

Dreaming with God

Menno Mennonite Church

August 9, 2026

Purpose: To sit with the way that God works beyond the ways and means of our expectations.

Message: As followers of Christ in God's Kingdom we are invited into God's dreams that can far outstrip our own

Scripture: Genesis 37:1-4; 12-28 (I will read); Psalm 85:8-13 (Please read)

Synopsis: Dreams, as pleasant as they are, are dangerous. They can set up an anticipation of how things are and should be that can be hard to live up to, harder still to make sense of. What's more they are consequential as they can inspire both aspiration as we seek what the dream portrays and critique and skepticism when others doubt what we ourselves might envision. Yet in all this, God's way continues to be worked out in the often convoluted ways that can far surpass our dreams and expectations.

37 Jacob lived in the land of Canaan
where his father was an immigrant.

² This is the account of Jacob's descendants.

Joseph was 17 years old and tended the flock with his brothers.
While he was helping the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah,
his father's wives,
Joseph told their father unflattering things about them.

³ Now Israel-- Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other sons
because he was born when Jacob was old.
Jacob had made for him a long robe.

⁴ When his brothers saw that their father loved him
more than any of his brothers,
they hated him and couldn't even talk nicely to him.

¹² Joseph's brothers went to tend their father's flocks near Shechem.

¹³ Israel said to Joseph,
"Aren't your brothers tending the sheep near Shechem?
Come, I'll send you to them."
And he said, "I'm ready."

¹⁴ Jacob said to him, "Go! Find out how your brothers are
and how the flock is, and report back to me."

So Jacob sent him from the Hebron Valley.
When he approached Shechem,

¹⁵ a man found him wandering in the field and asked him, "What are you looking for?"

¹⁶ Joseph said, "I'm looking for my brothers.
Tell me, where are they tending the sheep?"

¹⁷ The man said, "They left here.
I heard them saying, 'Let's go to Dothan.' "
So Joseph went after his brothers and found them in Dothan.

¹⁸ They saw Joseph in the distance before he got close to them,
and they plotted to kill him.

¹⁹ The brothers said to each other, "Here comes the big dreamer.

²⁰ Come on now,
let's kill him and throw him into one of the cisterns,
and we'll say a wild animal devoured him.
Then we will see what becomes of his dreams!"

²¹ When Reuben heard what they said,
he saved him from them, telling them,
“Let’s not take his life.”

²² Reuben said to them, “Don’t spill his blood!
Throw him into this desert cistern,
but don’t lay a hand on him.”
He intended to save Joseph from them and take him back to his father.

²³ When Joseph reached his brothers,
they stripped off Joseph’s long robe,
²⁴ took him, and threw him into the cistern,
an empty cistern with no water in it.

²⁵ When they sat down to eat,
they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead,
with camels carrying sweet resin, medicinal resin,
and fragrant resin on their way down to Egypt.

²⁶ Judah said to his brothers,
“What do we gain if we kill our brother and hide his blood?
²⁷ Come on, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites.
Let’s not harm him because he’s our brother; he’s family.”

His brothers agreed.

²⁸ When some Midianite traders passed by,
they pulled Joseph up out of the cistern.
They sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver,
and they brought Joseph to Egypt.

For as much as we make about dreams and dreaming, we must admit that we know full well that they have a way of complicating reality. Dreams of a better, brighter, or even a different future frequently remain just that: dreams and that is that. Sure things improve and the way is opened and we can wind up in a far different place than what we ever imagined, but seldom does it come as clearly as we might aspire to, and almost certainly never as cleanly as we would dream. It is always a two edged sword. We need the dream to inspire us and call us to move toward something but we know too that there is the other side where things do not work out the way that we might hope. For every person who has realized their ambitions and achieved their dreams, we also know that there are those for who life never quite measured up as well. Sometimes, dreams are slow in coming no matter how many stars you happen to wish on.

So who needs them? Joseph would have been better off without them. His brothers might have stood a chance of a happier life with out them. Jacob could have been saved decades of grieving and heart break without his son's images of grandeur and the need to talk about them. At the end of it all, who really needs dreams anyway?

Perhaps God does. Perhaps this too is how God works, even in sorry circumstances such as these.

It is notable that God does not make an appearance in this part of Genesis. The God of Abraham, the Fear of Issac, the YHWH of Jacob's Bethel visions are no where in this chapter. The whisper isn't even there. There is no pointing at God along the way anywhere in the explicit text. But you know, even if we didn't know how this story ends, you would still be rather hard pressed to deny the sneaking suspicion that there is a strong likelihood that God is in here somewhere hiding amidst the dreams.

Casting your recollections back through Genesis and the stories that we have had thus far, we might note an emerging pattern: it is never the character in the story that we are given to suspecting. God is always going out of the way to raise up the younger, out of the way sibling to greater things. Even when the story goes out of the way to make it clear that the ones who are chosen are not always the wisest or the best behaved (see birthright theft in the first degree) that gets the blessing and inherits the right to become the nation that they are being called to become. So you sense from the get-go that if Joseph has a dream, then it is a dream borne somehow of God. But we're not told that directly. Joseph himself makes no divine claims for his adolescent

fantasies of greatness. Indeed, throughout these closing chapters of Genesis, right on through to chapter 50, it is the hiddenness of the divine hand that is key.

But we might wonder if the hand of God needed to be that well hidden. If the dreams of Joseph are typical then we might wish to just be blind deaf and dumb should our sleep be so interrupted. Joseph it seems can't help himself to talk it around. Speaking as a younger sibling he really should have known better, though sometimes we don't know when to stop talking. I sort of imagine it as a bit of a wonderment at it all with him declaring the dream with amazement and a immunity to the resentment and hatred it was bringing to bear. So much so that when the second dream comes Jacob pulls Joseph aside for a quick word to tell him knock it off with the dreams of being the center of the universe. But—this is part of the story we skipped for brevity—Jacob keeps this in mind having learned a thing or two about the working of YHWH along the way.

