

“Dreamway”

At long last we’ve arrived at the end of the beginning. Our summer’s-long journey through Genesis is nearly at an end; and to borrow a RAGBRAI image, at this time next week we’ll be dipping our tires in the Nile in Exodus.

Genesis deals with these questions: What is the truest thing we know? Who or what is God? Who or what are we? How does it all fit together? Its answers are summed up in the fifteen crucial verses of our lesson for today.

We’ve been following the saga of Abraham, with special attention to what would become of the promises God made to him. Abraham represents God’s do-over. God has not given up on the dream for God’s good creation, a dream in which all the elements of creation will exist in their proper relationship to one another; and God’s peace, God’s shalom, will permeate all things. The dream goes awry when first Adam and Eve and then pretty much everybody else decide they want to be God. God tries starting over with a flood; but soon things get out of balance again as people build cities and towers to their own glory. So God starts over in microcosm with Abraham, promising this unpromising seventy-five year old man that he and his post-menopausal wife will become the ancestors of a great nation, will inherit the land of Canaan, and will become the means by which the world will know God and be blessed. Everything else that has happened in Genesis has addressed the same key issue: what has become of this promise?

We’re now into the generation of Abraham’s great-grandchildren, most of whom are not so great. Their stories have included treachery, deception, deceit, rape and incest. The lectionary’s picking and choosing has spared us some of the worst. In recent weeks we have focused on Abraham’s grandson Jacob, who had his name changed to Israel after wrestling with God. Israel has twelve sons, who give rise to the twelve tribes of Israel. From simple beginnings the story has erupted into a loud, massive confusing opera in several languages at once. The clan has grown so alarmingly complex that you pretty much need a scorecard to keep everybody straight, so we’ve given up trying to deal with Ishmael and Esau and the other outlying relatives, but they’re a part of it, too. Mercifully, the spotlight today falls on one individual: Joseph.

Joseph is the eleventh of the twelve sons of Israel. But he is favored by his father because Joseph is the first son of Israel’s favorite wife, Rachel. Last week we saw that Joseph’s status as Daddy’s favorite got him two things: a fancy coat with sleeves and an exaggerated sense of self-esteem. And these in turn won him the undying animosity of his ten half brothers. They wanted to kill the little twerp; but at the last minute they decided to sell him to a caravan headed for Egypt. They took the coat that was the emblem of his favored status, dipped it in the blood of a goat and took it home to Daddy Israel, allowing him to conclude for himself that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. The brothers, knowing that Joseph would be enslaved in Egypt, had to figure he was as good as dead. Some of them were sorry... a little bit.

Joseph was seventeen when he was sold, and the next thirteen years are eventful. In Egypt he is bought by Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh's guard. So immediately he's on the fringe of Egypt's power elite. Things go well for him at first. He's smart and capable and hard-working; so gradually Potiphar gives him more and more responsibility until he's basically running Potiphar's household.

And wouldn't you know it, he's also good-looking. This does not escape the attention of Potiphar's wife, who repeatedly makes brazen overtures to him. But Joseph's sense of loyalty to Potiphar outweighs whatever attraction he feels to Potiphar's wife. Thus spurned, she seeks revenge: she accuses *Joseph* of coming on to *her*, with the result that he is thrown into prison.

It's sort of a white collar prison where they play a lot of ping pong and pool. It's populated by servants of Pharaoh who have fallen out of favor. Joseph's roommates are Pharaoh's cup holder—you can't fool me, he's the bar tender—and Pharaoh's baker, who can't seem to get the Fertile Crescent rolls quite right. Conveniently (or providentially) they both have dreams that they are a loss to interpret. And Joseph has a special God-given gift for the interpretation of dreams.

In the bartender's dream he sees three branches which in short order bud, blossom and yield fruit which the bartender presses into Pharaoh's silver cup, which he places in Pharaoh's hand. Joseph says that the three branches represent three days, and the dream means he's going to get his job back. Joseph asks the bartender to remember him when he's back turning out whiskey sours and Harvey Wallbangers.

Encouraged by this good news, the baker recounts his dream: on his head there are three baskets; the top one is filled with bread, and birds come and eat the bread from the basket. Joseph doesn't sugarcoat it: the three baskets are also three days, at the end of which the baker will lose his head and become food for the birds.

This third day they've been dreaming about is Pharaoh's birthday, and in celebration he has the baker executed and the bartender reinstated. But of course the bartender forgets all about Joseph... for two full years.

Then Pharaoh has two dreams that *he* cannot interpret, and he is much perplexed. Well, when Pharaoh ain't happy, ain't nobody happy, and the bartender has learned to keep Pharaoh happy. So he tells him that a young Hebrew (actually by now Joseph is thirty) is really good with interpreting dreams. So Pharaoh calls for him, and the household holds its breath.

The narrator bothers to tell us that before he comes to Pharaoh, Joseph shaves and changes his clothes. This isn't a question of etiquette but identity; he comes in looking like an Egyptian. (There's no word whether he walked like one.)

