

Hijacked Dreams

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Empty us, Great God, of all that prevents us
from hearing what you want us to hear.

Empty us of our preconceptions,
our preoccupations and our prejudices.

Empty us that we might be filled
with your Spirit and your Word.

Empty us that we might be filled
for ministry and mission.

In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

Scripture: Genesis 37:12-36 (NRSVue)

¹² Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. ¹³ And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." ¹⁴ So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem,¹⁵ and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?"¹⁶ "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock."¹⁷ The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.' " So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.¹⁸ They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them they conspired to kill him.¹⁹ They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer."²⁰ Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams."²¹ But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life."²² Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father.²³ So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the ornamented robe^[b] that he wore,²⁴ and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

²⁵ Then they sat down to eat, and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt.²⁶ Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood?"²⁷ Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed.²⁸ When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

²⁹ When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes.³⁰ He returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is gone, and I, where can I turn?"³¹ Then they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood.³² They had the ornamented robe^[c] taken to their father, and they said, "This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not."³³ He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn to pieces."³⁴ Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days.³⁵ All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father bewailed him.³⁶ Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – “Hijacked Dreams”

There is a Chinese Proverb about a farmer, his son, and a stallion that was the family’s source of income.

One day, the horse escaped from the stable and their neighbors commiserated with the family, “Your horse ran away, what terrible luck!”

The farmer replied, “Maybe so, maybe not. We’ll see.”

Several days later, the stallion returned home, bringing a few wild mares to the farm. The neighbors celebrated, “Your horse has returned, and brought several horses with him. What great luck you have!”

The farmer replied, “Maybe so, maybe not. We’ll see.”

The farmer’s son began breaking one of the mares and he was thrown by the horse to the ground, and he broke his leg.

The villagers cried out, “Your son broke his leg, what terrible luck!”

The farmer replied, “Maybe so, maybe not. We’ll see.”

Not long after this, soldiers from the national army marched through the village, recruiting all able-bodied boys for the army.

They didn’t take the father’s son, who was still injured.

Friends shouted, “Your boy is spared, what tremendous luck!”

To which the farmer replied, “Maybe so, maybe not. We’ll see...”

Our morning’s passage has a similar feel to this Chinese proverb. God is at work, even in the midst of human evil, ignorance, lostness, mistakes, and even tragedy. In hope, we too can say, “we’ll see,” even when we’re down in the dumps.

Our story begins with Jacob sending his son Joseph on a perilous journey to Shechem—an eighty-mile trek, all by himself. He asks his son to check on his brothers’ shepherding skills.

We already know how much they like Joseph’s bad reports. This doesn’t bode well for Joseph. Yet Joseph is a dutiful son.

“Here I am.” Ready, available, listening, willing.

Joseph finally makes it to Shechem, but his brothers aren’t there.

He's wandering around and a very mysterious man appears to guide Joseph in the right direction. "Go another thirteen miles to the great pastures of Dothan. There you will find your brothers." This is destiny—Joseph is being directed by an unseen hand.

His brothers see him approaching in the distant horizon. And *of course* Joseph is wearing his technicolor toga.

"Here comes the dreamer."

Their animosity and envy is so great, they can't even call their brother by name.

"If we kill the dreamer, we can kill his dreams."

Joseph may have been spoiled, but he certainly didn't deserve this. They decide to fling him into a cistern used to capture rainwater. These pits were anywhere from six to twenty-four feet deep. It was empty, so he wouldn't drown, rather he'd die a slow death of exposure, hunger, and thirst. By doing this, Joseph would also be denied a proper burial. This was literally a "grave" sin. One of the worst sins at that time. Add to that the *sin of deceit* we see so often in Genesis.

"We shall say a wild animal killed him... and then we shall see what will become of his dreams."

Yes, we shall see. By fighting against the dream, the brothers helped fulfill the dream. Not only will the dreamer be saved, but they will be saved by the very dream and the dreamer they tried to destroy.

But then Reuben comes to the rescue...*almost*. His plan was to save his brother.

"Let's not take his life." "Shed no blood. Lay no hand on him..."

And then these interesting words..."throw him in a pit." Secretly, Reuben would come later to save Joseph. But, he didn't. It didn't work out that way. He had conscience, but not courage.

The great rabbis invite us to take some time with Reuben. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls Reuben "the great might-have-been" in Scripture.

"His is a story of potential unfulfilled, virtue not quite realized, greatness so close yet unachieved."

Reuben is the Hamlet of Genesis whose "*native hue of resolution*" is "*sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thought*." But let's not be too hard on him. There's a goodness in Reuben. He has a conscience. He cares about others. Has good intentions. But here's where Reuben is lacking: he attempts to do the right, *the wrong way*. By deception.

