

Foundational Stories Series
“You Can (Try to) Kill the Dreamer, But You Can't Kill the Dream”
Sermon on Genesis 37:1-28 (8/23 & 8/24/14)
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Since the first weekend in July, we've been in a sermon series called *Foundational Stories*. We took a little break from the series last week while I was away, but now we're back.

So far, this series has centered around many of the stories in the book of Genesis – beginning with the story of Creation in Genesis chapter 1, and taking us to today's story in chapter 37.

The stories of this series are “foundational” because they are the stories of how God and God's people first came to be in relationship with each other. See, back in Genesis chapter 12, God had invited Abraham and Sarah to be the parents of a holy nation – a chosen people.

Abraham said “yes” to this invitation, and then God promised Abraham three specific things: one, that Abraham would be given the land we now call “Israel”...two, that Abraham would have many descendants...and, three, that Abraham's descendants would not only *be* blessed, but that the world would be blessed *through* them.

We call this three-fold promise “The Abrahamic Covenant” and, again, the three parts are land, descendants, and blessing. Then, perhaps most importantly, the over-arching promise woven throughout that three-fold promise was that God would be faithful to this promise, to this covenant, forever.

And so, the promise made to Abraham and his wife, Sarah, continued through their son Isaac and his wife Rebekah...then through Isaac and Rebekah's younger twin son, Jacob.

The most recent few weeks of this series have rested on Jacob's family. And...one of the most important things we learn from these “foundational stories” in the book of Genesis is that God keeps promises...despite the strange – or even horrible – behavior of God's chosen people.

Up to this point in Genesis, we've learned about all kinds of ridiculous stuff in this “holy, chosen” family: Jacob and his mother, Rebekah, tricked Jacob's older twin, Esau, out of both his birthright and a special, fatherly blessing...Jacob's father-in-law tricked Jacob into marrying someone he didn't want to marry *before* allowing Jacob to marry the woman he *did* love...and Jacob's wives fought for Jacob's attention and conceived children out of jealousy.

In today's story, we learn the family dysfunction continued with a brat of a youngest brother who dreamed dreams about his brothers and other family members bowing down to him, as though he were some sort of king or god.

Not only did Joseph *dream* these dreams...he flaunted them: he gloated about how his dreams seemed to indicate that *he* – the youngest – would eventually rule over his older brothers. Flaunting such dreams is surely not the best way to endear yourself to your siblings...especially when your father has already made it abundantly clear you are the favorite son.

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There are many interesting details in Joseph's story – many of which we'll encounter in next week's story, along with all sorts of interesting tidbits in the chapters between this week's and next week's stories.

Actually, I'd strongly encourage you to read through Genesis chapters 37 through 45 on your own sometime before next weekend – it will help you to wrap your head around the events leading up to next week's reading. And, if you're into musical theater, we have the ultimate Cliff's Notes version of Joseph's story available to us in the show *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

In fact, pretty much the only reason I can remember any of Joseph's brother's names is because, when I was in about fifth grade, the children's choir at my home church in Sioux Falls performed a 20-minute version of that show for a church dinner theater event. (In case you're curious, I played Joseph's brother Zebulun.)

In the musical – as in the actual story in Genesis – it's clear that Joseph was Jacob's favorite son.

And, in the musical – again, as in the actual story in Genesis – one of the ways Jacob made it clear Joseph was his favorite son was by giving him what today's reading calls “a fancy coat”...or, according to the musical's title, a “technicolor dreamcoat.”

A handful of translations of the Bible refer to Joseph's coat as a “coat of many colors” – which is obviously the source of the musical's title. But other, more accurate translations of Genesis refer to this coat as a “long robe with sleeves” or a “robe with *full* sleeves.”

The implication of the “coat of many colors” is that the *colors* are what's significant about the coat – that somehow the colors themselves were a sign of near-royalty for Joseph... so, in this respect, the coat in the musical version of Joseph's story was merely symbolic. The *reality* of the coat was far more significant than that, however – far more tangible.

See, the *actual* gift Jacob gave Joseph – the “robe with full sleeves” – had a *functional* implication...because the sleeves would have been so grand and large that, when he wore this special coat, the sleeves would have gotten in Joseph's way, so much so that he would not have been able to do much manual labor around the family homestead.

And those of us with siblings know what it feels like when your brother or sister manages to get out of doing some of the family chores. It's no fun and, if it happens often enough for no good, practical reason, it can lead to resentment toward that sibling.

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One of the details I find fascinating about today's story is the timing of Jacob giving Joseph this “robe with full sleeves.”

We learn right away in today's story that, along with many of his brothers, Joseph helped take care of the family sheep and goats. So there *was* actually a time when Joseph worked alongside his brothers. But we also learn that Joseph told his father “all sorts of bad things” about the kind of work his brothers were doing.

Interestingly enough, we don't know for sure if Joseph's brothers actually *were* doing their work poorly – we just know Joseph tattled on them to their father. And we know that it was *after* Joseph tattled that Jacob gave Joseph the robe with full sleeves.

So Joseph complained about working with his brothers in the field...and then Jacob made him a robe that prevented him from continuing to work in the field. I'd say that worked-out pretty well for Joseph, wouldn't you?

Then, not only did Joseph have this robe that prevented him from doing much of the hard, family work, he also gloated to his brothers about the dreams he had. So, naturally, his brothers were not terribly fond of Joseph...and they decided to do something pretty terrible to put Joseph in his place.

