“Dream a World”
Genesis 37:1-5, 12-28
A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery, preached at Duke Chapel on October 7, 2012

Dedicated to Julian Abele and Pelham Wilder

Joseph is having a pretty bad day by anyone’s standards. At the age of seventeen years old, just when one is supposed to be dreaming dreams about the future and beaming with bright hopes of being accepted into Duke University, at 17, life is the pits for Joseph, literally. His older brothers don’t play catch with him in the backyard anymore, nor do they take him to Durham Bulls baseball games. They don’t play basketball in the neighborhood anymore, nor do they teach him about dating girls. They don’t love to watch out for their little brother anymore. Instead, they love to hate him. His brothers love him so much that they throw him into an empty pit—life is the pits for Joseph! They do it with the hopes of killing him and his dreams. This pit is a symbolic death. The Hebrew word for “pit” (bor) refers to the underworld. In other words, Joseph is living in hell. He’s in some really hot water.

Joseph is not in Chapel Hill drinking a skinny vanilla latte at Starbucks. Joseph is in a pit. No internet surfing, no access to email, no facebook friendship, no ipod in hand, no option to play Wii video games, no Duke basketball games on television, no Bible to read, no Duke Chapel choir music to hear. Life is the pits for Joseph!

And, he’s only guilty of two things: 1) being his father’s favorite son, the “apple” of his father’s eye, and 2) being a dreamer. I understand the part about the brothers being jealous of their father’s love for Joseph. Jacob didn’t give his other sons a long robe with sleeves (what in tradition has been called the coat of many colors), but to turn on your brother because he is a dreamer?

Associate Professor of Neurology at Boston University School of Medicine, Patrick McNamara, is an expert on the science of dreams. He’s researched and written books on this topic and even has a blog titled “Dream Catcher: The Neuroscience of our Night Life.” He says that dreaming is a cultural universal though not everyone recalls their dreams. But for those who dream and remember, sometimes they dream what is called a “big dream,” in which they encode in the memory an epoch win of some sort. Maybe this is what upsets Joseph’s brothers—Joseph dreams too big.

Yet, dreamers are ordinary people who imagine extraordinary things. Dreamers aren’t perfect people, and neither is Joseph. He’s a tattletale, and it appears that he doesn’t even do the same amount of work as his brothers in the fields. If I am honest, little brother Joseph seems to have it pretty easy compared to his big brothers. But to treat him like they do because of his dreams makes no sense, does it? Their father’s beloved son doesn’t deserve the pit for this. And while Joseph sits in the pit, his brothers sit down outside of the pit to eat their North Carolina barbeque. They are cold, callous, uncaring, and definitely not Christ-like, hoping little brother dies right along with his dreams. And this, all because they can’t handle his big dreams. Their vision is limited. “Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?” (37:8). They want Joseph as far away as possible because his dream is their nightmare. Any sight of him reminds them of his dream. They want him out of sight and out of mind. The pit isn’t even enough. When the opportunity arises for them to get rid of him and make some money (what some public intellectuals call “bling-bling”), they sell their own flesh and blood into Egyptian slavery just because their brother is a dreamer. Sometimes family may
be the worst enemy. They hate him because their father loved him more than them most definitely. But the scripture also says “they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words” (37:8). Joseph’s dreams get him into trouble. His dreams make them want to destroy him—“we shall see what will become of his dreams” they say (37:20). They want to make his dream a living nightmare for him. They aim to deny Joseph his dreams by destroying him, and by doing so, deny the power of the dream. Everyone can’t handle our dreams so some will find any way possible to defy or ignore them.

But dreams are significant especially when they are God’s dreams for us. Joseph dreams of his brothers binding sheaves in the field: “Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright and then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf” (37:7). And if one dream wasn’t bad enough, Joseph dreams again—“the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” (37:9). At least Joseph didn’t rub it in and taunt his bigger brothers by saying—“nanny, nanny, boo boo.” If he did that, then maybe I could understand why his brothers are so hateful. But there is no taunting. There is no teasing. There are only two dangerous dreams. Dangerous because God’s dreams disrupt the way things are. Dangerous because God’s dreams threaten the status quo, the normal order of life. Dangerous because dreaming God’s dreams might get you into trouble. If your dream just confirms what already is, rubber stamping the norm, pouring out a blessing on the sociopolitical empire of the day, it’s not God’s dream because God inverts our human way of doing things, flipping life on its head. The last shall be first. The least are the greatest. The weak are the strong. The foolish are the wise. To go up, you go down. To have life, you have to die.

