

Joseph Dreams of Greatness

Genesis 37 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.^[a] 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.

⁵Once 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.

⁹He 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." ¹⁰But 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?" ¹¹So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

The Visit of the Wise Men

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,^[b] and have come to pay him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd^[d] my people Israel.’”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Escape to Egypt

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴ Then Joseph^[B] got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

The Massacre of the Infants

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,^[B] he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.^[B] ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ “A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

The Return from Egypt

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰ “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” ²¹ Then Joseph^[B] got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

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Genesis 37:1-11; Matthew 2:1-23
Dreamers/Rachel's Lament
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Dreams can quickly become nightmares.

*“A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation. Rachel weeping for her children;
She refused to be consoled because they are no more.”*

This is one of the most haunting passages of scripture. And it's especially haunting in how often it repeats itself.

The powerful rage – and the powerless suffer.

Dreams of greatness turn into nightmares of regret or retribution.

One Joseph has symbolic dreams of greatness among his brothers, and those furious brothers sell him into Egyptian slavery and write him off as dead.

Another Joseph dreams of dread in the land of Herod, and flees with his family to Egypt to evade the slaying of male children done at the hands of a ruthless King.

These two Josephs, both driven to Egypt without consent or alternative,
are both sons of men named Jacob.

And so, they are both familiar with Rachel's torrent of tears.

Rachel was the patriarch Joseph's birth-mother. Though Jacob is known as the father of the sons who would head the 12 tribes of Israel, only two of those sons were Rachel's offspring. If you remember a few details from the story, Jacob fell in love with Rachel when he first laid eyes on her. Nevertheless, he was tricked by his father-in-law Laban into marrying her older sister Leah first. Rachel had a difficult time conceiving so she was quite jealous of her sister's sons with 'her' husband. So, she gave Jacob her handmaiden Bilhah to conceive sons that would be considered 'hers' then as well. More children were born to Bilhah, to Leah, to Leah's handmaiden Zilpah – all in all 10 sons before she FINALLY conceives and gives birth to Joseph. Up until that point Rachel had lamented her barrenness bitterly. After Joseph's birth, Jacob decides to uproot his family from his father-in-law's household and move back to Canaan. While they are leaving, Rachel steals the household gods because her father was refusing to give them their rightful inheritance. Jacob, not wanting to anger Laban swears the curse of death on the person who took the idols – not realizing it was his beloved Rachel. The curse comes to pass when Rachel dies in childbirth with her second son, the one she names Ben-omi, son of my suffering, who Jacob renames Benjamin, son of my right hand.

This week, it dawned on me that Rachel is the ever-lamenting mother of the Hebrew people, her soul never quite relieved, never completely quieted as her descendants seem to face the dire and deadly consequences of slavery, exile, and Herod's murderous rage in Bethlehem. I suspect her tears are still with us whenever children suffer the consequences of senseless violence or calculated destruction. Her tears not only appear in her own story, but again alongside the weeping prophet Jeremiah, and now here, in Matthew's gospel as a human-instigated plague of

childhood death crosses over the Hebrew people again – and this time their sons aren't spared – all but one – Jesus who ends up whisked away by his father, Joseph, to a safe haven in Egypt.

This Joseph has two dreams that bookend my reading for today. In his dreams, angels speak to him directly. “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him,” and “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.” In Joseph's dreams – he is called to action - “Get up,” and he is called to protect the lives of Mary and Jesus. Matthew tells us these stories, as he says, so that prophecies about the Messiah may be fulfilled in the telling. This many hundreds of years later, I know that I have trouble hearing the stories in the context in which they were originally told. As a life-long Christian in a long line of life-long Christians, much of it can easily get lost in the familiarity of how we have told our nativity narratives – usually leaning way more on Luke's glorious angels and humble shepherds – rather than dwelling on Matthew's dark narrative filled with horror and grief. To simply be relieved that, thank God, Jesus was saved by Joseph's angelic visitors is to miss a far greater point that, for Jesus, for his whole life, he would pose a very tangible threat to the “way things were.” So much so, that all the children under 2 years old in Bethlehem were killed from house to house because of the threat he posed to Herod. That was the job his policing force was forced to carry out.

