

**“Joseph: Bearer of God’s Dream”**  
**Sermon at Chevy Chase United Methodist Church**  
**Dane F. Smith**  
**September 3, 2011**

- I have had a particular fondness for the story of Joseph for at least thirty years. Perhaps it stems from my association – and that of my family – with a 1984 off-Broadway production of *Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. Well, actually, off, off, off-Broadway. In Monrovia, Liberia to be truthful.
- Why did I pick Joseph for a sermon topic? The story contains many themes relevant to our Christian pilgrimage. Let me run through it quickly. Jacob, grandson of Abraham and Sarah, apprenticed himself to his uncle Laban to win the hand of Rachel. After 7 years he was tricked when Laban’s older and less attractive daughter Leah was substituted for Rachel at the altar. He had to work another seven years to get Rachel. Six sons and a daughter came from Leah. Rachel was initially barren, and four additional boys were born to concubines, before Joseph arrived. Rachel, the beloved wife, died in childbirth with her second son Benjamin.
- Joseph, the favorite son, earned the hatred of his older brothers by his arrogance and his dreams of dominance over them. When Jacob sent Joseph to visit his brothers tending the flocks in far-away pastures, Joe donned the fancy cloak, which we know as “the coat of many colors,” which Jacob had made for him. The brothers beat him up, shredded his coat and threw him into a deep well where he was expected to die. However, in the end they sold him to a band of Ishmaelite traders, who resold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s military chiefs. Joe prospered until his master’s wife tried to seduce him and her angry husband threw him in jail. There he interpreted correctly the dreams of two disgraced servants of Pharaoh. The one who returned to Pharaoh’s service, as Joseph had predicted, eventually commended Joseph to Pharaoh when the latter had a puzzling dream about a future calamity. Joseph interpreted the dream as an impending famine and counseled a strategic grain reserve. His reward: the prime minister’s job. When famine arrived in Canaan, Jacob sent his ten older sons to Egypt to get food. They came before Joseph, who recognized them while keeping his own identity secret. He tormented them, forcing them to bring his full brother Benjamin back to him, before revealing himself. Jacob came to Egypt and his family resettled there with honor.
- The Joseph story has all the elements of a modern novel: dreams, pride, envy, parental favoritism, a close brush with fratricide, human trafficking, sexual harassment, revenge, reconciliation, and fulfillment of the dream.
- Found at the end of Genesis, the Joseph story has a clear historical function.<sup>1</sup> That is to provide an explanation of how the Israelites, whose ancestors were traced to Palestine in the 18<sup>th</sup> century before Christ, made it to Egypt so that they could experience delivery from slavery there and rebirth as a people in Canaan-Palestine. Jacob’s sons are portrayed as the ancestors of the 12 tribes of Israel.
- I don’t want to spend time on the historical function, but on three story themes: dreams, death and resurrection, and the miraculous way in which God works God’s purposes out.

### Dreamer

- Dreams are central to the story of Joseph. Dreams got him into desperate trouble. As a teen-ager he dreamed that he and his brothers had pulled together large upright bundles of grain stalks in a field. The bundles of his brothers bowed to his bundle. In a subsequent, even more provocative vision, the sun, moon and 11 stars – symbolic of his parents and all his brothers – bowed down to him.
- Yet his dreams, which he understood as imparting truths from God, sustained him when his fortunes changed abruptly and he arrived in Egypt. Even as a slave in a completely unfamiliar country, he had a sense that he was in God's hands and could fulfill his intended role, whatever that might be, by serving capably high-ranking Potiphar. Foiled ultimately in that role, he found the opportunity in prison to rise to a still higher calling.
- Indeed it is often dreams that help enable persons in the depths of poverty or oppression to persist and emerge to greatness. I think of Congressman John Lewis of Georgia. His parents were sharecroppers in rural Alabama. He had a dream – of becoming a preacher. As a boy he read scripture lessons to the chickens in his care, and preached funeral sermons for dead chickens. He acquired the nickname “preacher.” He studied hard and graduated from seminary. But his dream led him to the civil rights movement and to politics. One of the 13 original freedom riders, he suffered a fractured skull at the hands of Alabama State police when leading a march in Selma in 1965. By then he was recognized as one of the "Big Six" leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. He began running for office in 1971 without success. He finally won election to the Atlanta City Council and then in 1986 to the House of Representatives. Today he is a leading member of Congress. A dream sustained him.
- Brian McLaren, a founder of the “emergent church” movement, has written that our job is to bring our dreams into line with God's dream for his creation. According to McLaren, to say “Thy will be done,” in the Lord's Prayer, means the same thing as “O God, may all your dreams for your creation come true.” “The call to faith is the call to trust God and God's dreams enough to realign our dreams with God's.”<sup>2</sup> That is what Joseph did. He set aside juvenile dreams of power over family to embrace the conviction that God had something important in mind for him to do, a dream which sustained him in slavery and in prison.
- We have been celebrating that great dreamer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. With the opening of his monument on the mall, we have been hearing again the moving cadences of his speech at the Lincoln Memorial 48 years ago. For many of us who heard the speech that day, either in person or on television as Judy and I did, the familiar sentences invariably bring tears.

