

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 about the unseen wheels of God moving history forward through the life of Joseph, the son of Jacob.

We’ve learned about God at work in Jacob’s life. However much Jacob tries to secure himself through his own efforts at self-determination and control, there is a power that will not be thwarted. 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.

Now it is Jacob’s son, Joseph, on whom the story focuses. Who’s the hero of this story? Who should we be like? 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? They resort to premeditated murder that is only stopped by their greed when they decide to sell Joseph into slavery rather than killing him outright.

And what about Jacob? Surely we should not 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 Jacob’s favorite son. Though Jacob senses something special in Joseph, he chastises him for even suggesting that 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. Undergirding all these human interactions is God who 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 bow down becomes the one who others bow down to. Joseph’s older brothers, first in line of inheritance and blessing, will soon find themselves bowing before Joseph.

Joseph, the younger son, despised and sold, will become the salvation of the whole family. God doesn’t necessarily use power the way we expect power to be used. God’s history includes inversions and paradox.

There’s also the bowing and submission of the stronger nation, Egypt, who will soon be beholden to Joseph. He is destined to lead the mighty Egyptian empire through 7 years of feast and then 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 working behind the scenes of this special family to keep history moving forward. God does not speak 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 his special awareness. He is uniquely “in touch” with God’s dream for the future. So Joseph becomes the one chosen to implement God’s possibilities. The brothers try to kill both 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.

We also learn something about empire. In this text, Egypt is not the evil empire that it later becomes. In fact, the Pharaoh recognizes 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 Jacob's family. 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.

The story poses questions for us to consider: 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 includes surprises, inversions, and paradox? Who is worthy of your bowing down to; who is worthy of your worship? Have you ever thought that all seemed 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 or foreigners be used by God today 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 people on the bus they read, read, read. The babies on the bus go 'wa, wa, wa.' The mommies 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. We're part of God's story too. We come here to be encouraged and reminded that we belong to God's future. And this is why we resonate with the words from the song Tom 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 Canaan. Our land is God's everlasting, ever loving realm. We place our trust in the hidden, silent, but very real presence of God, the ground 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.