It's a reminder to us that being called to love in a world plagued by family curses, and the powerful interests of Pharaohs, Kings, and even elected leaders is a dangerous business. To truly stand with the powerless when the powerful want their own way puts us in an uncomfortable

place. Following Jesus means weeping with Rachel when the children suffer. Following Jesus means fiercely protecting like Joseph when love could be lost. But as I learned from my own dream just this week, it also means that God hears our need for love and community, and it's up to us, the church to allow the music and mayhem of such love to be expressed understanding that there's risk involved when we do that.

Here's the basics of my dream and how I interpret it. I was traveling through a countryside, listening to stories of all kinds of people, people who were feeling alone, people who had been hurt, people who had great needs, and people who had love to give and were simply wanting to connect with their neighbors. The individuals began to talk and share their lives with each other as we traveled along – coming to realize they needed a place where they could meet. Someone mentioned that there was a house on the hill overlooking the ocean that might be the perfect place for us, so we all gathered around tables – outside of the house – in the driveway and carport to see if someone would let us in. When I knocked on the door, the caretaker answered, but only let ME in, not the group. The house had no other people in it, but it was filled with the most exquisite pianos and organs I had ever seen. I started taking pictures to show Austin. Then I turned a corner and there was a room filled with golden harps – 30 or 40 of them. That's when I realized the whole house was silent. All those instruments, and not a note of music, and the caretaker of the house seemed to like it that way. Scene two – I realized there were some kids outside in the crowd who needed to use the bathroom, and I knew the group was getting hungry and needed a place to prepare food. Again, the house had multiple bathrooms and a huge kitchen, but the caretaker was horribly worried about any mess, especially the kind of mess children and young people make. What if they don't know their manners? All that space, all that hard work

put into design and form, and there was no room for music, no room for mess, no room for the people who wouldn't respect the pristine nature of this space that had been kept so diligently for so long. So, why have those beautiful instruments if no one is allowed to play them? Why have kitchens, and bathrooms, and living rooms if they are going to remain empty? That's when I woke up knowing that this was a dream about what it means to be the church, with people hungry for community and connection on the outside, emptiness on the inside, and me standing in that doorway trying to figure out what's most important. The "me" in this case isn't just me, it's anyone who sees what is happening to the Christian church in America and elsewhere. This also isn't just Ashland Presbyterian Church, it's THE Church, capital C, because this has been the direction of many churches, in our time and in other times. We institutionalize and caretake to the point of closure not realizing that the church isn't the building, or instruments, or kitchens, or bathrooms. It's no museum. Rather, the church is the people, the loud and messy people who need a place where they are encouraged and supported to gather together for healing and hope.

The museum mentality creeps in in so many ways, and it gets under the skin of both evangelical and progressive communities, and all kinds in between. If we become about preservation and caretaking rather than about love – for the messy lives of real people – then we start to miss the point about Jesus. His life was about love to the point of facing unspeakable horror and grief in his own life to offer salvation to the whole world. When we stop the music or turn away the young – that's the beginning of the end. We need to remember Rachel's tears for her lost children, and remind those lost children constantly that they have a space and a place anywhere and everywhere that Jesus came to redeem – and that's all of it!

Let me take one more moment to remind you of your gift of space, and place, and welcome so that you will see it, believe it, and trust in it again anytime those niggling little caretaker vibes come in. I know them, because I have them sometimes myself. Remember that in my dream, I woke up in the DOORWAY, with a decision yet to be made of where to put my energy and attention! All of us need to be reminded sometimes of just how crucial it is to root our Christian practice in the care of PEOPLE, not things. Lately, I have been seeing 5-star ratings along with the check-ins on the Ashland Presbyterian Church Facebook page, and they aren't from our regulars, and they aren't from Christmas Eve visitors. They are from the people who come to AA and NA meetings in Lancaster Hall. Those who need a place to be seen for the children of God that they are – beyond their addiction – are finding it here. They are hearing the music and letting the mess of life be revealed to be healed. Sometimes our sanctuary lives could be improved by noticing what goes on in the church basement (or in our case, the fellowship hall).

Love is hard. Whether that hard love is about letting go of “the churchy way things have always been done,” or not being too worked up by the loud noise or mess of a kid, or letting the music be more important than the instrument, or standing up to the powers of the world that still see children and the poor as expendable – love is still our calling as followers of Jesus, the Savior of the world. Live into that love. Let it speak to you in dreams and in your daily life. Mourn when there's something worthy of your tears, Rachel's tears so that the grief will change you, and motivate you, and let your heart break with love for God's people, all people. Amen.