

“Joseph”

Genesis 37:1-4. 12-28

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Perhaps you've heard the children's song: The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round, round and round. The wheels on the bus go round and round all through the day...and then it repeats with “all through the night”, and so on.

Today's text is a story about the unseen wheels of God moving history forward through the lives of Jacob and his family. In Jacob's entire life he has known an unseen presence that has been at work. He has learned that in spite of his own efforts at self determination and control, there is a power of the universe that will not be thwarted in spite of human efforts to do so. Human frailty will not stop God. Human sin will not stop God. Human pride, arrogance, jealousy, deception--nothing will thwart God's movement of the wheels of history. They just keep going round and round.

This wonderful story is also a complicated one. Who's the hero of the story? From whom are we to learn a lesson or to follow? Is it 17 year old Joseph who is spoiled and lacks the good sense to keep his dreams to himself, dreams sure to incite the ire of his siblings? He's a show off. He knows that “daddy always loved him best.”

In typical adolescent style, he lacks humility, and he is a tattletale. Then what about his brothers? Surely we're not to be like them. They resort to premeditated murder that is only stopped by their own greed when they decide to make money (twenty pieces of silver) off Joseph by selling him into slavery rather than killing him outright. And what about Jacob? Surely we're not to favor one child over the other like Jacob favored Joseph--even giving him a robe so splendid that it was a symbol of enthronement and rule. This same robe becomes a symbol of dethronement when the brothers return with it torn and bloody telling their father that a beast had killed Joseph, Jacob's favorite son. Now it is Jacob's turn to be deceived like he, himself, had deceived his own father Isaac, in order to steal the family's birthright.

Yet, Jacob senses in this child something more; when Joseph tells the family his dream, his father chastises him for even suggesting he, his mother and brothers would bow down to him, and yet verse 11 ends with these words “but his father kept the matter in mind.” Jacob ponders in his heart what this child's future will bring.

This story says that God understands that life is complicated. Oh, the web we humans weave! Yet, undergirding this human reality is a ground of being that is not thwarted in purpose and in bringing forth a future. The wheels may turn slowly; but they keep turning, and they bring us to a future of surprises.

One surprise, one inversion is that the one who should do the bowing down become the one who others bow down to. Joseph's older brothers, first in line, who should expect respect, will soon bow down to Joseph. The weaker and younger son will become the salvation of the whole family. God doesn't necessarily use power the way we humans expect power to be used.

Parallel to the bowing of the brothers to Joseph is the bowing or submission of the stronger nation, Egypt, who will soon be beholden to Joseph, destined to lead the mighty Egyptian empire through 7 years of feast and 7 years of famine. The way things “should” be how things “ought” to be in human thinking is undermined by the dream of God for a future of hope. It is the hiddenness of God (according to Walter Bruggemann) working behind the scenes of this special family to keep history moving forward. God is silent in this text; yet, God is very much present in this text.

This story says (indirectly) that it is OK to dream. Joseph is a dreamer; he may not use good judgment telling his dreams to others; but his dreams reveal an awareness of something

beyond, something more than what is. He is “in touch” in a unique way with God’s dream for the future. So Joseph becomes the one chosen to implement God’s dream for possibilities.. The brothers try to kill the dreamer and his dreams; but they cannot; because this dream doesn’t just belong to Joseph or his brothers; this dream belongs to God.

The story teaches us something about empire. In this text, Egypt is not the evil empire that it later becomes. In fact, the Pharaoh will recognize in this foreigner, Joseph, a talented and useful leader and will use his skills for good. God can use even an empire and its leaders to bring salvation during the impending famine. Later that same empire is brought to its knees because of the way it treats its foreigners. But for now, Egypt is an important player in God’s dream for these 12 tribes of chosen people. The Bible shows us that empires are transitory; they come and go; they don’t last forever. It’s God’s dream for a future that remains.

In the end, the story poses more questions for us rather than specific answers: For instance:

How has the unseen, silent, hidden God moved in your life?

Are you a dreamer?

Do your dreams reflect those of the Holy One?

How do you share those dreams with others in your world?

Are you open to a future that just doesn’t seem “right” at all? Are you open to God’s surprises for your life?

Who or what is worthy of your bowing down to; who is worthy of your worship?

Have you ever been deceived into thinking that all is lost?

Have you dwelt in the depths of despair, like Jacob, who refused to be comforted because he believed Joseph was dead.

What role does the larger community or empire have today in moving God’s dream forward?

Can outsiders be used by God to keep the wheels of history moving on?

In the little preschool song, The Wheels on the Bus, the lyrics continue by describing ordinary people doing ordinary things:

“The driver on the bus says ‘move on back.’ The people on the bus they read, read, read.

The babies on the bus go ‘wa, wa, wa.’ The mummies on the bus go ‘sh,sh,sh.’

The bus is filled with ordinary people living day in and day out.

And the wheels keep rolling round and round.

So it is with us ordinary people. It’s unlikely our histories will be as exciting or compelling as the family of Israel and the future revealed through them; but we’re part of God’s story too. We come here today to be encouraged and reminded that we belong not to our own designer future, but we belong to God’s promised realm. And this is why we resonate with these words from the song Jennifer sang:

Close every door to me, keep those I love from me,

Children of Israel are never alone, For I know I shall find my own peace of mind, For I have been promised a land of my own.

Our land is not the Canaan promised to Israel. Our land is God’s everlasting, ever loving realm. Yet, it is the same God in whom we place our trust. The hidden, silent, but very real presence of the ground of being, the undergirding of all that is good ever moving, always turning and bringing us forward into the possibilities of God’s love that knows no beginning and no end.