When we take up the story again, the seeds of the dream have firmly taken root and were bearing the full fruit of resentment. There was no mistaking that silhouette on the horizon. You could see that miserable flowing robe of many colors quite literally a mile off. So in what may have been a wine-induced, tipsy plan, they say to each other, "Let's get 'em! Let's end both the Dream Master and the dreams right here, right now!" Their ambition was to be rid of the nuisance once and for all. It was only their greed and opportunism that let them hatch the plan of selling Joseph for a little bit of cash along the way. The text doesn't give us the embellishments, though I can imagine the cries and pleading along the way, perhaps echoing in the cistern to let him out. It was the dreams that made them do it and curdled their sympathy into hatred. All that was left was a bit of theater to sell the story to Jacob and no one would be the wiser.

That's the story. Were we to leave it there we would certainly have to wonder what could possibly be holy about a scripture that condones the dumping of obnoxious siblings into wells and slavery? We would certainly need to wonder what could possibly be up with those dreams. Why must the dreams of a God inspired future given to Joseph make the present so brutally and unalterably unhappy and mean right now?

We enter here the mysteries of providence. Mostly we ponder providence as a tender, lovely thing. Providence is getting the job you prayed for, providence is meeting Mr. or Miss Right at just the proper time in your life, providence is being saved from a terrible accident, or the myriad of others ways by which the strong but sure hands of YHWH maintain the

functioning and order of this world and cosmos. All of that is true, of course, but among the things Genesis 37 and the Joseph cycle of stories have to teach us is that these dimensions of God's providence do not tell the whole story. Sometimes the world resists God's work, and so also the people in and through whom God is working. Because of the nature of this broken world, sometimes it is the work of God itself that brings a degree of unhappiness.

We cannot and should not be the referees of providence in the midst of the stuff of the world be it good or bad. No one should be speculating on where God was or was not in a week where our broad community has known unspeakable suffering. Ascribing all things that we deem good to favor and bad to failure will fail us time and again. It is mean, hard hearted, and wrong headed. But that doesn't stop the wondering and the speculation of why things like this have to be.

That is precisely why we need stories like that of Joseph and his dreams. Although God's work is steady and sure, it does not exist in a vacuum. God does this work in the midst of some of the worse things life dishes out to us. God did not have inspire the evil plot of the older brothers. God does not need to permit or cause suffering either. Since we rightly affirm that God is not the author or instigator of sin and suffering, we'd have to say that God does not help people cook up rottenness. That does not mean, however, that God is unable to work toward a greater goal even in the midst of the worst that the world can and does do.

If there is one thing, in fact, that the scripture; Genesis in particular, does make clear is that being part of covenantal promise does not grant immunity from the suffering of life. All through the story of God and people it is the beloved son, the selected heir and the ordained prophet that quite often has their lives disrupted because of their divine vocation, not despite it. In the fullness of time Joseph is able to connect the dots and see the whole. That ability is far from guaranteed. We know that there are those for whom the mystery of God and God's will remain as they are unable to sit as Joseph does and see the divine hand at work in the stuff of their lives and broken dreams. The sweep of Genesis 47-50 does not tell us the whys and wherefores of what is happening to us. Instead they bear witness to faith informed hope that in the fulness of time, perhaps even beyond our own time, there is the working of God. God will not be undone, outsmarted, outwitted by the events that may come. We are frequently undone, baffled, and so maybe even angry at how things go and turn out. There is a reason why the voice of lament and protest is a proper biblical mode of praying. The witness of Scripture remains:

somehow God can and will make all things new, will right all wrongs, will return all things to how they should have been all along. Scholars believe that the Joseph story as we now have it was perhaps first set into written form during the period of Israel's exile in Babylon. If so, then the original audience of readers and hearers of Joseph's story were people well-acquainted with grief, with disorientation, and with the collapse of what they thought were the fondest dreams of their faith. In the millennia since we can read with the many known and unknown who wondered at their times and their challenges as they read the sweep of God and God's promise here.

If Genesis 37 had concluded at verse 35 with the inconsolable weeping of Jacob over his apparently dead son, then as readers we might suspect we'd never hear of Joseph again. But that isn't what happens. The story continues as the way of God unfolds with unlikely places and unlikely people. The writer of the Joseph story even drops hints, though they are beyond the reading as it was selected for today. The first resides with Jacob and the dreams. In verse 11 when he scolds Joseph for his chutzpah he is said to remain wondering what it all might mean. The second is after our reading as the story continues to unfold. Verse 36 begins with meanwhile to continue things on. Both verse 11 and verse 36 are little nudges into the reader's ribs to say, "Pssst! The dream is still alive! God is not dead, and neither is Joseph! Keep reading!" Those two verses remind us that even when people take matters into their own hands, with often disastrous consequences, faith is always still there on the sidelines to say, "Yes, but . . ." There is ever yet another word to be spoken. So long as God lives and is faithful and gracious and full of lovingkindness, the story will go on.

When we find ourselves in the parts of the story we would rather close our eyes to, we needs must stop and hear God's meanwhile. God is still God. As such the dream, no matter how fanciful does not die and the promises are not at an end. We must keep reading. We must keep following. We must keep living, looking for what God is yet to do.

May we live in the meanwhile, and dream with God of the kingdom still coming every day on Earth as it is in heaven. Amen.