

“Here Comes This Dreamer”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
August 13, 2023

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28
Matthew 14:22-33

Two weeks ago we talked about the inheritance Jacob got— by means of deceit— from his father Isaac. This week, our story of Jacob picks up again and moves to the next generation this week. Before we get there, though, I want to ask if anyone *inherited* anything interesting from a previous generation.

I inherited my grandmother’s family bible, my dad’s left-handedness and his curly hair, my mom’s kind heart and her pair of patent-leather, open-toed black heels which are three sizes too small for me; it took 9 years of growing until they finally fit my daughter, for about 5 months until her feet grew too big for them, too.

I want to invite you to turn to one or two neighbors, or if you’re worshipping online, type into the comments, and share something you inherited from an earlier generation in your life. You don’t have to be related to them by blood.

“This is the story of the family of Jacob,” our passage begins. And then the scripture commences to tell the story of *Joseph*. *Here comes this dreamer*. Wait a minute. Weren’t we talking about *Jacob* here? And if we’ve moved on to Jacob’s children, why the focus on *Joseph*?

Perhaps it is a Western thing to view people as individuals, and not as extensions of their parents or even ancestors. After all, Jesus himself was called the “root from the stump of Jesse”; David’s father Jesse was something like 28 generations before Jesus, according to Matthew’s gospel.

In order to continue the story of Jacob, the bible’s focus is on *Joseph*. The scripture reports, “*and Jacob loved Joseph more than any other of his children.*” Well, this sounds like a setup! Everyone knows you are supposed to love your children equally! Even if it’s not true, you have to make it look like it’s true. I always think of a member of our church, Betsy, who said that her father loved each of his daughters so well, and had such a special relationship with each one of them, that after he died each of the sisters revealed that she had always thought that she was his favorite. Ideally, a parent can do that. But not all parents behave in the ideal, and if you think of where Jacob came from, it is understandable why.

Jacob was the younger brother— by a few minutes at most, since he was the twin. And yet, his mother favored him and prompted him to trick his elder brother out of the blessing and inheritance meant for him.

A generation before that, Isaac's father Abraham chose him over his firstborn brother, Ishmael, who had been born of a concubine, Hagar— and exiled Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness, leaving them to die... and they almost did, until God saw them.

Generational dysfunction and trauma is an inheritance that can get acted out upon children and grandchildren who never even saw the original suffering. We were all reminded of that last week, in Montgomery Alabama, when a riverboat co-captain, Damien Pickett, who is Black, was just trying to do his job and move a pontoon boat over a few feet, so that his riverboat could dock in the spot the city had designated for the boat. He had already asked them to move many times. Four people from the pontoon boat, who were White, began beating Mr. Pickett.

This had happened before. These same pontoon folks had taunted the Black riverboat workers before. Not only that. On these same river shores in Montgomery, Alabama, on the same dock, generations before, enslaved Africans had arrived by steamboat to be sold in the city's center.

So when a crowd of Black people, descended upon the crowd attacking Mr. Pickett, and prevailed, there was a moment of joy ringing out from the Black community. Memes went viral, including one of a 16 year-old who jumped out of the riverboat and swam to the dock to defend one of his elders— they called him “young buck.” This boy, named Aaren, said he left the safety of the boat, into the water to help the man in need “because that's what I was taught to do.” Even the police, when they showed up, defended Mr. Pickett. Watching this across the country, there was a moment of shared joy ringing out from the Black community. “The ancestors are proud,” they said, all over social media. Too often in this country, similar stories have ended badly for Black Americans, but on that day, they had a little taste of the justice their ancestors could only dream about.

Like Abraham, like Isaac, Jacob inherited a tendency to privilege the younger son. Joseph was number 11 out of 12. His brothers knew that Jacob favored Joseph, and seeing this, they *hated* him and could not speak peaceably to him. To make matters worse, Joseph gets these dreams. In one, he is a sheave of wheat, and his brothers are each a sheave of wheat. Joseph stands in the middle of them, and he rises tall, while his brothers encircling him bow down to him. Joseph tells his brothers this dream. It is *not* a way to make friends.

Adding to that, there is that fancy coat. Joseph gets singled out for something he wears. Kittredge Cherry, a theologian who blogs about queer theology, calls the robe Jacob gives Joseph “the queer biblical princess dress.” She notes that the Hebrew name for this robe is *ketonet passim*. The direct translation comes to something like “a tunic of distinction.” Kittredge Cherry noticed that “The only other use of the term *ketonet passim* is in II Samuel

13, where princess Tamar wears a *ketonet passim* and the author helpfully explains that this is ‘how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed in earlier times.’¹

Looking at the scripture from this perspective, I hope we can have more empathy for Joseph. Maybe the special care his father showed to Joseph was because he noticed Joseph was different, a dreamer, in a world that cherished men who were skilled in the concrete things of life. Maybe Jacob decided to cherish what was in his son— his child— even if it wasn’t what the world cherished. Maybe Jacob had seen Joseph trying on his mother’s tunic, her bracelets, her veil, and decided to give Joseph something beautiful of his own to wear. Jacob— who saw in his own childhood a chance to go for it all— the blessing, the inheritance— wanted to help Joseph go for it all, too.

It may have even been that Jacob didn’t love Joseph best; Jacob just saw that Joseph needed to be loved *differently*. However Jacob sees Joseph, his brothers don’t understand what Jacob sees. They see that Joseph is the heir to Jacob’s special love, and what is their inheritance? To be discarded, unloved, and unchosen.

It is not only horrifying, but interesting that Joseph’s brothers sell him to a tribe of Ishmaelites— these are the descendents of Ishmael, Jacob’s great-uncle and brother to Isaac, who had been born to Abraham’s concubine Hagar. Although Ishmael had been the firstborn to Abraham, after Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah, they cast Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness, where they are left to die— until God provides a flowing spring for them, and assures a special covenant to Ishmael and all his descendents.

So Joseph’s brothers sell Jacob’s chosen son, to a tribe of descendents of the *unchosen* son. The bible loves reversals and surprises. There is hope for Joseph. Even the one who had sunk into the pit, hated by his brothers, sold into slavery, the chosen becoming the *unchosen*, things work out for Joseph. That is hopeful news for any youth, and person, who is struggling right now, feeling like they might sink into the pits of despair. *God will not leave you in the pit*. Have a little faith.

When Jesus saw Peter— who was bold enough to get out on the water and walk like Jesus— sinking into the depths when the strong wind troubled the water, he pulled Peter up from his sinking. Jesus told Peter, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

You know, “little faith” seems like a pretty good aspiration to me. If each person in our congregation, like Peter, had “little faith,” there is no telling what we could try and even accomplish. Little faith puts you out on the water. It makes you stand up for justice. It makes you dream of the day when, as Psalm 85 foretells, “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.”

¹ Kittredge Cherry, “Joseph and the Queer Biblical Princess Dress” in QSpirit blog, August 13, 2023. <https://qspirit.net/joseph-queer-biblical/>

If generational dysfunction and trauma can get passed down, I believe it's true that dreams and faith can be passed down, too. Paul's writings make it clear that we are *all* heirs to the covenant God made with Abraham— not by blood, but by belonging through Christ. Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. Whatever race, whatever gender, there is enough room in God's economy for *each* one of us to be chosen, for *each* one of us to be blessed, for *each* one of us to be loved in a special, particular way. There is no need to compete for the resource of God's love, for it is not scarce.

We are heirs to Joseph's dreams and resilience. We are heirs to Peter's little faith. In us, the generations of God's story continue. How will we shape it? What will we dream?