

Your Dream -- Someone Else's Nightmare

Genesis 37:1-11

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

"Dreams and Nightmares" Genesis 37:1-11

Let us continue in prayer. Now, gracious God, whether we come in joy or sorrow, we ask that you would minister to us of your gracious word and wisdom, through Jesus Christ and the power of your Spirit. Amen.

A little nostalgia this morning... in 1959, Bobby Darin blasted onto the rock charts with two hit songs. The one I happened to remember and sing quite often (it sometimes wakes me up in the middle of the night – that tells you something about my subconscious) was called "Dream Lover." And it goes like this:

Ev'ry night, I hope and pray
A dream lover will come my way
A girl to hold in my arms
And know the magic of her charms.

Because I want... a girl...
To call... my own...
I want a... dream lover
So I don't have to dream alone.

Dream lover, where are you
With a love, oh so true
And a hand that I can hold
To feel you near when I grow old?
Someday--I don't know how--
I hope you'll hear my pleas!
Some way--I don't know how--
She'll bring her love to me.

I've wondered over the years how this song has haunted me; and as I prepared for this sermon, I think I've discovered why. "Dream lover" is a triple entendre: it is not only a prayer for both a dreamy lover and a lover of dreams – one who would share the person who is praying dreams, and one who would dream with him. But most of all, it would seem to me, that Darin offering this prayer, to ask God, the ultimate Dream Lover, not only to help him to find the love of his dreams... but to be the Dreamer and Love of his dreams. As with many popular love songs, there is a kind of fuzzy theological eroticism implied in the text. While such songs overtly state, 'I want a lover,' they subversively yearn— hidden below and shadowed behind— 'I want God to be my Dreamer and my Lover.'

Love is always connected to dreams, because love always implies a future. Love leads us into faith and hope; and faith and hope are consummated in love. Jacob loved Joseph more than all of his other sons; he was the dreamer. Love beckons us to risk dreaming into a positive future. Love demands that there must be more to life than what we have right now.

Bobby Darin was born dreaming, but often lived in the nightmare of his dashed dreams. He was born, Walden Robert Cassotto, in a rough section of Bronx, New York. In his early years he had several bouts with rheumatic fever which left his heart permanently damaged and weak. The doctors doubted that he would outlive his childhood. He almost died before he could dream. But he did live to have dreams, and his driving ambition was to become a living legend by the age of 25. In spite of his physical frailty, he had a brilliant, genius-level mind; and he pushed himself to excel at everything he did. He was a classic American example of the self-made man. In 1959, at 23 years of age, he was an internationally-famous song writer, star performer, and a rising business entrepreneur. He was wealthy.

But very often, his dreams turned to nightmares. His father disappeared a few months before he was born and he never knew who his father was. He lost his hair before he was 25 and he chose to wear expensive toupees. At least four times in his life, he thought that he had found his dream lover, only to lose them: two women, a hero, and his mother. He fell in love with Connie Francis in 1956, but her father drove him away at gun point. In 1961, he married, at 17 years of age, Sandra Dee, with whom they had their only child. But then they divorced in 1967. In 1968 he worked tirelessly for the dream to elect Bobby Kennedy as President; but Kennedy was killed in Los Angeles just two days after Darin met him face-to-face. That year, he also found out that his supposed sister was really his mother; and his mother was really his grandmother. Disillusioned with life, he sold all of his possessions, moved to Big Sur, and lived in seclusion in a mobile home. In 1973, after several heart attacks, he died at the age of 37. A man with big dreams experienced early in his life how they were dashed; his life dreams all seemed to end in loss. His son, Dodd, picked up this theme of broken dreams when he wrote the biography of his mother and his father; that biography was entitled: "Dream Lovers: The Magnificent Shattered Lives of Bobby Darin and Sandra Dee."

Human dreams can turn into nightmares. When God gives a person, or a people, a dream, it can become a nightmare for others. We have seen evidence this week of this on an international level with Georgia's dream of being lived out for independence— while Russia's nightmare of losing control of that oil pipeline haunts them. Ultimately, the desire for our dreams to be fulfilled, or the frustration that our dreams have been scuttled, should drive us into the presence of God—who, I believe, is the primary Dream Lover that we all seek. It is only God who can fulfill our deepest needs and our transcendent hopes.

Joseph was a dreamer; and in this text, he is called a "dream master," or even a "dream addict." As the well-loved and favorite son of old Jacob, he had lots of time to wander in the pastures, feeding the sheep. A sense of entitlement developed in him, where he would dream about his future. As a teenager, Joseph had two dreams about his family. When he told the dreams to his brothers and his father, they became angry and rebuked him —because Joseph's dreams implied a coming nightmare for the whole family. It was most likely that his father, who fed Joseph's extravagant dreams... held a special love for him because this was the son of his most beloved wife, Rachel, who couldn't have children; and Joseph was born as a 'miracle' child.