One day when Joseph's brothers were tending the sheep in a land a ways away from home, Jacob sent Joseph out to them to bring back a report on how they're doing.

When his brothers saw Joseph approaching in the distance, they developed a deadly idea: “Look, here comes the hero of those dreams!” his brothers said to each other. “Let's kill him and throw him into a pit and say that some wild animal ate him. Then we'll see what happens to those dreams.”

“Here comes the hero of those dreams! Let's kill him ... Then we'll see what happens to those dreams.”

Those are some powerful words, don't you think?

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As the story goes, big brother Rueben had compassion for Joseph and he offered an alternate plan: he suggested they throw him into a well instead, all the while planning to then figure out how to secretly send Joseph back home. When Joseph approached them, his brothers attacked him, took his fancy robe, and threw him into a well with no water...clearly sealing his fate, should they simply walk away from him.

But, they did not, in fact, walk away from him because, wouldn't you know, a band of Ishmaelites came rolling by and the brothers decided to sell Joseph to *them* instead of leaving him for dead in the desert.

The brothers made twenty pieces of silver out of the deal and their obnoxious younger brother was taken to Egypt...and out of their lives forever. Or so they thought. (We'll get to Joseph's time in Egypt next week.)

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A preacher could choose any number of directions for a sermon on this story about Joseph and his brothers...but I'm a bit of a dreamer myself, so I am particularly drawn to the *dream* aspect of this story. (Granted, I am perhaps not the kind of "prophetic" dreamer Joseph was, but I am a dreamer, nonetheless.)

I tend to be captivated not only by the idea of dreams themselves, but also captivated by the people who dream the dreams. For this reason, that one phrase from today's reading continues to come back to me, over and over again:

"Here comes the hero of those dreams! Let's kill him ... Then we'll see what happens to those dreams."

Joseph's brothers hated him, at least in part, because they hated his dreams: they did not like the idea of their brat of a younger brother ruling over them...and they thought that, if they got rid of the one who dreamed the dreams, perhaps the dreams themselves would not come true.

But that's not really how dreams work, is it. As we'll learn in next week's story, getting their dreamer brother out of their lives did *not* prevent his dreams from coming true. Getting rid of the dreamer does not always mean that the *dreams* will also go away.

Some dreams are just too big. Some dreams are just too important.

And...usually those big, important dreams are more about the *dream* itself than they are about the dreamer who dreamed it.

"Here comes the hero of those dreams!" his brothers said to each other. "Let's kill him ... then we'll see what happens to those dreams."

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On August 28, 1963, one of our nation's most famous dreamers gave his most famous speech. He gave his famous speech to a crowd that numbered in the hundreds of thousands, telling all who would listen about his great dream:

“I have a dream,” he'd said, “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.’”

“I have a dream,” he'd said, “that my four little 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. I have a dream today,” he had said.

Then, on April 4 of 1968, he was shot and killed at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Now, outside the Lorraine Motel, there is a plaque that reads: “Martin Luther King, Jr. January 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968. Founding President [of the] Southern Christian Leadership Conference.”

Below these identifying details, those haunting words from today's reading in Genesis 37 are etched in the stone: “They said to one another, 'Behold, here cometh the dreamer. Let us slay him...and we shall see what will become of his dreams.’”

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That dreamer was killed over forty years ago, but the dream he dreamed is still alive and well today – because it was not simply *his* dream. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a primary spokesperson for a dream of racial equality that had captured millions of people, a dream that's time had finally come.

In 1968, our nation learned that the death of the dreamer did *not* cause the death of the dream itself. There is still a long way to go toward full racial equality in our nation and throughout the world...but that dream *is* still alive and well, despite the death of the dreamer. And thank God, right?

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Somewhat more recently, the dreamer of a different kind of dream was killed. This dreamer's name was Rachel Beckwith.

Rachel Beckwith lived outside of Seattle, Washington. In the year before her 9th birthday back in 2011, Rachel learned through her church about an organization called charity:water that builds wells in Africa to give communities better access to clean water.

Rachel couldn't bear the thought that children like her in other parts of the world were getting sick and dying because they didn't have clean water.

So, instead of planning a party for her 9th birthday on June 12, 2011, she set up a donation page on charity:water's website.¹

She set a goal of \$300 and asked that her friends and family make donations there instead of buying her birthday presents. Her birthday came and went with only \$220 donated to charity:water – \$80 short of her goal.

Then, on July 20, 2011 – barely a month after her birthday – Rachel's family was driving their car when two trucks collided, creating a 13-car pile-up, leaving Rachel critically injured. As a way of showing love and care following the accident, church friends and others donated to her charity:water page and the amount quickly shot up to nearly \$50,000.

Three days after the accident Rachel died...and news of her fundraising efforts spread like wildfire.²

When I read her story three years ago, I was moved to make my own donation and, within three months of Rachel's death, the total amount of donations through her charity:water page was nearly \$1,266,00.00.

Rachel Beckwith had a dream that children in African would live longer, healthier lives through clean water...and though Rachel died tragically, her dream lives on through the wells built with money donated in her memory.

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The death of dreamers does not necessarily cause the dream itself to die – especially when the dream comes from God Almighty.

So...look around in the world. Notice the places where God's people are crying out for justice and healing. Find the dreams worth latching onto. And pray for the dreamers of those dreams...because their dreams just might be heaven-sent. Amen.

1 http://mycharitywater.org/p/campaign?campaign_id=16396

2 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/11/opinion/rachels-last-fund-raiser.html>