

Title: Behold the Dreamer
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Text: Genesis 37:12-20

In 1970, Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber produced a musical called *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat*. I recall how angry some of my conservative colleagues were at the apparent disrespect for the sacred text. But I thought it was a very positive thing that people were actually reading and reflecting on a Bible story. It seems that most of our favorite Bible stories come from the Old Testament, and like many of you I remember Joseph from my childhood. But not because he survived hardship and ascended to position of power in Egypt, but because of his “coat of many colors.” Dolly Parton wrote a song with that name.

Of course, we have all inherited myriad misconceptions based on bad translations and antiquated perspectives in past generations. Scholars say the Hebrew text does not suggest a technicolor coat, but rather a tunic woven of multiple fibers, or possibly even a tunic with long sleeves, as one belonging to a chieftain or noble. Whatever it was, it became the icon for the story of Joseph, the Hebrew boy who dared to dream of greatness.

Here’s what’s going on in this story. The patriarch Jacob had a tent full of kids. Two wives and two female servants, all available at his pleasure. That’s how it often was among Bedouin tribes. At the time, Joseph was Jacob’s youngest son and his favorite (Benjamin would come along later). But Jacob made the mistake, as many fathers have done, of displaying his favoritism in a way that fostered jealousy among his children.

The trigger for the whole story is Joseph had a couple of dreams that he someday he would be a man of great significance, and his brothers would bow down to him. Those dreams might not have been a problem had he not told them. That was a tactical error, to say the least, and their hatred grew. One day they saw him coming and one said “Look here comes the dreamer!” So, they roughed him up a little, threw him into a pit, smeared his special tunic with blood and told their father that Joseph had been killed by wild animals. Jacob grieved sorely. In the meantime, the brothers sold Joseph to Midianite traders who in turn sold him into slavery in Egypt.

What appears to be the end is just the beginning of Joseph’s story. I’ll leave it to you to read the rest. It’s too much excitement and intrigue to fit into this one lesson. But in summary, many years later Joseph had ascended to a high station among Egyptian royalty, and was in charge of storing and distributing grain for a famine he predicted. As had happened before, many poor Bedouins came to Egypt hoping for a hand out. Many historians believe that was the time when a Hyksos dynasty ruled Egypt. Whoever they were, they proved hospitable. And guess who came before Joseph asking for food? His own brothers. And as he had dreamed, they bowed before him. In short, we can say that despite hardship, trials, and harsh treatment, over the course of time Joseph clung to his moral values, his faith in God, and his dreams. Joseph remained true to God, and God remained true to him. Joseph’s dreams came true.

For today’s message, we’re not going to discuss or debate the common belief in the ancient world that dreams had prophetic meaning or modern notions of dream interpretation. No doubt, most Bible believers simply assume that God, for whom all things are possible, used dreams as a method of communication with select people. As the writer of Hebrews says “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways.” So, let’s leave it at that.

However, in this lesson I simply ask you to see in Joseph an illustration of the power of personal dreams and visions to lead people forward to significant accomplishments. And I speak of dreams and visions in their common metaphorical sense, our inner vision of what we would like to accomplish, to create, to produce, to become, as in the great song *I Dreamed a Dream*, from *Les Miserables*. Not dreams while we're asleep, or any sort of supernatural vision, but simply images in our minds of what is not but might be, what we desire to see in reality. I'm speaking of personal ambitions, goals of excellence, noble aspirations, including how we want to serve the interests of God. And that requires faith strong enough to keep working toward it, expecting good things to happen until those dreams become reality.

Earl Nightingale is famous in American history as a pioneer of personal development and motivation. One of his most defining statements is: "We tend to move in the direction of our dominant thoughts." Stated another way, he suggested that what we constantly dwell on directs the course of lives. That is true both in a positive and negative sense, both of our dreams and our nightmares. We know that a child who grows up with images of failure, misery, ridicule and abuse tends to reproduce more of that in life. There are remarkable exceptions, but generally that's true. On the flip side, the positive side, a child whose head is full of images of love, support, encouragement, praise and healthy ambition typically will move in that direction— that is, a stable and mature life of success. There is immeasurable power in dreaming a dream.

It is a simple fact that all great accomplishments in human history were first somebody's dream. From the pyramids of Egypt to Mount Rushmore, every stadium, cathedral, roadway, bridge, university, hospital, church, mission, daycare center for children, or benevolent foundation, was at the start someone's dream.

There have been many memorable statements by great people about dreaming dreams. The voice of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. continues to resound across our nation through his *I have a dream* speech, against racism and in support of tolerance and equal opportunity. Robert Kennedy said "Some men see things as they are and say why. I dream things that never were and say why not." Harriet Tubman, born as a slave and later a famous abolitionist, said "Every great dream begins with a dreamer." Henry David Thoreau, great American philosopher of the mid-nineteenth century, said: "If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours."

It is no accident that at the birth of the church, recorded in Acts 2, Simon Peter quoted the Prophet Joel concerning a new era of divine reign where "Your sons and daughters will prophesy, young men will dream dreams and old men will see visions." Every Christian should be a dreamer, a visionary, who sees that others might not be able to see, and who lives led forward by visions of good things that might be, that can be, if we believe and work to make them reality.

My prayer for you as individuals and as a church is that you grasp that ancient identity of Christians as a people with a mission in your community and the world. We need to be people who can handle even the harshest circumstances, not reacting in anger and resentment but responding in faith. We are dreamers, we are people who long for a changed world and will be led by that noble dream to live in such a way that can move the entire world in the direction of our dreams. We cannot allow ourselves to be absorbed into common complaints and criticism of what is, but dream of what might be and set ourselves to the task of making it happen. The church needs dreamers, visionaries, and prophets to blaze a trail through the wilderness of the unknown, to cope with hardship and adapt to change with innovation and optimism. Despite all

the problems in the world around us, to keep our eyes open to a bright future and go confidently in the direction of our noble dreams. A famous quote from Mark Twain is "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. Throw off the bowlines. Sail away. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore, dream, discover."

This concept has been adapted in recent decades in business, education, and sports for personal motivation, to help people see themselves attaining goals of excellence—to help a young girl break free of ethnic prejudice and see herself receiving a high school or college diploma, to help nurture a young man's entrepreneurial spirit and believe he can build a successful business, to help a woman believe in her inner sense of calling to become an ordained minister in the church. Christians tend to see ourselves as people with a divine purpose, on a divine mission to the world, people with the Good News, people who embrace the truth that saves souls, the truth that breaks down the dividing wall of race and class, the truth that lifts up the fallen and empowers the weak. The truth that love, kindness, goodness, and mercy is a better way that brings better results in daily life. So if we believe those rather elevated theological concepts, we should also believe in our personal dreams.

The words of scorn from Joseph's brothers became his legacy, words that defined his character, his faith in God, and his indomitable spirit. If so many others can see the power of dreaming a dream, why can't we. What is your dream?

(This message can be adapted to the story of Elisha's servant Gehazi, 2 Kings 6:17-20, whose eyes were opened to see what others could not see. Another valuable story is that of Walt Disney. In early years as cartoonist he had visions and dreams others just could not see. His creation of Mickey Mouse and the production of the film Steamboat Willie are stories of great vision. And it is told (a story that is probably exaggerated but has a marvelous point) that after Walt had died and Disney World in Orlando opened (anyone who has been there has no trouble remembering fireworks over Lake Buena Vista, the castle of the Magic Kingdom, Tinkerbell descending on a cable, the marvelous lighted parade of fantasy characters), someone said "It's a pity that Walt could not have seen this. The response was "He did see it. That's why it's here.")