

Dreams and Deceptions

Providence of God Series 1

by

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Genesis 37:1-28

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. ²This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. ³Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves.* ⁴But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

⁵ Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. ⁶He said to them, 'Listen to this dream that I dreamed. ⁷There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.' ⁸His brothers said to him, 'Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?' So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

9 He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, ‘Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.’¹⁰ But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, ‘What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?’¹¹ So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

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 long robe with sleeves* 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 there 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.

Today we are beginning a fall sermon series on the last family saga in the Book of Genesis. As you just listened to the beginning of this Joseph narrative, I imagine some of you may have thought to yourselves: I haven't thought about this story since third grade Sunday School. Others may be having flashbacks to the last church Youth Musical Performance you heard, or sang in, Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Weber's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. Still others may have pondered, and I admit to this crossing my mind, this is a terrible biblical tale of jealousy and deceit, of sibling rivalry, hatred and violence. Why on earth do we teach our young children about the brat Joseph and his cruel brothers?

So, let me tell you the very grown-up reason why I have chosen to focus on this ancient story at this particular moment. This is a survival story. It was written for historic people who had suffered an unusually long season of violence, natural disaster and experiences so terrifying they had lost a sense of meaning and purpose.

They needed help finding hope for the future.

Here's a quick review of the historic context: With the Babylonian invasions and assaults on ancient Judah and Israel, the people lost nearly everything – their king, their temple, control of their land. Babylon deported the elite, displaced those who remained in the land and ruined its economy, subjecting the conquered to violent disruption and social upheaval. When the Babylonian Exile was over, those exiles needed a story to help them see what had happened to them, to grieve it, and to interpret their experiences in order to rebuild their broken lives.

Today, we would call the Joseph story “trauma informed literature.” The Joseph saga is intended to be a story upon which traumatized people can project their own experience of violence and social upheaval in order to help them process it, make meaning of it and to live again with hope and purpose.¹

On this twentieth anniversary weekend of September 11, 2001 – we remember the trauma of that day, the subsequent twenty-year war, and between then and now the crumbling of so many of our institutions, the growing suspicion of the other, the

¹ Kathleen O'Connor, “How Genesis Faces Chaos,” *Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 2021.

raised level of fury across our land, and the sheer decline of civility. Add to concerns about international instability and national political rancor – our long and contentious pandemic season alongside the recent onslaught of natural disaster, of fires out west and flooding in the neighborhood, and I think it’s safe to say, that we ourselves might benefit from attending to the Bible’s trauma informed literature over the next several weeks.

Carlos Lozada is the Book Critic for *The Washington Post*; it seems he’s read every book about the terrorist attacks twenty years ago and their ripple effects. He writes about how the 9/11 Commission Report details the origins and objectives of al-Qaeda, the missed warnings and failures of government, and then the report makes “a rousing case for the power of the nation’s character.” “The U.S. government must define what the message is, what it stands for,” the report asserts. “We should offer an example of moral leadership in the world, committed to treat people humanely, abide by the rule of law, and be generous and caring to our neighbors...” We need to defend our ideals vigorously and stand up for our values. And yet today, Lozada notes, the legacy of the 9/11 era has instead heightened some of our ugliest impulses – leaving a nation deeply divided, citizens who bypass inconvenient facts, and demonize outsiders and one another. More Americans today are concerned about domestic terrorism than foreign terrorism.²

Twenty years ago over a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, a group of Americans heroically saved the nation’s Capital Building from being bombed by an airplane. Nine months ago American citizens attacked that same Capital building and threatened to murder our elected leaders.

Friends, WE ARE Joseph and his brothers. We are survivors in a kind of existential exile, and I think we need this Biblical trauma informed narrative to help us recover greater hope for the future. So let me lift up a couple of key insights from the passage before us today about where God might be calling us through this terrible tale of dreams and deception. Joseph was Jacob’s favored son because he loved his mother, Rachel, more than the others, and because he was the son of his old age.

² Carlos Lozada, “9/11 Was a Test: The Books of the Last Two Decades Show How American Failed,” *The Washington Post*, 9/3/21.

All of God's promises to Abraham and the hopes of Jacob are now centered on this favorite son. The name Joseph means "to increase" or "to add," and Joseph is added to the already large family, by the love and grace of God. Here we see that oft-repeated biblical inversion of how the last becomes first, when his father gives him that special coat with long sleeves, remembered to be multi-colored. Spoiled and too young for hard work, Joseph becomes a tattletale paving the way for his brother's jealousy and hatred, but the thing that tips them over the edge is his dreams. In the ancient world dreams were conduits for messages from God, and no one likes the dream Joseph brags about – forecasting a future when everyone else will bow down to him. They hated the Dreamer and plan to get rid of him.

