

## Dreams and Nightmares

### Genesis 37:1-4

Stories of Genesis: When God Shows Up

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Worship at 9 and 10:45 a.m.

It is good to be back from four weeks being away. I was far away in California, visiting family, remembering some patterns from the past, getting lots of good rest and staring at the Pacific Ocean which is, in fact, very peaceful. It's good to be back and I am thankful for those who have filled this pulpit while I have been gone. I look forward to a powerful and wonderful year with this congregation.

Let us offer our prayer before the Lord to hear the word from God. From the ancient deep, from the power of your creation, your Spirit has spoken and now speaks to us. May we hear, and in hearing, may we pick up the dream that you have for us as your people. Through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen

A couple were on their dream vacation; they had gone a long way to visit a beach community. Exhausted from the long drive they got into their hotel and decided to take a quick swim. The young woman had been working on losing some weight but she hadn't paid much attention to the size of her bathing suit. She jumped into the pool and part of suit fell off. They kind of cackled about it at the time. There was nobody else in the pool and they kind of enjoyed the moment of being free and together. After they left the pool they went up to their room and dressed and went down to the restaurant where they sat by the bar and noticed that there was a giant fish tank right above the bar. They also noticed that there were no fish in it. So the man turned to the bartender and said, "Why is it that you have this gorgeous fish tank and no fish?" The bartender smiled and said, "That's not a fish tank, that's a swimming pool."

Sometimes our dreams can turn into moments of being nightmares. Sometimes when we think we're on a track to go the direction of the light, we have experienced the darkest possible moments. I think my wife was experiencing some of that on the first day of our honeymoon. We had just been married and I think I was probably a little nervous about that, at that point in time. We were driving up the eastern side of the high Sierras in California and I developed a pattern of going into my weird sense of humor around puns. She had heard a couple of those while we were dating but not the extent to which my nervousness was now decrying them. After a flat tire, I said, "I'm too young to retire." After the sun went down over the mountains I said, "I guess we're going to live on the dark side on this trip." After a second flat tire, I said, "I don't know about you but I'm feeling a little deflated right now." Having to stop for an early snowfall on the pass of the high Sierras towards Lake Tahoe to put on the chains on the tires, I said, "I didn't think I'd be chained up this soon in our relationship." Well, about that time, she said, "if you say anything else about a pun, I'm going to divorce you right now."

Sometimes the dream can turn into a nightmare. Joseph had had this marvelous set of dreams. The dreams were about him, and the dreams were about his family. The dreams were fairly obvious – that is, that Joseph was going to be lifted up by God to be a person that the rest of the family would have to pay obeisance too. The brothers did not find this amusing. I think it was rather in humor of God that God would give a seventeen-year-old that kind of vision. Because you know what a seventeen-year-old probably is going to do with it? Quickly go tell the rest of family, "You know what God has said to me? You all are going to be subjects to me." Even his father was not amused by it. Why would God give a young man such a dream?

Now, Joseph, I think had a certain amount of preparation for that, you see, because his father – because Joseph was the son of his old age – had given him a special robe. It says in one text, "the robe of many colors" and another text is a "robe with long sleeves." The whole point is that this was a robe to state: "My son...this son... is uniquely different and special. It's a royal robe." I don't think the other brothers were very amused by that as well. In a sense God set Joseph up, along with the father, to believe that he deserved to be treated as a royal subject. Joseph's dreams became his brothers' nightmare. Joseph discovered a little bit later on that his dreams would lead to a darker place and his own nightmare.

The scriptures are full of people who have dreams. In fact one of the great prophetic statements in scripture from Joel, repeated at the time of the Pentecost in Acts, is that "Your young men would see visions and your old men would dream dreams." Both men and women, it is a thing that God's people do – is to have a strong sense of visions and dreams for the future. If you are walking with God, God will give you a dream. God gives these dreams in many different forms. Sometimes they can come serendipitously; sometimes they come at night; and sometimes they come during the day, as an awareness, or an intuition, or a point of discernment. Suddenly you are aware that God has spoken and has a message for you in your future. Sometimes these dreams can come in the middle of trauma or triumph. Sometimes these dreams can be the result of events or special signs. But God speaks, and we begin to dream.

