved prescient; he was proven right. For what the next years would bring would be a terrible crisis that threatened the family's very existence and thus threatened the very continuation of the promise that God had made to this oh-so-human family that through them all the peoples of the earth would be blessed. For, as we shall hear in two weeks, a soul-and-body searing famine came to grip the land so badly that our first family of faith was in danger of perishing. The promise was in danger of dying out. In the midst of such a crisis, in the midst of such change, in the midst of new occasions and new opportunities new leadership would indeed be needed.

Which means that the ability to dream what could be, what should be, would be the most vital thing of all.

And that's what Joseph had. You know the definition of “madness” that Alcoholics Anonymous uses? “*To continue to do the same thing and suddenly expect different results.*” For all his cockiness and adolescent smugness, we can also see that Joseph realized that in some ways continuing the dysfunctions that had not worked would not suddenly provide different results. His was a new vision, a new dream – and if God’s blessing was indeed to continue, a new dream, a new vision was exactly what was needed.

Did you know that neurologists have identified a malady that they call “*anoneiria*”?² It is the **inability to dream**. While it’s usually caused by injury to the brain,

²http://braininjury.org.au/portal/component/option,com_glossary/Itemid,363/

it can also happen for other reasons that scientists don't fully understand. Have you ever thought about what it would be like if you couldn't dream? You might think your nights might be more peaceful, or that you could eat that barbecue or that burrito from El Taco Rey without worrying about how it would take its revenge on you during your sleep. But those who have this malady report that it has a rather dramatic and very sad side-effect. Not only do those with this brain malfunction lose their ability to dream, but they have a **complete lack of motivation to do anything at all**. One scientist says this: *"Patients basically do nothing of their own volition. They can perform any action no matter how complex so long as you **instruct** them to do it. They don't have an **internal drive** to do anything."*³

Now, of course, anoneiria is about the dreams that

³Quoted in <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2004/jun/10/science.research2>

happen while we sleep. But that sad side-effect of having no drive, no motivation, is also apt for other kinds of dreams as well, the kind of dreams that make people alive, the kind of dreams for a future that is better than the past that motivates us all, the kind of dreams that we can be a part of something that is larger than ourselves that is worthy and life-giving, the kind of dreams that we have for how our lives and our church can be of even more service to others. Our “first family of faith” in Genesis was reaching an impasse; the old ways didn’t work any more, and they were stuck and stymied. They needed to re-kindle the dream; they needed a vision of what could be, what is possible, what is worthy. They needed a dream that could lead them into the new occasions that, as the hymn says, will teach new duties. They needed a dream that could give them drive,

motivation. And Joseph, cocky, sometimes smug, occasionally annoying, Joseph, had the ability to dream, the ability to lead, the ability to see God's future and do what was needful to make it happen.

My friends, is there any place in your life that you are suffering a kind of spiritual anoneiria, an inability to dream? Don't you find that it just makes it hard for you indeed to do anything? If that is you, then ask God to re-ignite your ability to dream, ask God to give you the courage to seek out those large and powerful and grand dreams for your life, for your family, for our church. Put those dreams in the service of God. And you will be blessed, and God will be blessed. May it be so. Amen.