

**13<sup>th</sup> Week after Pentecost, Proper 14 – Year A – August 10, 2008**  
**Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33**  
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“Here comes this dreamer.”

Author James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book *The Epic of America* is thought to have coined the phrase “the American dream”. It is often understood in modern parlance to embrace the cultural ideals of increasing wealth and prosperity, education, liberty, and the opportunity to reap the rewards of hard work. Adams’ original intent appears to have been a broader vision centered on social justice and equality for all. This was a radical notion for that era. Consider, for example, that the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment granting the national right to vote for women was not signed into law until 1920. Adams’ vision was equality for every human being, regardless of all the things in our social consciousness that create rather than remove barriers between us. Sounds rather like Martin Luther King’s dream doesn’t it? And it sounds a lot like our Baptismal Covenant as well.

There are many dreamers of dreams in the Bible as well as in world history. Jacob dreamt of angels on a ladder into heaven. Laban, Jacob’s uncle was warned in a dream not to “say a word to Jacob, either good or bad”. Some time later as a slave in Egypt, Joseph would interpret the Pharaoh’s dreams. God would speak to Solomon in a dream, and also to another Joseph, the one engaged to be married to Mary the mother of Jesus. Who is your favorite historical visionary or dreamer? Martin Luther, Thomas Edison, John F. Kennedy, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu? Or does the word “dreamer” have a different connotation for you?

The actual descriptions of Joseph’s two dreams are missing from the Lectionary text of today’s reading from Genesis. The dreams are part of the reason that Joseph’s brothers have murderous intent against him. Joseph’s obvious favored status with their father Jacob who was renamed Israel is the other source of familial tension. As presented in Genesis, Joseph’s dreams concern visions from God indicating that he will come to bear the power and responsibility of leadership as the chosen heir of Jacob/Israel, despite being one of Jacob’s lastborn children. The relationships within this family are like a large power grid with God in control. In future readings from Genesis we will see how Joseph will function as a transformer turning the high-voltage drama of being sold into Egypt, into an effective low-current transmission of power over the long haul. Yet the reading for today is not without significant insights for us all to come to understand our own place in this story. It is a delightfully crafted master-narrative providing many lessons about our own Judeo-Christian roots, family and community dynamics, God’s power, human will, and the value of dreams and visions.

Here are the main characters: the elderly trickster Jacob renamed Israel by God in last week’s Old Testament reading; the favored teenage son, Joseph; the angry and jealous older brothers of Joseph including Reuben and Judah. Then with significant one-line roles, there are two bands of traders: the Midianites and the Ishmaelites, who trade for Joseph and deliver him to Egypt as a slave. The author and director behind the scenes is, of course, God. Which of the characters do you relate to in this story? Perhaps your own family reflects relationships that include stepparents, stepsiblings and half-siblings? I know mine does, and in that respect I am by no means part of an unusual family. Nor is my own experience of the joys and challenges arising from these accidents of birth and remarriage different from many of your own. The beauty of Biblical stories like Joseph’s is that they express deep truths about human nature and life in a broken world. The rich plot of our Judeo-Christian heritage is full of ordinary people doing exactly the kind of things that people do, some things that are good, and quite a lot of things that aren’t so good. It helps us realize how much love and grace God grants to each of us every moment of every day, and how much we need to seek forgiveness. It also helps to remind us just how dependent we are on God, and how easily we slide into self-interest when we don’t rely on God.

Families are a microcosm of the broader culture – there is love and loyalty, but there are also

such traits as competitiveness, jealousy, greed, and the desire for power and control. Within a family though, there is a much higher level of emotional involvement and therefore a much higher level of emotional pain whenever there are family difficulties. How painful must it have been for Joseph to be beaten and betrayed by his brothers? According to the Scripture, Joseph's brothers "hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him." This is more than just giving a half-brother the cold shoulder for some real or imagined slight. As a result of their hatred, Joseph's brothers could not share the traditional blessing of relationship that is *shalom*. The meaning of the word *shalom* is very expressive. Beyond just a general greeting, it conveys the desire for relationships founded on peace and all that that encompasses, such as well-being, completeness or wholeness in health, welfare, safety, and prosperity. Implicitly *Shalom* also expresses a desire for equality and justice for all.

In the sense of fairness, there appears to be little justice in the way that Joseph is singled out by Jacob as a favored son to be, as the reading tells us, loved more than his brothers. The hatred of Joseph by his brothers is fueled by jealousy. Their jealousy is fueled by fear. Are they afraid that Joseph will mistreat them if he is the head of the family and the nation? Are they afraid that they will not get a fair share of land or food for themselves or their families? When day-to-day survival was a significant concern, as it is still is in many parts of the two-thirds world even today, these are valid fears. But what about you? What about me? What are we afraid of? Most of us don't have to fear whether we will eat today or tomorrow, but we may well be fearful about our health, our children or grandchildren, or simply making ends meet with rising prices. Outside of our family life, we may fear things that we don't understand, or people who look or speak differently from ourselves. Then again, how many of us fear that we will not see our hopes and dreams come to fruition?

You and I know that the opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is fear. As John tells us in his first Epistle to the Church, "perfect love casts out fear;" (1 John 4:18). The Holy Trinity is the only source of perfect love: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. God does not desire that we live in fear. As we see so well in this story of Joseph and his brothers, fear is a part of the world, but has no part in God's kingdom, which is one of love and abundance, not fear and scarcity.

"Here comes this dreamer," Joseph's brothers say as they see him approach in his long robe with sleeves. They react in fear. Blinded by their hatred, the brothers fail to live according to God's will. They are not acting in good faith, nor do they let their fear rest in God. Nonetheless, as the author and director of this magnificent story God will not allow the misuse of human power to prevent His dreams from becoming a reality. God's purpose is and always will be done, despite our action or inaction.

God's purpose for the world, God's mission to the Church as a whole has been given to us in the words of the Great Commission. We are called to reconcile all nations to God, establishing God's kingdom through discipleship, baptism, and teaching all by word and deed the ways of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here at Our Saviour we are committed to the mission of the Church by practicing God's graciousness in and through all our ministries. At the mid-year parish meeting next Sunday, we will hear about the visions of our ministry leaders in sharing the gifts of this parish both near and far. It is a time for us all to respond with generous hearts and open minds. It is a time for each of us to answer God's call in faith by offering our own gifts and resources in love and service to the Lord. There is a place in God's ministry here for every single one of us, for God's children of all ages. Joel Barker once said, "Vision without action is a dream. Action without vision is simply passing the time. Action with vision is making a positive difference." I don't believe that we are here to simply pass the time, and I don't think you believe that either. May God bless us richly in His dream and desire for lives shared in the spirit of *shalom*. May God bless the actions of this community that allow us to fulfill God's vision now and into the future. May God continue to help you and I make a positive difference in the lives of all the people we are blessed to touch through our ministries in service to the Lord.

Amen