If you are a human being and you are at all a person of hope, then you hunger for a dream – a dream that will carry you into the future. A friend of mine told this story about himself. He had grown up in a family where the father had not paid much regard to him. At a young age he had some connection to his dad but as he grew up to be in elementary school and as a teenager, his father had seemingly turned his back on him. His dad withdrew. Even when they went to church together and the son wanted to talk about what had happened at church and worship or Sunday School, the father said, "Let the church be church; it is not a thing to talk about at home." He grew up sensing that his father was extremely disconnected from him and he hungered for a more powerful relationship with his dad. That was never to happen. His dad died before he was able to build that kind of relationship.

One day at mid-life, after he was working through some of his relationship with his father and the loss of that kind of love, he had this vision of Jesus—he saw Jesus holding him as an elementary school child, in his arms and lifted up, and his head thrown back, and laughter and joy, and turning around, and dance, and saying to him, "You're my son. I'm delighted with you. I'm proud of you. I

want to have you with me all the time.” It was that vision – that dream of Jesus that transformed his life and moved him into the future. Not to hold the ambivalence for his father, but to have a new sense of value in the presence of God. It launched him into his sense of mission for the future.

Parents, as we baptize children today, it is important that we regard the dreams of our children. It is important that we listen and heed who they are and what they are called to do; for often that call comes at a young age. Invest in them so that you know who they are, and don't turn your back on them. It is important that you share in the dreams of your children. Parents, do not turn your children's dreams into nightmares.

The connection of dreams and nightmares are intimate in this text. Dreams tend to evoke the next event of life which tends to be not so good. Dreams tend to lead in some ways into nightmares. Your dream, in fact, may be another person's nightmare – because dreams, in a sense, demand that there's going to be a change ahead and you're going to be a participant in that change. So dreams sometimes stimulate resistance from other people.

It is true that Joseph's dream began to develop a stronger sense of hate and resistance in his brothers. Now why would God set that up? It's because, in the process of what God accomplishes on the earth, when people dream dreams because God has given those dreams to them, there is a sense of people standing back and thinking that that dream is going to change my life and make my life different and I don't want the change. It is sure that the brothers did not want to be bowing down to their youngest brother, Joseph. Dreams changed the status quo. Dreams began to change the injustice and inequities of the world. These are God-given dreams—these are God-focused and God-centered dreams.

A friend of mine was called to a church of four hundred members. The pastor nominating committee said, “We have a dream for our church that if you can come and be pastor, we believe that our church can grow.” The pastor went there on the call and the church began to grow and change, living into the dream. And lo and behold, when the church had reached about nine hundred members, there began to be greater resistance to the growth. People rose up and said, “Our church is changing. We're losing control of it. Pastor, how could you do this to us?” He said, “I'm living into the dream.” And there were a number of people who said, “This is becoming a nightmare for us, because the church that we loved is no longer our church.” Change tends to create hostility and resistance.

It is important in the dream process that we can discern the difference between God's dream and our personal ambition. There is no doubt that Joseph had some personal ambition in this dream. Joseph probably gloried in the idea that he one day would be the one to whom the other family members would bow down. God's dream will engage the human passion and ambition. It's not that ambition is totally bad – but ambition that does not pursue the dream of God can usually end up in a negative place. Ambition tends to be short-sighted; whereas, God's dreams tend to be far-reaching. Dreams are bigger than human capacity; only God can accomplish those dreams for human activity. Dreams are often bigger than the one who is having the dream themselves. Dreams are confirmed by others because, unless people have some confirmation that the dream is valid, it could be that the dream is simply a personal ambition.

Dreams begin with the person... confirmed by a community...and then move on to a people, and into the world. Dreams always move from person to the world because God is trying to save the world through the dreams of individual human beings. Dreams take a long time to unfold. Ambition tends to be impatient and demanding on a short notice. Ambition is personal; but dreams are global. Ambition is not the dream. God can use ambition to reach the dream. But the dream is always greater than the person.

My wife and I had a dream when we were married. We tried to state this dream in our wedding order of worship by putting on the front of our order of worship, “Christ is in us the hope of Glory.” We believed that our marriage had a mission; we believed that God had brought us together and that God would lead us into a greater dream of life and ministry.

It is important that marriages have a dream and have a mission. The dream that we carried was that our relationship as man and woman together would be a sign and symbol to other men and women that we could live in partnership. Partnership in all places: in the home; in business; in the church. And we have tried to live out that dream of inviting people in partnership of men and women together.

I heard an African-American preacher once say that it is not until men and women learn to live in peace, harmony, and partnership that religion and racial issues will ever be solved. There is something about the importance of the basic relationship of male and female in God's image. And we participated in that dream. Sometimes that becomes personal ambition and the dream fades. But every marriage needs to have a dream.