Secretly, not out in the open, he would rescue his brother and restore him to his father. His plans are passive and indirect. And he doesn't have good follow-through. Plus, he's absent, when most needed. In fact, Reuben's best laid plans backfire, making the situation *worse*, not better.

When he finds out that Jacob was sold into slavery, he rends his clothing, but he seems to do it for himself, more than Joseph. “The boy is gone, and I, where can I turn?” And instead of taking responsibility, Reuben joins in his brothers’ cover up, bringing fake news to his father.

As Rabbi Sacks notes, Reuben had conscience, but not courage or resolve. Tragedy ensues.

Reuben is not alone. This is a real human struggle. There’s a little bit of Reuben in all of us. People-pleasing and self-doubt can keep us from truly standing for justice. We stay silent when we should speak. Or we make half-hearted plans that aren’t carried through. But this doesn’t have to be our story—our story is still being written. We’re all imperfect. We all have a past, but with God we have a future. And our future doesn’t have to be a repetition of our past mistakes. All of us here have time—it may be a lot or a little, but we have time to learn and to change course, by God’s grace. Jesus gives us a new script to live by. With Christ, we can throw away our tired and predictable scripts and patterns of relating and being.

Know who you are. You are God’s beloved son or daughter.

You were created by the Creator of the Universe, made in God’s image. Your elder brother, the risen Christ, lives in you and forgives you. You are no longer a slave to fear. You are empowered by the Spirit of God to discern and do God’s good, pleasing, and perfect will. God has more faith in you than you do in yourself. And your faith is in the living God. Meditate on this.

Hear the good news Immanuel: we are a new creation in the crucified and risen Christ. We bear his name: “little christs.” And God even uses Reuben’s and our missed opportunities to keep the dream alive. God is faithful, even when we’re not.



*“Joseph Is Sold To The Ishmaelites”
French Manuscript Illumination*

They strip Joseph of his ornamented robe and throw him in the pit. While Joseph was in a deep pit all alone, the brothers sat down to eat together. Casually and callously, the brothers make a toast with their champaign and enjoy caviar.

Then they hear the clapping of camel hooves coming their way. It was a caravan of Ishmaelites from Gilead with gum, balm, and resin. Yes, there is a balm in Gilead, even when life is the pits.

More family members get involved—sons of the deposed Ishmael. And can you guess where they’re going? Egypt.

God is at work, even in the midst of this grave injustice. The brother Judah gets an idea and messes up Reuben's plans. Don't kill Joseph—he's our brother, our own flesh and blood. Let's sell him. He'll be gone, but not dead. Plus, we can make some money off it. His brothers agreed. Joseph is lifted out of the well and sold for twenty pieces of silver, what may have been the going rate for slaves. The deception continues, and so they take Joseph's ornamented robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in blood for the cover up.

It's interesting that they chose a goat. Do you remember when Jacob deceived his father Isaac to get Esau's blessing? What animal skin did he use to make him appear like Esau? Goatskin. What kind of meat did Jacob use for the meal he gave to Isaac when he came into the tent? Goat meat. Once again, we see how the deceiver will be deceived...with the help of a goat.

They bring the blood-stained robe to Jacob. In Old Testament law, if it could be proved someone or something was killed by a wild animal, they would not be held guilty of the death. The brothers are longing for innocence and their father's acceptance and love, a love that Joseph enjoyed, and they didn't.

Jacob recognized the clothing, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him and Joseph has been torn to pieces." Joseph then tore *his* robe in grief and put on sackcloth, mourning in a way that only those who have lost a child do.

Several of you personally know Jacob's gut-wrenching sorrow. His sons, daughter, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren sought to comfort him. He refused their comfort. He would bewail his son until he would join him in the grave. Even in death, Joseph remained Jacob's favorite.

Meanwhile... Joseph is in Egypt. He's just been sold to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard. Joseph's dreams may have been hijacked, but the dream is still alive. The dreamer is still alive.

So, where is God in all of this?

We find an answer later, at the end of Genesis.

"You intended to harm me," says Joseph to his brothers, "but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."



Does life have you down in the pits? *Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up.* Remember Jesus, the one betrayed with a kiss, was lifted out of the grave. The evil against Jesus resulted in life and salvation.

The cross reminds us that God can transform the very worst into something life-giving. We have hope. And grace, too. Even in the midst of our bungled plans, painful hurts, missed opportunities, betrayals, and infidelities, God is still working and redeeming.

The dream isn't over.

Amen.

Sermon Art: *"The Coat of Many Colours"*, by Ford Madox Brown, 1867

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