Pharaoh's dreams sound like he's been to the State Fair. There's a prize winning stalk of grain—just for fun let's pretend it's corn—with seven ears on it, plump and golden and crying out for melted butter. And there's another stalk of grain that's withered and shriveled like it's been through a tornado. And the shriveled stalk devours the prize-winner...go figure. In the second dream there are seven prize cows—just for fun let's say

they're *not* carved from better—and seven skinny, scrawny ones; and—you guessed it!—the scrawny ones devour the corpulent ones.

Joseph is careful to cite God as the source of the dream and its interpretation. The seven plump ears and the seven prize cows mean seven years of bounty; but they will be followed by seven years of famine, that will wipe out the abundance of the plentiful years. So Joseph counsels Pharaoh to prepare by levying a 20% tax on all the harvest of the good years, stockpiling the grain in cities. Then when the famine hits, Pharaoh can sell the surplus grain back to the populace. In doing this, Pharaoh eventually will accumulate all the money, all the livestock and all the land in Egypt. What a guy! Immediately he takes a liking to Joseph.

Whether all this acquisition is in the plan from the beginning isn't clear; but that is the way it goes. Pharaoh appoints Joseph as his chief administrator. He gives him a signet ring, garments of fine linen (Joseph always was a fancy dresser), and a chariot—his own limo with a driver. Wherever Joseph goes the cry goes out, “Bend the knee!” And the populace bows down to the newfound penultimate potentate, second only to Pharaoh. When Pharaoh is at the Olympics or throwing out a first pitch or keynoting a fundraiser, Joseph is running the kingdom. Pharaoh even gives him an Egyptian name. It's Zaphenath-Paneah, which means—get this!—“Savior of the World.” Don't let it go to your shaved head, kid. You've come a long way from the flocks and herds and tents in the desert. Bend the knee everybody, here comes Zaphenath-Paneah!

It all happens just as Joseph said. There are seven great years in a row, and Pharaoh is literally raking it in while his golden boy keeps track of it all. Then the famine hits; and for those who aren't ready, the results are disastrous throughout the region. Particularly hard hit are the nomads who cannot feed their flocks and herds; people like Joseph's father and brothers. In the very first year of the famine Father Israel sends the brothers to Egypt because he has heard there is grain for sale there. And they all go; all except the youngest... all except Benjamin. Benjamin is the only other son by Israel's beloved wife Rachel. She died giving birth to Benjamin. Israel has already mourned the death of Rachel's other son, Joseph. He can't bear the thought of losing Benjamin. So the ten make the trek without him.

Evidently Zaphenath-Paneah (aka Joseph) is something of a micromanager, because he's on hand where they're dolling out the grain when his brothers arrive. The last time he saw them they were selling him to a caravan. He recognizes them immediately, but they have no clue that this Egyptian with all the trappings of power is their brother. How could they know? They're not even allowed to lift up their eyes to look at him.

It's a long story. He treats them harshly, holds one of them hostage until they bring back their brother Benjamin, and then contrives to have Benjamin arrested so he can keep him with him in Egypt. Yet all the while he is also conniving to give them back the money they had to spend on grain, and wondering and worrying about their father. Given all the back and forth, it has to be at least a couple of years from Joseph's first contact with his brothers until the climactic scene in today's lesson.

What breaks things open is a speech brother Judah makes. Joseph has announced his intention to imprison Benjamin in Egypt; but Judah says, in effect, “Please don’t do this. You don’t know what this would do to our father. Benjamin is the child of his old age. His brother [meaning Joseph] is dead, and Benjamin alone is left of his mother’s children.” This would kill the old man. At this Joseph loses composure. First he clears the room, sending out all the Egyptians. Then he empties his heart, revealing himself to his brothers. Will there be punishment, vengeance? No. There is forgiveness.

It’s hard to break through at first. “I am Joseph,” he says. But it is as if they cannot hear him. “Is my father still alive?” He has to try again; they can’t even look at him. “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.” And then comes something like a salvation pronouncement: “And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.” When does Joseph realize this? I think it’s right now.

At last the dreamer sees it all clearly: the part they have all been living in God’s dream. The whole vast, reeling soap opera—crazy, improbable, messy and fully human—is something in which a greater purpose has been at work; and that purpose will not be denied.

Walter Brueggemann helps us see the full power of this scene when he writes of Joseph, “The dead one is alive! The abandoned one has returned in power! The dream has had its way!”¹

There will be a reunion. Israel their father will come, and the eleven brothers will live with their father in Goshen, a choice part of Egypt. And they will all live happily... but not ever after; no, not quite ever that. Here at the end of Genesis we are only at the end of the beginning.

So in and through this whole long, convoluted and continuing story, all along it is God’s dream that matters, and God’s dreamway that will not be denied. Do you see how this changes everything? Always there is hope because God’s dream will not die. It’s not that God causes every event like a puppeteer. We have real choices, and those choices have consequences, and sometimes those consequences are dire. But they are never final. And here at the end of the beginning we pause to remember always that our lives and loves and labors are also a part of God’s dreamway for the redemption of creation.

What is the truest thing we know? It is the love of God. Who or what is God? God is the One who made us, and to whom we return. Who or what are we? We are God’s beloved children, made in the image of God and called to be fully human: no more, and no less. How does it all fit together? This long road we’re on, after all, is a journey home.

Amen

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¹ Brueggemann, Walter. *Genesis*, in the series, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982, pp. 343-344.