

## Then and Now: Power (The Story of Jacob's Sons)

A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28  
on August 20, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC

### I.

A few weeks ago, I suggested that you all might be humming the songs from the movie musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, after we watched it together on our Friday Films series one night. But I tell you – those aren't the songs I have been humming this week, rather all the songs from *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. When I was in college, our music department did a production of Joseph, and I was one of three who shared the role of the Narrator. These words and songs, as they do when you do a performance, lived in my spirit for week upon week. And despite the many days I spent in church as a preacher's kid learning the stories of scripture, it really wasn't until that performance that the story of Joseph sunk into the marrow of my life, and I understood it in new ways.

(I can't preach on Joseph without telling you that the Winston-Salem Theater Alliance's performance of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat has one more weekend, and there are still tickets available! If you'd like to go see it, it's just down the street from us!)

### II.

We can hardly talk about Joseph without first talking of his clothes, right? For that's one of the most enduring pieces of the story, the "coat of many colors" as Dolly sings about, or that "amazing technicolor dreamcoat" Andrew Lloyd Webber calls it. There is also fascinating biblical scholarship that surrounds this robe and its wearer, connecting the language of the robe [*ketonet passim*] both to the clothes taken from the humans in the Garden of Eden and suggesting a possible fluidity of gender as the only other mention of

the [*ketonet passim*] is the royal robe worn by princess Tamar later in the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>1</sup> The *ketonet passim* is a long robe with special sleeves, the kind of robe worn by people of leisure, not of brothers in the field. So the reason we can't NOT talk about Joseph's robe is because this robe is, of course, symbolic of the very power dynamics at play in his story.

You see, that robe was a symbol of Jacob's preferential, over the top love for Joseph. Joseph was the firstborn son of Jacob's beloved wife, Rachel, the one he loved from first sight. His name means "God added" – God added to their lives with his birth – and it is Joseph upon whose colorfully-adorned shoulders the whole family's future will rest. But there were 11 other sons – Joseph's older brothers: Reuben (the firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Joseph, and then baby Benjamin. Together these 12 will be known as the 12 tribes of Israel, their names and stories and values passing on from generation to generation.

But here – the vitriol between the brothers and Joseph was already high. Genesis tells us that when they understood that their father loved Joseph more than all the rest, they hated him. But where their contempt really soared was when Joseph began to dream. Let me read it to you. READ GENESIS 37:5-11.

It certainly didn't bode well that the 17 year-old claimed power over his brothers from a dream he had. So when the favored child in his leisure suit went to see the unblest brothers hard at work in the fields, the brothers' anger boils over. Their patience runs out. Their jealousy erupts. "Come now, let's kill the dreamer," they say to each other. Reuben and Judah give pause to murder their brother, so instead, they tore off the robe and threw Joseph into

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<sup>1</sup> There is much fascinating, creative scholarship on this particular passage from queer scholars. I used a source from Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, <https://lifeisasacredtext.substack.com/p/queering-joseph>.

a pit. They doused that robe with goat's blood and returned it to Jacob with a lie. They sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt for 20 pieces of silver.

The one claiming power over was now underground. The one with the garment of indulgence was now bare and spare, with daddy nowhere in sight to protect him. The pecking order, once inverted to preference the one God added, has now been put back in place. And that robe, once gifted to the favored now is given back in deception to the father, who weeps for what could have been.

### III.

I don't know if you noticed this in the story – it took me several reads to capture it – but you see, among all the characters in the story – a dozen brothers, Jacob and his wives, a caravan of Ishamelites and a host of Midianites, Potiphar, Pharaoh, a goat, and a partridge in a pear tree – among all these characters, there's one rather conspicuously missing from the narrative: God. Unlike so many of these stories we've studied together this summer, the Lord does not dialogue with Joseph in the manner of Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, Jacob, and Esau before him. Rather, Joseph knows the Lord by way of a dream. It's in Joseph's **dream** that we understand God to be at work even if it's not yet clear how, this main character in an unfolding drama, then and now. And wrapped up in Joseph's dream – as in the dreams to follow – emerges conflict with his brothers, grief with his father, and the unfolding course of his very life.

At its center is a tension, as Walter Brueggemann names, between “the power of the dream and its conflict with business as usual, embodied by the brothers... The battle is between the dream and the ‘Killers of the Dream.’”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis*, p298.