I have a dream that my four 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. ... 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.

- But the role of dreams in the Joseph story is a dual one. In the end, Jacob's favorite son surmounted his difficulties because he was a world class interpreter of dreams.

His correct explanation of the cupbearer's dream brought him to the attention of Pharaoh and a speedy elevation to the pinnacle of power.

- And perhaps the lasting legacy of Martin Luther King was not only that he was a dreamer but that he was a persuasive interpreter of the American dream. In his 1963 speech, he said

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."... This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning: "My country 'tis of THEE, sweet land of liberty, of THEE I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride, From every mountainside, let freedom ring!"

#### Death and Resurrection

- As a 17 year old, Joseph was feeling very good about himself. He was handsome. He was intellectually precocious and the pride of Jacob, patriarch of a large ranching enterprise. Full of himself, he foolishly shared his vainglorious dreams with his brothers, stirring up a murderous envy and hatred. The great German novelist Thomas Mann, in his monumental *Joseph and His Brothers*, places Joseph naked in the dry well for three days, where he had a spiritual transformation. He grasped that he bore partial responsibility for his own fate because of his arrogance and disregard for the feelings of his brothers. When he emerged as a slave of the Ishmaelites, he was a new person. According to Mann, he took on new clothing and a new name. He apparently made no effort to escape, although still in an area familiar to him. He accepted that God was leading him to a new life. Under Potiphar his organizational skills caused the household to prosper and led to promotion to overseer.
- But God's transforming work with Joseph was not finished. Potiphar's wife tried to get him into bed. When he resisted, she shouted, "Rape, rape," and Joe ended up in jail, a second descent into hell.<sup>3</sup> His success in dream interpretation secured his release. Rehabilitated, he got a new suit of gold and the ruler's signet ring, symbolic of resurrected life. His original dream was fulfilled when he became prime minister and ultimately preserved his family from famine and brought them to safety in Egypt.
- Death and resurrection, present in Joseph's story, are the central narrative in the gospel of Jesus Christ and a basic metaphor for Christian life. Human beings experience separation from God when they are caught up in destructive behavior – arrogance, family conflict, alcoholism, drugs, corrupt practices in their professional or personal lives. Reaching out in desperation and coming into relationship with God – or God in Christ – is often experienced as having "died" and being "raised" to new life. As Paul puts it in his letter to the Galatians (2:20), "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me."
- There is a mighty affirmation about life imbedded in these metaphors. Life is open-ended. It's not like a Thomas Hardy novel in which the protagonist is trapped by his/her past and society in a situation which will ultimately defeat him/her. No matter how desperate my situation, the force which shapes the universe provides me with an

opportunity – in fact repeated opportunities – to “die” to my old self and to be “reborn” to a much more fulfilled life in relationship with that force and with other human beings.

- I recently ran across a journal entry of a family member. In his 30’s and not a believer, he realized that “something is desperately wrong. Everything is going my way, but the present doesn’t satisfy me. . . . I had no clue what would give my life meaning.” Influenced indirectly by his wife, he began reading the Bible and was attracted to the figure of Jesus. Then he had a vision. “I saw myself at the bottom of a shaft. No doors, no steps, no way out. After awhile I looked up and saw light seeping in through a transom. From the same place a vine seemed to extend down – ever closer to me – I realized that grasping the vine and pulling myself up by it was my salvation. Instantly, I associated the vine with Jesus.” He emerged from the shaft – from the well of death – and became a Christian.