Kenneth Blanchard, a business consultant who wrote the book, *The One Minute Manager*, had a dream about helping managers and leaders be better at their management processes. When he wrote this book, he had no idea what would be the result of the impact. The book took off and sold hundreds of thousands of copies. In conversation one day, he said, “That book became a God thing. It was my personal ambition but God took it and created a dream. And that dream changed my life.” Kenneth Blanchard committed his life to follow Jesus Christ as a result of writing that book. Now he doesn't just talk about ‘One Minute Managers;’ now he talks about what it means for people in the marketplace to be followers of Jesus Christ. The ambition became a dream.

Sometimes we're tempted to manipulate the dream. Abraham and Sarah, when they had the promise and dream that they would have a child, became impatient and tried to have a child on their own agenda. They had Hagar become pregnant. But that wasn't God's dream, God's dream was greater than that: to have a child in their old age by miraculous happening. Sometimes personal ambition shortcuts the dream because of manipulation.

All too often recently, I've run into the stories of large church pastors who have taken the leadership of the church away from elders and leaders and have decided to run things their own way. Too many cases recently of pastors who have tried to manipulate the

system by control and coercion...by arrogance and autocratic activity. Their leadership becomes oppressive because the dream has turned into personal ambition. Lord, help it not to happen here at National Presbyterian Church. It is important that we hold on to God's dream and let go of our personal ambition.

The dream always leads into some form of intentional mission. You can't have a dream that God has given to you without that driving you into some responsible action in the world. Dreams make you missionaries and it turned Joseph into a serious missionary leader of the people of God. What God had in mind for Joseph was not simply to be the ruler of his family, but more importantly, to lead Egypt to save the world because of famine. The dream that he had was simply the down payment on his long-term call to be a participant in how God was going to save the world. In a sense, every dream that God gives each one of us is to participate in saving the world: personal, but global.

We must admit that dreamers are rather vulnerable on the way. There were many times that Joseph came close to death. He was imprisoned; he was wrongly accused; he was forgotten; he was left out. For thirteen years his dream just disappeared. Dreamers are vulnerable on their journey.

My wife and I had a dream of a wonderful vacation and we were on our way up to the middle part of California to be on the beach for a few days. We were driving along the Ventura freeway and out of the corner of my eye I could see a black SUV dart all the way across five lanes of traffic, suddenly, and slam into a car that was right in front of us down the freeway. And we were all going about 65 or 70 miles an hour. My wife started to pray and I wondered if we were going to be injured or killed. Dreamers are vulnerable in a world where vicissitudes and accidents happen. It's up to God to make sure the dream continues; but it's not because we can control our destiny. It's up to God. It was a close call and I'm glad I'm here to talk about it.

I pray that our leaders at National Presbyterian Church will have a dream. A dream that will move this congregation into global mission; a dream that will move all of our people into ministry and mission and the responsibility of taking Jesus with them into the world. It is wonderful to have sanctuary here on Sunday; but we must be willing to take our sanctuary with us as we go. We are in the middle of such a plan for a dream, praying that God will give us to clarity about that. I ask you to join with us in prayer, that that dream will become clear for this church and our future together.

All God-given dreams lead to the building of the Kingdom of God on earth. When Jesus prayed the prayer that we pray every Sunday — "Thy will be done on earth as it is heaven," the emphasis is on the will of God to be done here on earth — that our dreams would be the accomplishment of the will of God here on earth. Jesus is the example and leader of how God's will is accomplished here on earth, as it is heaven. Dreams of heaven have to have earthly reality. Jesus said to the disciples in the prayer in John 17, "I'm not asking you, Father, to take them out of the world, but I ask you, Father, to protect them from the evil one, so they can be in the world." Jesus wants us to live in this world dreaming of how to bring heaven to earth. God gives us those kind of dreams — not for our personal ambition — but that we would have the freedom, and the power, and the joy of participating in the Kingdom of God coming to earth. So that, in the end, every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, King of Kings, to the glory of God the Father. That's what the dream is about. Every other dream that is less than that is inadequate and probably stifled by personal ambition.

May God give you dreams in your work...in your family... in your marriages... in the church... so that God's will be done, and the Kingdom of God will be visible on earth.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, we now offer ourselves to you; that you would help us live in the dream that you give; that we would not be overcome by the nightmares that haunt us on the way; that you would take us and lead us in the mission you give to us. In Jesus Christ, in whose name pray, Amen.