Yes, without any conversation we're aware of, Joseph's brothers make a lot of assumptions about what his dreams mean for their power. Sheaves bowing down to one? Of course this means Joseph wants to reign over them! Sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him? This must mean Joseph wants dominion! They think they know full well what his dreams mean, yet what their responses reveal really says more about what they think power means. Assuming Joseph must want total power, they hatch the plan to pursue total destruction of him in order to keep control. To those brothers, keeping power means keeping power by any means, even - and especially - if that means resorting to violence. For what is a dream, even a dream deferred, to a curled fist, or a cocked gun, or a crushed hope?

Of this interplay of power and dreams, Brueggemann continues: "A dream is a power which neither tradition nor force can finally resist... Dreams permit the imagining of new political possibilities which immediately threaten the old and call it into question."<sup>3</sup> Joseph's robust understanding of dreams would soon centrally locate him within the favor of Pharaoh as the one dream-interpreter who would speak truth to Pharaoh's power, and then counsel Pharaoh about how best to use his power for the flourishing of the land even during a time of drought and famine.<sup>4</sup> Those dreams, once destabilizing Joseph's place in the family, would soon centralize his place with Pharaoh, and secure his family's place in the land, and assure Israel's safety for generations. These dreams, like Jacob's before him and Mary and Joseph's centuries after him, reveal the movement of God in this world, a movement that will come as Love made flesh, Jesus, the One who brings God's dream for this world that we know as the kingdom of God into being.

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<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, 302.

<sup>4</sup> Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*, p218.

#### IV.

But as a people, we're a bit squeamish around dreams, aren't we? They come in the dark, quiet, singular, vulnerable places as wisps of an imagined future, hopes for what isn't but could be. And yet, as humans, I think we'd so much rather reach for that which is clear, defined, measurable, appreciated, concrete, even at the expense of the dream itself. That, we often define and explain as power.

I so appreciate Andy Crouch's definition, which says this: "power is the ability to make something of the world.... But humans exercise that power in not just making stuff but making sense of the world. So power is simply the ability to participate in that stuff-making, sense-making process, and ... powerlessness as being cut off from those two kinds of creation."<sup>5</sup>

We don't have to look far to find examples of power used for creation – both good and bad. It's all around us in our daily lived lives, in our politics and our markets, online and in relationships, in this earth and in what's next. Yet where even the most well-meaning of us may assume all power is bad and easily corruptible and hoarded by the few, Dr. Crouch reminds us that power at its best is "a source of refreshment, laughter, joy and life – and more power. Remove power and you cut off life... Flourishing power leads to flourishing life."

Think of this in our own lives, when we've captured a dream we'd had and fueled it with daily practice, or harnessed the power within us for something good, or discovered something new about ourselves we didn't even know. I wrote to you this week about how I tried something new on my

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<sup>5</sup> Crouch, 17-18.

day off – making gazpacho for the first time – harnessing the power of the tomato and cucumber and an online recipe to try something new.

Think of our country. We've found that the pursuit of the American dream is perhaps at its strongest when supported by the resources of power to make it possible: a job with living wages, a safe and sturdy home, medical care that doesn't bankrupt a family in crisis, education, communities of purpose, life-giving freedoms and meaningful responsibilities, and many opportunities to invest your life and your resources for good. Yet, like Jacob's sons before us, how often do groups in our country incite anger, contempt, violence, and fear because other groups are now enjoying that dream too? Or how often does this dream become impossible expectation? As one observer says, referencing the dreams Joseph will later interpret with Pharaoh, "we seem to think this dream will always produce fat cows."<sup>6</sup>

Think of the church, the big-C church. On every measure, church researchers tell us that the "golden era" of the white American church back in the 1950s and 1960s was the exception not the rule. That if you look at the long line of church history, that was a blip of booming resources everywhere you turned (people and buildings and dollars and influence, oh my!), our churches followed suit. We built buildings and started programs, we hired staff and sent missionaries, we grew influence and enjoyed our place, I think, among the center of things.

I'm no cynic, and I know far too many wise and thoughtful Christians who believed that the powerful expression of the faith in their time was to do just that, and that was precisely the witness the world needed. Yet I'm no romantic, and I know there are now millions who have seen church after

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<sup>6</sup> Bill Moyers, p347.

church, pastor after pastor, Christian after Christian, fall victim to **their** pursuit of power and authority, who led movements infiltrated with patriarchy and racism and homophobia, who exercised power unequally used and never shared, who let their dream of power cloud the power of the dream of God for this world to those who needed to hear it!