Now, the oldest brother, Reuben, is not with his brothers when they plot to kill Joseph, so he intervenes with his own elder brother idea. Not quite as violent as killing Joseph, Reuben engages an alternative plan of deception. His deception will both save him from losing his father's favor altogether if the killing were discovered, and it prevents him from alienating the other brothers. Scholar Walter Brueggemann says: "Reuben is presented as responsible, but cowardly, and the killers of the dream will not be restrained by a responsible coward."³

So Judah steps in, and the brothers sell Joseph into slavery which is as good as counting him dead. South African pastor, Allan Boesak, zeroed in on Reuben's pivotal role in turning the drama from murder to mere deception. He calls his attempt – to not really save Joseph, but to appease all sides the "Reuben Option." Boesak said the Reuben Option is often the agony of the church. We know what we should be doing, but sometimes we lack courage to do it. "We are afraid to make choices," Boesak said, "so we are constantly on the lookout for compromises. We get paralyzed by the need to be all things to all people, and to be a church where all feel welcome all the time." However, when we live out the Reuben Option, we engage in deceiving ourselves in order to keep the peace amid dissention and injustice.⁴

³ Allan Boesak, "The Reuben Option," *A Chorus of Witnesses*, Thomas G. Long, Editor, p. 135.

⁴ Boesak again, p. 134-5.

We end up hesitating to do what really is right: to love boldly, to speak out loudly against injustice, to do the hard work of God on behalf of the oppressed and the poor, the desperate and downtrodden.

Here are just two examples of how folks lean into the Reuben Option today. Some good church people do not want to talk about racism – it surfaces guilt, tension and conflict. But The Gospel calls us to the work of anti-racism, of fairness and justice. Some good church people are fearful about the arrival of so many refugees. But God repeatedly calls us to make a home for them. The problem with the Reuben Option is the Gospel is never impartial, and it is impossible to be the church of Jesus Christ and keep as many people appeased as possible – by choosing the Reuben option; by choosing Responsible cowardice.

Friends, today we begin a new program year and this church has all manner of ways to help people feel connected, to grow in faith and faithfulness. But it takes a community of truth-telling, of love and support to help us to have courage to not choose the Reuben Option. We have hard work to do in this season of incivility and crumbling institutions, amid a world of racial hostility and violence, during an ongoing pandemic and a climate teetering toward unlivable. We need one another to be honest about our trauma, in order to make meaning, to mend brokenness, to recover hope in the promises of God, and thereby to have courage to do the hard work of discipleship.

Barbara Kingsolver's most recent novel is about two families who occupy the same house a full one hundred years apart. The title *Unsheltered* hints at how these families navigate the challenges of surviving a world in the throes of major cultural shifts. As the home inherited by one family in 2015 becomes uninhabitable, the house serves as a metaphor for the crumbling life of a middle-aged couple facing job insecurity, the medical crisis of an aging parent, and an unexpected tragedy plaguing a young adult child.

The protagonist, Willa, goes to the local library to learn about the history her home, and finds that her own desperate situation mirrors that of its occupants in the late 1880's. A hundred years earlier, her house was home to a science teacher passionate about honest investigation, who gets caught up and traumatized for teaching a then new scientific theory published by Charles Darwin. The novel

unfolds – showing how times of great personal loss and cultural upheaval circle around periodically, and yet people find ways to survive by being in community with other seekers of meaning, by loving one another with compassion. Which, in turn, helps them find courage to be better and stronger human beings.

What I found actually most interesting was Kingsolver’s *Afterward* in which she describes how she came to write *Unsheltered*. She surveyed the world around her, writing: “I’ve been alerted to the end of truth in journalism and the honor of elected officials. Democracy itself is on notice, along with thoughtful political discourse, civil leadership, civility *period*, not to mention more urgent concerns like affordable education or a reliable pension at the end of a career.” She goes on: “And it gets worse. I’m now required to contemplate the ends of species, coastlines, and the formerly steadfast ice on the North and South Poles. Truths that most of us have counted on all our lives are abruptly in doubt... When the rules of the past no longer help with navigating the future, it feels like the sky is falling.”⁵

It struck me that she wrote those words in May of 2018, almost two full years before the pandemic sent us into isolation from which we are only now emerging. Kingsolver completes the thought that these may seem the worst of times, and many of us would rather read a novel than the news. “Because this is what I know for sure,” she concludes, “stories will get us through times of no leadership better than leaders will get us through times with no stories.”

The Bible gets that in spades. The story of Joseph and his brothers is going to get us through the next several weeks as a narrative upon which to cast the trauma of our days. Today’s take away is this – God will not let the DREAMER or his DREAMS be killed. And, God does not want us to choose the Reuben Option and just keep everyone happy at the expense of doing what is right and just. In these fraught and traumatic times, we are being called. To trust God. To obey God, and to work together to preserve the dream for the common good.

AMEN

⁵ Barbara Kingsolver, *Unsheltered* “Afterward.” 465.