The other sons could sense Jacob's bias, early on. But paternal deference turned to familial defiance with the making and gifting of that coat. That coat made incarnate the real dreams of the father for this special son. It was a robe designed for royalty. It was a tunic

to die for. It was a cape made for a prince. It was the dramatic symbol of Jacob's dream for Joseph— as the prince of the family. It was gorgeous, flowing, ornate and regal. And how do you think that made the rest of the sons feel when they saw Joseph prancing around in that robe? That dream coat from the father quickly became the nightmare for the sons. They hated Joseph for that coat— maybe a little transference— where they should have been hating the father for the coat. But Joseph bore the brunt. The coat said that dad had special dreams for this son; but the implication was that he had ordinary expectations for the rest of his sons. Jacob was going to live out his high hopes and unfulfilled dreams through this one son; but not the others. They were angry about such a blatant and ostentatious demonstration of their father's admiration for the son. Was it any wonder that Joseph lived into the part by being rather entitled and self-possessed? It was no surprise that he grew up being a dreamer, since his own father was dreaming for him. You can almost hear Jacob say, "I have plans for that boy! I'll give him the best of everything I have – the best education, extra servants, special food. I will give him what my father never gave to me" (after all, you remember that Jacob's father loved Esau more than Jacob). "Dad always preferred Esau; I prefer Joseph. After all, he's the child of my most beloved wife, Rachel." And with each new demonstration of dad's ardent attention, the sons felt the pain and dreamt the nightmares.

Then this favored son started getting even some more uppity in his adolescence, tattling on the sons of Jacob's concubines. He told dreams about his future royalty and about how the whole family would bow down to him. The brothers started reacting; dad had gone too far. We've got to get rid of this dreamer; his addiction to dreams will destroy all of us and our family. He's going to sabotage centuries of family tradition; he's got to go. His dreams have become our nightmares.

Toward the end of his life, Bobby Darin became more cynical about dreams, His cynicism was reflected in a song that he wrote called "Sunday":

Sunday - Where has what you stood for gone? Sunday - Have you been asleep? You say keep the faith but there is no faith to keep.

Sunday - Master of a dyin' breed Sunday - Lyin' in a heap You say keep the faith but there's no faith to keep.

Sunday - Tellin' lies on history Sunday - Ain't you in too deep? You say keep the faith but there's no faith to keep.

Sunday - Bow down to the blood you've shed Sunday - Bodies piled so deep You say keep the faith but there's no faith to keep.

Sunday - Build your house of solid gold Sunday - Let the people sleep You say keep the faith but there's no faith to keep.

For Darin, Sunday became the symbol of his lost dreams... his lost hopes... and probably his lost hope for the presence of God. He had lost God somehow, in his life. God, like Sunday, has gone; asleep; a master of lies; dying breed. The church building may be full of gold, but there is nobody home and the people are all asleep. God is gone. The dream is dead. The dreamers' lives are shattered.

It is striking, throughout the story of Joseph, that God seems absent all the way to the very end. This is in contrast to the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whom God speaks to face-to-face, person-to-person. That never happens to Joseph; it's as if God just disappeared. There is conversation, occasionally, about God. But it's not a direct conversation with Joseph; there is only the dream. It's striking, throughout that story, that God has whispered in the dreams about Joseph's future, even when he is in slavery and prison. God is absent, but his dream lives on. Jacob has lost his son; but somehow, the dream lives on. In the working of the dream, it can seem that even God himself is absent.

Dreams are good news for those who dream, but often bad news for those who think they will be devalued if the dream comes true. This was surely the case for Joseph's brothers and father: if Joseph was right, their traditional family values would be turned upside down—the first would be last and the last would be first. Where have we heard that before?

Walter Brueggemann's comment about this story says that it is about power and how it affects families, and organizations, and nations: "The family is kept off-balance by the dream of Joseph. The dream may be a blessing. But it disturbs the peace, and, at times, it seems to be a curse. The family, like many others, would manage better without a dream to disturb and disrupt the normal properly-ordered life."

Dreams are often about power— particularly for people who don't have it. Dreams tend to give power to the weak and take power away from the strong. And those who have power are not happy with those dreams that put them out of power. In the faith history that we have, we see both Joseph and Jesus have these things in common: they both shared God-ordained dreams with others, who— when they heard them— sensed danger to their own power. When Jesus shared God's dreams of himself and the kingdom of God, the priests... the scribes... the Pharisees... the religious leaders of his day... the church leaders... were not amused. If Jesus' dream that he was Messiah was to come true, their religious and political power would be endangered. They could not allow that to happen. Joseph had to go. Jesus had to go. Someone may think that you have to go. Or you may think that someone else has got to go.

