

Sermon 7 August 2011.

Genesis 37: 1 – 4, 12 – 28.

Human rights activist Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Junior, began his speech on 20 August 1963, almost 50 years ago, speaking to a crowd of over 200,000 people. “I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration of freedom in the history of a nation.....

He goes on ‘I have a dream’. It is one of the most passionate and inspiring speeches I have ever heard ‘I have a dream’, it stirs me to this day.

And today we hear of another dream; Joseph of whom his brothers say: Here comes the dreamer. Come now, let us kill him, and throw him into one of these pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what becomes of his dreams. Gen. 37: 20.

We will see what will become of his dreams. And they did. Joseph, the dreamer. As an older sister, I know that dreamy naivette and flaunting of his favouritism would infuriate me! He doesn’t get it, this young Joseph! And his father doesn’t help matters, with this coat. He, a younger son himself. No tact, no understanding of human relationships. He just blurts out his dreams – “You’ll all bow down to me”, isn’t that strange? What a dream, oblivious to his brothers’ looks, their mutterings.

Naively, he goes to find them again, at his fathers’ request. Will he tell tales on them again? Go running home to Dad? Enough!

Their frustration and jealousy must have been huge to want to kill their own brother! Family history repeats itself – some of us have probably felt the frustrations – get him out of the way, and maybe our father will see us. Some of them were a bit uncomfortable with that....but you can’t go against the Mob, you can’t force your opinions against the group, but maybe modify – let’s not kill him (thinking, I’ll save him later, and maybe get some kudos from my father).

Thwarted. Sold as a slave bound for Egypt. No mention of God at all in this story. Just raw family dynamics. Shocking all round. The story doesn’t end here of course. It continues for 13 chapters. It seems the Hebrew scriptures tell this story trusting that God is in it somewhere; but for now, for this piece of family history, things are not clear. They are very messy. It is a most unhappy situation.

When Jacob finds out about Joseph, his heart is broken. He, who is now Israel – a younger brother who gained his older brothers place and had high hopes of Joseph. He is broken, but still Joseph claims his attention: he will go on mourning. The brothers may be rid of the favoured brother, but Joseph still gets most of their father’s attention (Genesis 37: 29 – 35). Conflict, jealousy and isolation.

Where is God in all this when all seems lost.? Frederick Buecher (Beyond words: Daily readings in the ABC’s of faith) writes, ‘ A family is a web so delicately woven that it takes

almost nothing to set the whole thing shuddering or even to tear it to pieces. Yet the thread it's woven of, is as strong as anything on earth.'

Today we have seen the web torn, and looking like it has been destroyed, but we will see the story unfold in surprising ways, and a family rebuilding the tears; the web is both fragile and enduring as the narrative revolves around Joseph, as a dreamer and his dreams. It gives hope in conflicted relationships, especially of us in the midst of it all. (Seasons of The Spirit)

'Don't be afraid, my love is stronger than your fears, and I have promised, promised to always be near'. (Song from the Iona Community)

The brothers want to kill the dream, to stop it from becoming a reality, and by the end of the story, the dream is one in the mind of the brothers and Jacob, the dream is dead, at least from their point of view. But God's dream and though the text now says it explicitly, the dream is God's dream, and isn't over but in truth has only just begun. (Geoff McElroy).

As Walter Bruegemann also says (Genesis)

'Though hidden in the forms of a dream, silent and not at all visible, the listener will understand that the dream is the unsettling work of (the Lord) upon which everything depends; without the dream, there would be no Joseph and no narrative. From the perspective of the brothers without the dream there would be no trouble or conflict to the father, without the dream there would be no grief or loss. The dream sets it's own course, and in the end the dream prevails over the tensions of the family.

Not long before his assassination, Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Jr. Broke open on the steps of the Washington monument, his renowned 'I Have a Dream' speech. Later at the National civil Rights museum across town at the Lorraine Motel where Dr king was shot, A plaque was inscribed with these words: 'Behold, here cometh the dreamer. Let us slay him and we shall see what will become of the dreams'. Look at America. See how his dream has become reality (Seasons of the Spirit p75). The Joseph narrative suggests dreams are not easily disposed of.

We at Holy Covenant need to encourage dreams and dreamers, for our church and our community. What are your hopes, your dreams?. Live today into those dreams. The disposal of Joseph and then into Egypt suggests that trouble and troublemakers – can be dealt with best by an, out of sight, out of mind philosophy. The quote at the Martin Luther King Jr. Plaque suggests this is an all too familiar way of dealing with conflict. There are other options for us and in the story of Joseph for dealing more constructively with the conflicts.

A little bit of family round table discussion perhaps?. Mediation?. This gives us food for thought for the conflicts in this community and beyond.

Langston Hughes writes in his poem, ' Dreams'

Hold fast to dreams

See if dreams die,

Life is a broken winged bird,

That cannot fly

Hold fast to dreams

For when dreams go

Life is a barren field

Frozen with snow.

The dynamics of conflict are multilayered and nuanced and look how Joseph grows and changes. Know God is with us in the midst of the conflicts in which we find ourselves. God has dreamed us and continues to dream for us life abundant.

‘I Have a Dream’.

Out of the ashes will rise a phoenix.

Edwin Muir, born in the paradise of an Orkney island, where men and women and children were at one, and then forced, because of poverty to leave, reminds us in his Poem, ‘One Foot in Eden’, that Eden has to go. But in its place come strange blessings, as blackened trees give way to new blossoms, not innocence restored but something different:

But famished field and blackened tree,

Bear flowers in Eden never known,

Blossoms of grief and charity,

Bloom in these darkened fields alone.’

So today again, we end with not any easy answers, but with the confidence of the Poet who tells us:

That from the darkened fields will come new flowers, blossoms that we could never have imagined. (P113 – 114 , Lost in wonder – Rediscovering the spiritual Art of Attentiveness, Esther De Waal, John Garrett, Published 2003).

Susanna Pain