

13 August

Genesis 37: 1 – 4, 12 – 28.

Almost 55 years ago, human rights activist Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Junior, speaking to a crowd of over 200,000 people, began his speech:

“I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration of freedom in the history of a nation.....He continues with the famous words, ‘I have a dream’. You can see it on utube. It is one of the most passionate and inspiring speeches I have ever heard. ‘I have a dream’. He dreamt of equality, and freedom.. His speech and dream are still inspiring.

Today we hear of another dream; Joseph of whom his brothers say: ‘Here comes the dreamer. Come now, let us kill him, and throw him into one of these pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what becomes of his dreams’.¹ We will see what will become of his dreams, Joseph, the dreamer, ha!. And they did..

As an older sister, I know that that dreamy naiveté and flaunting of his favouritism would infuriate me! He doesn’t get it, this young Joseph! And his father doesn’t help matters, with this coat of many colours. He, a younger son himself. No tact, no understanding of human relationships. He just blurts out his dreams – “You’ll all bow down to me, isn’t that strange? What a dream.” He is oblivious to his brothers’ looks, their mutterings.

Naively, he goes to find them again, at his fathers’ request. Will he tell tales on them again? Go running home to Daddy? Enough! Their frustration and jealousy must have been huge to want to kill their own brother! Family history repeats itself – some of us have probably felt the frustrations – get him out of the way, and maybe our father will see us. Some of them were a bit uncomfortable with that.....but you can’t go against the mob, you can’t force your opinions against the group, but maybe modify – let’s not kill him

¹ Gen. 37: 20.

(thinking, I'll save him later, and maybe get some kudos from my father).

Thwarted. Joseph is sold as a slave bound for Egypt.

No mention of God at all in this story. Just raw family dynamics. Shocking all round. The story doesn't end here of course. It continues for 13 chapters.

It seems the Hebrew scriptures tell this story trusting that God is in it somewhere; but for now, for this piece of family history, things are not clear. They are very messy. It is a most unhappy situation. When Jacob finds out about Joseph, his heart is broken. He, who is now Israel – a younger brother who gained his older brother's place by deception had high hopes for Joseph. He is broken, but still Joseph claims his attention: he will go on mourning. The brothers may be rid of the favoured brother, but Joseph still gets most of their father's attention.²

Conflict, jealousy and isolation.

Where is God in all this when all seems lost?

Frederick Buechner³ writes,

'A family is a web so delicately woven that it takes almost nothing to set the whole thing shuddering or even to tear it to pieces. Yet the thread it's woven of, is as strong as anything on earth.'

Today we have seen the web torn, and looking like it has been destroyed, but we will see the story unfold in surprising ways, and a family rebuilding the tears; the web is both fragile and enduring as the narrative revolves around Joseph, as a dreamer, and his dreams. It gives hope in conflicted relationships, especially for us in the midst of it all... it doesn't mean you need to stay in a toxic or abusive relationship.. sometimes you need to get out, and quickly, and start again with the support of community.

² Genesis 37: 29 – 35

³Frederick Buecher Beyond words: Daily readings in the ABC's of faith

God sings to us, to Joseph, to Jacob, to Peter, to the disciples, 'Don't be afraid, my love is stronger, my love is stronger than your fears, and I have promised, promised to always be near'.⁴

The brothers want to kill the dream, to stop it from becoming a reality, the dream is dead, at least from their point of view. But God's dream and though the text doesn't say it explicitly, the dream is God's dream, isn't over yet, but in truth has only just begun.⁵

As Walter Bruegemann says:

'Though hidden in the form of a dream, silent and not at all visible, the listener will understand that the dream is the unsettling work of (the Lord) upon which everything depends; without the dream, there would be no Joseph and no narrative. From the perspective of the brothers without the dream there would be no trouble or conflict, to the father, without the dream there would be no grief or loss. The dream sets it's own course, and in the end the dream prevails over the tensions of the family.'

Not long before his assassination, Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Jr. on the steps of the Washington monument, delivered his renowned 'I Have a Dream' speech. Later at the National Civil Rights Museum across town at the Lorraine Motel where Dr King was shot, a plaque was inscribed with these words:

'Behold, here cometh the dreamer. Let us slay him and we shall see what will become of the dreams'.

Look at America. See how his dream has become reality, even now.⁶

The Joseph narrative suggests dreams are not easily disposed of. We at St Paul's need to encourage dreams and dreamers, for our church and our community.

What are your hopes, your dreams?

Live today into those dreams.

⁴ Song from the Iona Community

⁵ Geoff McElroy

⁶ Seasons of the Spirit p75

The time for cynicism and a culture of criticism is over. We want dreamers, people passionate about showing Christ's unconditional love in action, encouraging people to see the connection between the Divine and the everyday.

Christine sent me a story that goes like this:

A man who was blind sat on the steps of a public building with a hat by his feet. He had propped up a sign nearby which said, "I am blind, please help."

There were only a few coins in the hat. A man walking by took a few coins from his pocket and dropped them into the hat. He then took the sign, turned it around, and wrote some words. He put the sign back so that everyone who walked by would see the new words.

Soon the hat began to fill up. A lot more people were giving money to the blind man.

That afternoon the man who had changed the sign came by to see how things were going. The blind man recognised his voice and asked, "Did you change my sign this morning?" "What did you write?"

The man said, "I only wrote the truth. I said what you said but in a different way."

He had written, "Today is a beautiful day and I cannot see it."

Moral of the Story: Be thankful for what you have. Be creative. Be innovative. Dream. Think differently and positively. When life gives you a hundred reasons to cry, show life that you have a thousand reasons to smile.

The disposal of Joseph suggests that trouble and troublemakers – can be dealt with best by an, out of sight, out of mind philosophy. The quote at the Martin Luther King Jr. Plaque suggests this is an all too familiar way of dealing with conflict. There are other options for us and in the story of Joseph for dealing more constructively with the conflicts. A little bit of family round table discussion

perhaps?. Mediation?. This gives us food for thought for the conflicts in this community and beyond.

Langston Hughes writes in his poem, '*Dreams*'

Hold fast to dreams.

See if dreams die,

life is a broken winged bird,

that cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams

for when dreams go

life is a barren field

frozen with snow.

The dynamics of conflict are multilayered and nuanced. Look how Joseph grows and changes.

Know God is with us in the midst of the conflicts in which we find ourselves. God has dreamed us and continues to dream for us life abundant.

'I Have a Dream.' Our God might say.

And you, what is your dream for this place, this community, for your life?

Susanna Pain