However, if the dream comes from God, no one can permanently scuttle what God wants to accomplish. There may be frustrating, or even tragic setbacks; but, in the long run, God's dream will be a reality. If the dream is from God, enemies may try to kill you or imprison you; but they cannot kill the dream. God will not allow dream-killers to ultimately win. They may win a few battles, but they will not win the final war. If God is for us, who can be against us?

It is up to God to bring the dream to fulfillment—not us. This is the nature of God's promise to us: not that we will make our dream happen, but that God will make his dream happen. This leaves us, as dreamers, in a place of vulnerability and humility. God has the last word on the dream, whether it is our fantasy, or God's destiny—only God will determine that. We need to hold our dreams delicately and humbly; not arrogantly or obnoxiously.

Some recall, at the last three years of Bobby Darin's life, that there was a transformation in his life. When he was young and

successful, he was demanding and demeaning toward others. He was so committed to making his own dream happen that he stepped over people on the way and crushed their dreams. But after Bobby Kennedy's death, and with the death of his own self-made dreams, Darin seemingly had a mystical experience of the presence of God. And he started caring about the dreams of others. He turned his life from looking out for himself, to helping others succeed. He turned from being a music king, to an artists' servant. The faith that he had in himself turned to faith that he was developing in others.

Remember the Apostle Paul's great song that he wrote to the Philippians? It's called the Carmen Christi; some refer to it as the 'love song of Christ.' "Though he was in the form of God, He did not consider equality with God as something to be grabbed and exploited; but instead, he emptied himself. Taking the form of a slave, he humbled himself and became obedient, all the way to the point of death, even death on a criminal's cross."

Jesus himself didn't think it was up to him to make the dream happen— the Lord and Savior of the world could not... and would not... chose to excite and exercise his own authority to make the dream come true. For, it was God's dream. And remember what happens in the second verse of that that song? "Therefore, God highly exalted him, and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

God will make the dream come true even if it demands a resurrection. And the dream is centered in the servant, the slave—Jesus. Paul told the Philippians, if they lived into God's dream like Jesus did, without murmuring or complaining... without being crooked or perverse... without being selfish or arrogant... they would "shine like stars in the heavens."

Unlike Bobby Darin, you don't make the dream happen, and you don't make yourself into a star. God does it, as you choose to live the life of a humble servant.

Jean Calvin comments on this text: "The promise of God, which had exalted Joseph to honor, almost plunges him into the grave. We also, who have received the gracious adoption of God amidst many sorrows, experience the same thing... God permits us to be cast down in various ways so that we often seem nearer hell than heaven. Therefore, let the example of Joseph be fixed in our minds, that we may not be disquieted when many crosses spring forth to us from the root of God's favor."

The power of God's dream. God's dreams can seem like nightmares at times. But it is in the darkness and the dreariness where God is working out the fulfillment of the dream, while bringing us, at the same time, to maturity—growing us up. God led Joseph to hold onto the dream, to mature into leadership, even when he was thrown into a deep hole... and sold into slavery... and wrongfully accused... and thrown into prison... and even forgotten— not exactly the dreamy life of a star and a king. But all the time, in the midst of those terrible losses—the loss of the dream— he continued to be the person of integrity; the good servant. He kept his wits about him and learned all that he could. Joseph himself discovered it was God's responsibility to bring the dream to fruition.

Do you have a dream that has never been fulfilled? Do you think it's from God? If it is, it's not your responsibility to make it happen—but to live like Jesus and Joseph, in the midst of the difficulties of life. If the dream is from God, God will make it happen. And while you are struggling through the tough times, where the dream seems eclipsed, God will transform your mind and your spirit to become like Christ. So, when God finally gives you the fulfillment of the dream, you will be mature enough to rule like Joseph and to reign like Jesus.

Dreams help us grow. Dreams help us see that we're not in charge. Dreams may be shattered by human sin but they can be resurrected by the power of God. God gives us a dream to hold onto so that our faith may grow through the dark times, even with unanswered prayers for years.

I was talking just last week in the narthex with one of our members who came up to me overjoyed. And she said, "I've been praying for my son for 46 years to find a wife and guess what? He's getting married next week! I never gave up!" God gives us the dream so that we hold onto the faith in the middle of the dark nights. But the point of all of this is that it's ultimately not about the dream— it is about the Dream Lover himself. Dreams will drive us to despair or reverence. They will drive us nuts, or drive us deeper into the presence of God. And along the way, we will, if we are open, meet the Dream Lover of our souls who has come to us in Jesus. And God loves us; has us participate in his dream, which is beyond our wildest expectations, abundantly, far more than we can possibly ask or imagine, through Jesus Christ, who is our Dreamer and Savior.

Let us pray. May we be humble servants of our dreams, Lord, and be willing to follow your dream in Jesus Christ. That we might know you, to the depths of who you are, to the freedom of who we can become, as you lead us day-by-day, into the glory of Christ's presence, in whom we pray. Amen.