Many would say that because of this, it's now's a time for the church to just sit down and shut up, that we just need to burn it all down, that we need to start fresh, that the church in America has lost any moral authority we may have carried, that the church has hurt too many for too long, and it's time to stop. When I'm having a cynical day, I see their point! Perhaps you do too!

And yet. Friends, we are the inheritors of a dream! We are the trustees of hope! Our ancestors and their words and stories course through our shared lives, and of them, we are the stewards. We are the bearers – not only! not exclusively! but particularly! – of God's dream in this world, and we cannot settle for anything less than connecting the God-shaped dream with our God-infused power for the sake of the flourishing of life!

## V.

It was 60 years ago next Sunday when our country heard about a dream. The tireless work of the civil rights movement had captivated a nation for years, decades even, and the movement was reaching fever pitch. 250,000 had gathered on the National Mall on that hot August afternoon, and when Dr. King took the lectern that day, he situated their movement among movements of justice and reconciliation all throughout history.

But as legend tells us, it wasn't until the singer Mahalia Jackson prompted Dr. King that he would find the world's most instantly recognizable

riff on a dream.<sup>7</sup> “Tell them about the dream, Martin!,” she hollered from just behind him, referring to the dream she’d heard him speak of, a dream that lifted him from page to poetry and lifted a nation alongside. “Tell ‘em about the dream!” And with his words, Dr. King infused the power of a dream. “I have a dream,” he declared, “my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!” Word after word, line after line, the chorus of the crowd joined him and lifted that power of a dream. From Amos to Isaiah, from Jesus to Paul, Dr. King told of his dream, and that dream changed the course of this world.

## VI.

Friends, our church is not a perfect church. Our history is not without pain and power used in unwieldy fashion. We still have reconciliation to seek, and forgiveness to find, and hope above all else to shepherd. This is not a perfect church, but dare I say that this is a church with a dream. **Because I’ve heard it from you!** I’ve heard of your dream for our church, here at First on Fifth, to be a people living the truth that God’s love knows no boundaries, therefore our love shouldn’t either. I’ve heard you say your dream for our church here at First on Fifth to welcome, affirm, and celebrate all people in the fullness of who they are, loved precisely for all the colorful shades of our humanity, not in spite of it. I’ve heard you say your dream for our church is that we are a place, a people, a community, a movement where resources can be put to meaningful use, where community can be found and nurtured, where leadership can be shared, where hope can be made real, where we

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<sup>7</sup> Loved this reflection on the 50th anniversary from Michiko Kakutani in *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/28/us/the-lasting-power-of-dr-kings-dream-speech.html>



care for one another and love alongside one another and fellowship together and serve together for the sake of God's dream for this world.

No, we are not a perfect church. But you know what? I don't hear us dreaming for power around here. Instead, I hear you talk about the powerful dream you have for us. And that, friends, is a dream worth investing in.

## VII.

We've talked before about the Jewish practice of midrash, of the rabbis and priests filling in the narrative gaps that the scriptures leave for our interpretation. There's a fascinating midrash on the story of Joseph, late in his life, carrying the bones of his father Jacob back to the land of Canaan to be buried. On the way, he passes the very pit into which he's thrown by his brothers, and Joseph stops. Instead of lamenting all that had happened, he blesses the pit, for he recognizes that this place of powerlessness is the place where he found his power. This place where life ends is the place that saved his life. And for the rabbis, the question is this: can the pit be transformed into a place of redemption? And then for the people of Israel, can Egypt – translated *mitzrayim*, the narrow place – can that place of confinement, the place where we feel powerless and persecuted and alone, can that place become a birth canal through which we are reborn?<sup>8</sup>

Friends, with the dream of Joseph in our minds and hearts, might you bless those pits in your life? Might you dream of the power that emerged within them? Might you find new life and transformation on the other side? Just imagine what might come when we dream it and do it together! Amen!

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Bill Moyers' *Genesis: A Living Conversation*, and the conversation between biblical scholars for this wonderful story. Credit to Norman J. Cohen, p341 for articulating it.