

June 13, 2010  
Genesis 41:14-36  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
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## Joseph: Dreams and Visions

When I was a little girl it was a big event each year to watch “The Wizard of OZ.” Now, of course, this was in the days before you could download a movie anytime you wanted onto your TV, or computer, or I phone. It was before Netflix, DVDs, even before videocassettes. To see a movie, you had to go to the movie theater, which our family rarely did. Or you waited until it appeared on TV, which “The Wizard of OZ” did once a year. Like millions of other families we gathered around the TV set for this special showing. I have to admit I never saw the whole movie, because I was too afraid of the witch. When she appeared, I would leave the room, occasionally peaking around the corner. When the music shifted indicating a scene change or my parent’s announced that she was gone, I would return.

What I didn’t really pick up on at the time is that it was all a dream. The movie is primarily Dorothy’s dream after she is knocked out by the tornado. I never noticed the wonderful colors of OZ in contrast to the bleakness of Kansas because we only had a black and white television. It was only as an adult when I first saw it in color that I got the humor of the horse of many colors.

This great American movie classic is about a young girl’s dream and how the dream helps her to resolve the major conflicts she is experiencing in her life. At the end of her dream, Dorothy comes to realize as she puts it, “there’s no place like home,” and that it is up to her to bring herself back home. When Dorothy awakens and begins to tell her family and friends about her journey they chuckle and tell her that is “only a dream.” Dorothy is puzzled. “It was so real.”

The experience of dreams in the interplay between conscious experiences and subconscious and unconscious realities is very real indeed. Dreams are a bigger part of our life than we often acknowledge. If you sleep an average of 7 hours a day and live 75 years, you will spend 22 years of your life in the land of dreams.

Dreams are mysterious. There are many theories about dreams in terms of their origin, their function and their validity. Some medical research indicates that dreams can give people indications of where the body is experiencing trouble. Dreams are important in various forms of psychotherapy. Freud believed they expressed repressed wishes. Jung believed they had power for healing and growth. Some people believe that dreams make connections with the past and the future.

Dreams are often key in people’s creative and imaginative processes. “Let me sleep on it,” we say when we are trying to figure something out.

Interestingly enough, Descartes, the great proponent of rational thought from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, (remember, “I think, therefore I am.”) was compelled on his journey for truth by a dream. Descartes had a triple dream experience that served to focus his search for truth by applying the mathematical method to all other studies. It is interesting that his focus on rationalistic thinking had such a great impact of western civilization, while little or no attention was paid to the method by which he received his insights – by the mysterious process of dreaming. (**God, Dreams and Revelation**, Morton Kelsey, pg. 192)

Dreams are a significant part of the story of Joseph, especially in the first five chapters leading up to his re-encounter with his brothers. If you cut out the sections that refer to dreams, this is what you get. (*Hold up paper copy of these chapters, with dream segments cut out. About half is missing.*)

Joseph understands dreams as a means of contact with the realm of the Spirit. For him, dreams are one of the ways that God communicates with people. They are a rich spiritual resource.

That is why when he is brought to Pharaoh to interpret his dreams; Joseph asserts that indeed the dreams and the interpretation of the dreams are from God. For Joseph, dreams help him to understand his world through a lens of faith. They give him signs of the times. Joseph tells Pharaoh that his dreams of cows and ears of grain mean there will be 7 years of great harvest and then 7 years of famine.

Joseph’s role could have ended there. He could have remained primarily a dreamer. But Joseph has deepened through many harsh and painful experiences in his life. These experiences have honed his spirit and he is now not simply a dreamer, he is also a person of vision. He envisions storing up food during the times of feast in order to have sustenance during the times of famine. Pharaoh puts him in charge of living out this vision. Through his insights about the reality of his world, Joseph sees a path forward – a path of stewardship that will provide support to an ever-widening circle of people.

It is often through harsh realities that vision is clarified. Our young people who are graduating and going on to college have dreams and visions. As much as we wish it weren’t true, we know that those visions will be clarified not only through great opportunities but also through some of the painful realities of living. This is true not only for individuals but also for institutions.

The mainline protestant church finds itself today in the midst of the harsh reality that institutional church life has changed significantly in recent decades and thus we must clarify our vision for the future.

Sixty years ago, coming out of WWII, was a time of plenty for the church. As one of our retired clergy said to me, “In those days we didn’t have to pay attention to church growth, people just kept coming and we just kept building.” That world has changed. Just the other day, another one of our members told me that he is working with members of a large church in Maine who are strategizing about what to do with all the building space they have that they no longer use because the size of their congregation has decreased significantly. For many years the

institutional church as a whole lived luxuriously in the years of feast not paying attention to the intimations of famine.

To help us in clarifying our vision for the future there are a couple of aspects to Joseph's story that are helpful - flexibility and forward looking.

Flexibility – Joseph didn't desire to be flexible. I'm sure he would have preferred to stay at home and bask in his father's favoritism. He was an unwilling immigrant in a foreign land. He didn't want his world to change in the ways it had. But it did and he learned to deal with the real world in which he found himself. He trusted that God was with him, whether he was in the palace or in prison, whether it was a time of feast or a time of famine. Joseph has to adjust to a whole new culture.

We are a people living in a whole new time. We find ourselves in a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-spiritual world. It's not that the world hasn't always been this way, but we have often been comfortably oblivious to this reality. With today's instantaneous communication and ability to travel globally overnight, we cannot hide among ourselves.

As our young people move away from Midcoast Maine they will increasingly meet others who have little or no real contact with or understanding of Christianity. And they will meet others who think all Christians are narrow minded, judgmental, and focused on exclusivity. Since they don't want to be perceived that way it will be a challenge for them to live from within their own tradition.

One of the very interesting aspects of the Joseph story is the implication of the level of dialogue between Joseph and the Pharaoh about religious matters. Joseph does not hide his own religious convictions, but there does not appear to be overt antagonism between them about such matters. In fact, Joseph, while remaining Yahwistic (a follower of God, whom he calls Yahweh) in his convictions also marries an Egyptian woman and has Egyptian children. There are other parts of the OT that do not tolerate such practices, but we find them in this story.

I envision that the church is called to just such intercultural and interreligious dialogue in this time. We are called to witness to our experience of the Christian faith but we are to have open hearts and minds to those of other traditions. This is a way of spirituality that is key to what young people are experiencing and exploring in the world today, and they are drawing us into the future.

Martin Luther King Jr. found his dreams and visions were enriched by his dialogue with the work of Gandhi. In recent years there has been significant dialogue between Buddhist and Christian tradition in this country. It has helped us as Christians to reclaim some of our own traditions of contemplative practice.

In looking at our own tradition it is important to also be looking forward. We are a religion with a sacred book that was compiled almost two thousand years ago. There are times we are tempted to focus on looking back. We are a congregation with an almost three

hundred year history and an historic building which at times tempts us to focus on looking back. But the call is to be in dialogue with our rich history and heritage for the facing of these days and the days ahead.

There are many times when Joseph could have gotten stuck looking back, both at the glory days and at the horrendous treatment he experienced, but he envisions the possibilities and the responsibilities for the future. May we do likewise.