#### God is Working His Purpose Out

- The writer of Genesis uses the story of Joseph to demonstrate that God is working his purpose out through a series of improbable, almost miraculous steps. Joseph emerged as the star among Jacob’s many unruly sons. His dreams seemed to portend simply a rise to the top of the family. But he was sold to the Ishamaelites.
- And who were they? According to Genesis, they were the descendants of Ishmael, half-brother of Isaac, Joseph’s grandfather. In the metaphoric genealogy of Genesis, Ishmael was the father of the Arab people. And indeed in Islam, Ishmael is Ismail, son of Abraham and the receiver of God’s promise eventually conveyed to the Prophet Mohammed in the Qur’an. So Joseph’s relatives – the Arabs – become the instruments of his release from the well and his arrival in Egypt.<sup>4</sup>
- In Egypt Joseph landed on his feet. His future seemed assured until he ran afoul of Mrs. Potiphar. But God had other things in mind. Dream interpretation became the vehicle for release from prison and elevation to senior leadership. His implementation of the strategic grain reserve preserved the Egyptian state. It made possible the migration of Jacob’s family and the next phase of Israel’s salvation history: Exodus under Moses.
- And indeed that is a common pattern in our salvation history. God works God’s purpose out in amazing ways. Paul, the zealous Christian-persecuting Pharisee, became the instrument of the spread of Jesus’ gospel to Europe, while the church in Jerusalem was virtually wiped out before the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Christianity, carried to northern Africa from Egypt in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, survived in the Abyssinian highlands while the Middle East became predominantly Muslim. The cruelties of colonialism helped to spread Christianity to Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Now Christianity is growing much faster in Africa and China than anywhere else in the world. As our hymn indicates, “God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year; nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be, when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.”
- Each of us struggles with the question: why was I put here on earth? What is my purpose beyond simply survival, earning a living, maybe having a family, and minimizing the perils and sorrows of life. When I was in college, I was pretty sure

that God's purpose for me was to go to seminary and become a Methodist preacher. But a few years later I headed off to the Foreign Service. And frankly I had serious doubts that God's purpose was driving that change of course. I suspected it was ambition and my fascination with the world stage. Now 40 years later, I see perhaps God had in mind that I might work in a limited way for peace in some conflicts affecting Africa drawing on my experience.

- In the United States a Baptist preacher, leading his first church in Montgomery, Alabama, emerged to leadership in the civil rights movement because a quiet, determined woman, Rosa Parks, refused to move to the back of the bus. King became the leader of the successful Montgomery bus boycott. Six years later, building on other hard won victories, King galvanized America with his "Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial. There is no doubt; King saw himself as an instrument of God's purpose in bringing an end to segregation. Although honors came to him – the Nobel Prize in 1964 – he recognized that God's purpose for him involved continuous danger from violence. He told his close associates that he believed he would not see his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday; his murder in Memphis came at age 39.
- Yet who among us can doubt today that Dr. King was God's instrument for dealing with racial injustice in America? As we prepare to inaugurate his memorial, polling shows that 90 percent of Americans believe the Memorial is warranted.

#### Implications

- I leave you with two questions:
- What is your dream and how do you interpret it? If you are in school or at the beginning of your career, what are your aspirations? Do you seek a high paying job, a home in the better section of the Washington area, a vacation home at the shore? Or is your dream to provide leadership in service in your profession? Do you aspire to improve the quality of your workplace? Do you aspire to bring the love of Jesus Christ to those in need of education or employment or decent housing? Perhaps it is some combination of those two approaches. Have you thought recently about how you are aligning your dream with God's dream for you and our community? That should be a major focus of our prayer life. We should be continually asking for guidance on the meaning of our dreams and how we can bring them into congruence with God's dream for our family, our church, our community.
- And how has God been working out his purpose in you? I'm sure you have thought about that. How is God using your education to shape your role in the community and in the church? How is God using your experience to shape you for the future God has in mind for you? And how has that purpose changed over the years? If you are in mid-career, what career changes might be in store in which you can serve God's purposes? If you are near or in retirement, how can you serve God's purposes in your church and community?
- God has given us the capacity to reach for the stars and pursue our personal dreams. But more important, God wants us to align our dream with his purposes. God wants us to labor in our personal and communal spiritual life to bring his redemptive love to the down-hearted, the poor, the oppressed and those devastated by conflict and violence.
- So be a dreamer, but bring your dream into line with God's.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Joseph saga is the longest group of stories found in that foundational book, one quarter of the text. So the author of Genesis, which was edited into a single document about the time of the Exile, roughly in the 6th century before Christ, from collections of much more ancient tales, set great store by Joseph.

<sup>2</sup> Brian McLaren, "Found in Translation," *Sojourners*, March 2005, 16-17

<sup>3</sup> There is a suggestion in the Hebrew text that Potiphar was a eunuch. The word *saris* to describe him can mean 'courtier', 'someone who belongs to the king', but elsewhere in the Old Testament is used to describe a eunuch. Potiphar was married, but marriage may have been a possibility for a eunuch in ancient Egypt. The use of the word may be a hint that Potiphar's sexual prowess was not what it should have been. See [http://www.womeninthebible.net/1.6.Potiphars\\_Wife.htm](http://www.womeninthebible.net/1.6.Potiphars_Wife.htm)

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 37 appears to conflate two traditions about Joseph's captors. In addition to the Ishmaelites the story also mentions Midianites as taking him to Egypt. The Midianites are described in Gen.25 as descendants of Midian, Abraham's son through his final wife Keturah, i.e. another set of Joseph cousins.