Several weeks ago at coffee hour after the 10:15 service when we read the lesson of Abraham’s servant seeking a wife for his son, Isaac, someone came up to me and said, “In all my years of attending church I have never heard that lesson. Who are all these people in the Old Testament?” While I don’t expect to connect all the dots of the narrative lectionary that furnishes our Old Testament readings this summer, I decided to preach on the story of Joseph which we hear in part today and again next Sunday.

Sometimes referred today as the Joseph cycle, Genesis 37-50 reads like a short story or a novella and I commend it to your reading. In these 14 chapters, we read the dramatic tale of Joseph, the favorite son of Jacob, from his betrayal at the hands of his brothers that we heard today, through his descent into slavery and then rise to power in Egypt, and, in next week’s lesson, his ultimate reunion and reconciliation with his family. It is a story of parental favoritism, inflated ego, and family dis-function handed down from one generation to another.

One commentator wrote the following about the family into which Joseph was born, “In pastoral care terms, our text this morning is an example of family patterns being repeated by the later generation. Jacob and Esau fought, Jacob and Laban fought, Rachel and Leah (and their handmaidens) fought. And now that familial animosity has been passed down to the following generation, enflamed by Jacob’s preference for Joseph over and above his other brothers, a product of his union with Rachel who he preferred over Leah.”

We are introduced to Joseph when he is 17 years old, about the age of some of our “drama dreamers” who produced Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat last spring. To show his love of Joseph, Jacob made him that fabulous, colorful coat that evokes the lyrics of Andrew Lloyd Webber. As you can imagine, this parental favoritism did not endear Joseph to his brothers.

As if that were not enough—in the verses omitted in today’s reading—Joseph has two different dreams with the same message: his brothers and, in the second dream, also his parents, will someday bow down to him. With no check on his ego, Joseph is so self-absorbed that he delights in recounting the dreams to his brothers and his parents who are not nearly as appreciative of them as Joseph is.

This sets the stage for today’s installment of the Joseph saga. Jacob has sent him to look for his brothers who are out with the sheep moving from place to place to find good land for grazing. The tone-deaf Joseph, puts on his coat of many colors, and goes looking for his brothers. Seeing him coming they seize an opportunity to snuff out his ambitions. “Here comes this dreamer,” they say. “Come now, let us kill him..., and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” However, stopping just short of taking Joseph’s life, the brothers strip
him of his coat, throw him into a pit, and then sell him into slavery for 20 pieces of silver. Although they did not kill Joseph, his brothers, by the end of today’s story, believe his dream is over and that Joseph, the dreamer, will no longer “lord” it over them.

What became of Joseph’s dreams, of course, is that they came true, but in a way that neither Joseph or his family could imagine. In Psalm 105, the psalmist describes what will come next in Joseph’s life as a “refining process” writing, “...until what he had said came to pass, the word of the Lord kept testing him.” Alan Brehm offers this summary of what happens next for Joseph.

“Initially, Joseph’s refining process was a matter of humiliation. Because of his arrogance, his brothers hated him so much that they sold him into slavery. Suddenly he went from being the favored son of a wealthy man to being a slave with no rights, no family, no home. Talk about humiliating! In point of fact, however, apparently Joseph was so good at serving in the house of Potiphar that he quickly learned how to run the whole place and was elevated to head steward. The humiliating experience of being sold into slavery refined Joseph by preparing him with skills he would need later.

Unfortunately, things didn’t work out so well, because his master’s wife accused him of trying to seduce her. So the ‘word of the Lord’ kept refining Joseph—this time in prison. But while Joseph was in the dungeon, some of Pharoah’s personal attendants spent some time there. They too had dreams, and Joseph interpreted them. When Pharoah had a dream, one of them told him about Joseph, and Joseph wound up as the Prime Minister of the most powerful nation in the ancient world.”

What became of Joseph’s dream? Joseph’s rise to prominence in Pharoah’s kingdom enabled him to save the lives of his family when famine came, providing for them when they came before him as supplicants begging for food. But this isn’t the same Joseph who in his youth so alienated his brothers by his pretentious posturing. In Egypt, Joseph experienced God’s presence and deliverance from slavery and prison and came to understand that his position of power was a “trust” from God so God’s dream of reconciliation and wellbeing might overflow to all. Geoff McElroy writes, “All things look different on the other side of grace. All the years of toil and trouble have come to this point, where grace and love can be extended and can heal over the wounds of the past. Now all Joseph wanted was his family to be reunited.”

God’s will, made known through the flawed lives of Joseph and his brothers, is for the preservation of life; the life of Jacob and his family, and the lives of the people of Egypt and their neighbors. Joseph’s presence in Egypt is the means by which God ensures that human life will go on, even in the face of famine. In the face of Jacob’s “playing favorites”, Joseph’s arrogance, and his brothers’ desire for revenge, God remains faithful to the covenant he made with Abraham to make Israel a “light to the nations” and preserves the created order.
This, I believe, is the good news found in the story of Joseph: the dream of God still prevails over the plans of human beings. We all dream of fulfillment and peace in our lives and we may question God when, through acts of our own or others, we encounter detours and defeats along the way. But God’s dream is big enough to overcome our fears and faithlessness and despair, opening us to avenues of forgiveness, healing and saving grace that overcome our most grievous shortcomings and self-centeredness and help us seek a world of peace and abundance for all God’s children.

Walter Brueggemann envisions what it means for us to align ourselves with God’s dream in this prayer/poem, *Dreams and Nightmares*.

“Last night as I lay sleeping,
I had a dream so fair...
I dreamed of the Holy City, well ordered and just.
I dreamed of a garden of paradise, well-being all around and a good water supply.
I dreamed of disarmament and forgiveness, and caring embrace for all those in need.
I dreamed of a coming time when death is no more.

Last night as I lay sleeping...
I had a nightmare of sins unforgiven.
I had a nightmare of land mines still exploding and maimed children.
I had a nightmare of the poor left unloved,
of the homeless left unnoticed,
of the dead left ungrieved.
I had a nightmare of quarrels and rages and wars great and small.

When I awoke, I found you still to be God,
presiding over the day and night
with serene sovereignty,
for dark and light are both alike to you.

At the break of day we submit to you
our best dreams
and our worst nightmares,
asking that your healing mercy should override threats,
that your goodness will make our nightmares less toxic
and our dreams more real.

Thank you for visiting us with newness
that overrides what is old and deathly among us.
Come among us this day; dream us toward health and peace,
We pray in the real name of Jesus
who exposes our fantasies.”

*(Prayers for a Privileged People)*