

Sermon for Epiphany VII Year C 2019
It Was Just a Dream

Since I was a child, I have always loved the story of Joseph.
The sweep of his story not only captured my imagination.
The story of Joseph ignited my own idealistic dreams
of what justice, peace, love and mercy look like in this world,
dreams and imaginings of what would happen if . . .
if we chose to do good to those who hate us,
bless those who curse us,
pray for those who abuse us . . .
if we chose to give to all who beg from us
if we chose not to judge but to forgive
and to give in good measure . . .
I suppose none of that is a very practical way to live in the world,
after all, it was or is just a dream—

Joseph was a dreamer.
He was the second to youngest of the twelve sons of Jacob.
And he was his dad's favorite,
and his dad never made an effort to hide it.
As if the special gift of the coat of many colors wasn't too much already,
there were his annoying dreams as well.
Joseph dreamed he would be in charge,
that he would have power,
that his entire family would bow down to him.
The coat, the dreams, the favoritism . . .
oh, yes, and his role as family tattle tale . . .
all of this came to an end one day
with Joseph staring up at his brothers from the bottom of a well.

Where did his dreams get him now?
Would the dream make it out of that well?
It didn't seem likely.

Then the brothers had a second thought.
Slavery would be just as good at getting rid of Joseph as the well was.
And there was the added bonus of some cash—20 pieces of silver—
So, they hauled him out of the well and sold him into slavery in Egypt.
Would the dream make it out of slavery?
It didn't seem likely.

In Egypt, Joseph worked for the captain of the guards.
He was in charge of his whole house.
Everything he touched was successful
until the Captain's wife put the moves on him.
When Joseph rejected her, she got angry and the scorned woman told
lies and Joseph got thrown in jail.
Would the dream make it out of jail?
It didn't seem likely.

In jail, a couple of Pharaoh's men got thrown in with Joseph
and they had some dreams.
Joseph told them the meaning of their dreams.
What he told them came true.
“Don't forget me,” Joseph asked.
But would the dream be remembered?
It didn't seem likely.

Then one day Pharaoh had a few dreams.
No one could figure out their meaning
until that guy from jail remembered Joseph.
Joseph told Pharaoh what his dreams meant.
He told Pharaoh there would be seven years of plenty—
seven good years for farming,
followed by seven years of drought and famine.
Joseph told Pharaoh he should get someone to manage the country
and save up for the next seven years and prepare for the famine to come.
Pharaoh told Joseph the job was his.
But would the dream ever be free?
It didn't seem likely.

But life is strange and things that go around seem to come around again,
so when the famine hit, it hit everywhere and not just in Egypt.
But only Egypt was prepared.
Joseph's dad sent his older brothers down to Egypt to get some food.
When they arrived, they ended up buying grain
from none other than Joseph himself.
They didn't recognize him.
After all, who would have thought that the little brother they threw down
a well and sold into slavery all those years ago would be running Egypt?
Joseph gave the brothers the grain
but said they better bring their youngest brother back with them
if they came back wanting more.

And, of course, they needed more!
It was a seven-year famine after all.
So, they brought Benjamin back, which almost killed their father, Jacob.
Then Joseph told them to leave Benjamin and go get their father.
The brothers knew that returning home without their youngest brother
really would kill their dad and so they pleaded with Joseph.
In the end, Joseph couldn't take it anymore
and he told them who he was.
They were stunned into silence.
Here was the brother they had tried to throw away,
whom they had sold into slavery—
he was not only alive, but he was running Egypt
(the most powerful nation in the region).
Joseph, that throw-away brother, was in complete control of their lives,
just as his annoying dreams had predicted all those years ago.

Now what will Joseph do?
Throw his brothers down a well?
Sell them into slavery?
Toss them into jail?
Send them away hungry?
Have them killed?

How would you judge him if he did?
Joseph has a choice.
And though the answer to these questions doesn't seem likely,
Joseph chose grace.

That's been God's answer from the very beginning.
Grace!

That's the way to care for people.
Grace . . . a way that escaped a well, and slavery, and prison
. . . a way of living that made its way
through jealousy, lies, and deception.
A way of loving that found its way
through pain, power plays, and prison.
God, it seems, will have grace survive.
Actually, it seems God insists that grace will not just survive,
but thrive.
Even when it doesn't seem likely at all!

Grace is the middle way and God insists on it even to this day!
Grace insists on a different way.
Grace insist we not turn our back on or give in to evil.
But grace also insists we not return violence for violence,
or plot our revenge, or seek to get even
and give everyone a taste of their own medicine and see if they like it!
Grace is "the third way"—
a way in between denial and avoidance on the one hand
and getting mired, hopelessly ensnared in perpetuating evil on the other.
Grace, mercy, forgiveness, is the way to confront the hard,
the difficult, the troubled and even the evil of our world
without getting drawn into it
and becoming difficult, troubled and evil ourselves.
Grace is the way to move both the one who is attacking
and the one who is being attacked into a shared place of peace.
Neither becoming a "winner" or a "loser"
but both ending up in a shared place of peace.

Grace, mercy, forgiveness,
never seems “likely” to make it out into our world,
and, yet, it made it out of a well,
out of slavery,
out of jail,
and out of a famine to bring to a place of peace,
a terribly divided family.
Giving up your shirt as well as your coat,
doing good to those who hate you,
blessing those who curse you . . .
the world never sees those teachings of Jesus as very “likely” solutions
for the real evils of our world.
And, yet, Jesus himself made it off a cross and out of a tomb
to bring us to a place of real peace,
all of us—the terribly broken people of
our painfully divided world.

We will all have times . . . as individuals,
as families, as communities, countries or as a whole world,
where life feels as if we’ve been thrown to the bottom of a well,
when we feel like we have no control of our own future,
when we are cursed, abused, or condemned,
as if we are suffering an endless assault of lies and deceit and treachery
trapped in a place where for all the world,
God’s grace, mercy, and love seem unlikely at best
to make it out into the world where we need it most of all.
In those times, we need to remember
the story of Joseph and his brothers.
We need to remember that God’s grace always makes it out,
through that often ignored and always undervalued
and perpetually forgotten middle way.
It doesn’t seem likely . . .
but if we follow the way Jesus points us down the narrow, difficult path
illuminated by grace, it will reward us in ways we can hardly imagine.