That’s why Joseph’s brothers are so mad. Joseph dreams of a different kind of world. His dream constructs a new sociological vision of reality, much like Peter Berger’s “Sociology of Knowledge,” a study of human reality. Joseph’s dreams disturb the “pecking world order” of the family. Joseph, the son of Jacob’s old age, is now in charge and ruling over his entire family, including his parents? The younger over the older? The bottom goes to the top? I’m the son of my father’s old age, too, but my brothers, who are here, have not yet agreed to bow down to me! Joseph dreams of a world with a different distribution of power. A dream that would eventually become a reality as we read the rest of the Joseph narrative. A dream that was a nightmare to his brothers, at least from their perspective, because if this dream was true, they wouldn’t be running the program any longer. So the brothers seek to strip Joseph of any hope, disrobing him of Jacob’s sign of love for him, that long robe with sleeves which their father never gave them. This is serious family conflict. I’m not even sure Dr. Phil would want this case. Joseph’s dreams are a threat to how they lived, and they want to put an end to that. They enjoy the way life is, the way life has always been, and they have always thought to themselves, like Louie Armstrong, “what a wonderful world.” But Joseph’s dreams would change that world. Thus, they resist the dreams by doing evil to their brother causing great grief in their family. Reuben and Jacob tear their clothes in the agony of mourning when they think Joseph, the dreamer, is dead (37:29-34). Dreamers put their life in danger because others may attempt to kill the dream.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a dreamer who put his life at risk and was killed because of his dream. He dreamed of a world that disrupted and disturbed the way life was, that disrupted the status quo in society. In Dr. King’s most famous speech, he proclaimed, “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day, even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream 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! . . . I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, and
the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.” What a dream that still plays on the ipod of this country’s historical memory! But not everyone understood that dream. Not everyone understands that dream. Not everyone understands dreams. Not everyone can handle dreams. Not everyone wants our dreams to come true. Dr. King’s dream leads to his death, and there are all kinds of conspiracy theories about that.

So beware of what you dream for. It’ll probably get you into trouble like Joseph. Dreaming is dangerous business; even taking the risk to dream when you know that it may not come true is dangerous. Dreamers know that not all dreams come true. Dr. King knew this. That’s why he preached a sermon called “Unfulfilled Dreams” where he says “life is like [Franz] Schubert’s ‘Unfinished Symphony.’” In another sermon, he says that shattered dreams “are a hallmark of our mortal life.” Dreamers know that some dreams will be unfulfilled in their lifetime or even shattered. But that doesn’t stop the dreamer from dreaming because to dream is to live and not to dream is to die.

Dreams are deep yearnings of the mind and heart. Dreams are imaginative prayers of the human soul in the Spirit. You can be awake and dream. Two years ago when my son Zachary was four years old, I was putting him to sleep and was preparing to pray with him in his bed. All of sudden, out of nowhere, he asked, “Daddy, are we gonna see God one day?” Yikes! I just wanted to say a nice little seminary prayer and be done with it. I said, “Yes, one day.” Zachary, responded and asked, “Friday?” I said, “No, not Friday, but one day.” Then he said, “You, me, Mommy, and Moriah are gonna see God one day.” “Yes, Zachary, one day.” And he said, “Cool.” The beatific vision of divine communion is no less than “cool,” and Zachary was dreaming aloud, fully awake, with a child-like desire and prayer for eternal, empathic, intimate, relationality with the face of God and God’s people in the bond of love who is the Holy Spirit. Zachary saw beyond the “isness” of life and imagined the “oughtness.” His dream showed me that he was alive in the dead of night. Dreams occur in the interstitial spaces of life, between what is and what ought.

To dream the impossible dream. To imagine beyond what we see or experience. How the world ought to be. How the university, church, and community should be. To dream God’s disruptive dreams. What’s impossible to us is possible for God because nothing is impossible for God. God is a God of possibilities, a God of dreams. Is anyone dreaming? Not daydreaming during my sermon!

I mean dreaming of a world. Dreaming of a world where there is fair distribution of wealth and food for every single man, woman, boy, and girl on every continent. Dreaming of a world where there is a home and an excellent education for every human being. Dreaming of a world where families may take in orphans as their own children. Dreaming of a world where there will be no more torture or violence of any kind against humanity. Dreaming of when we’ll study war no more! Dreaming of a world where there will be no more racism and no more sexism and no more classism, no more hatred of any kind. Dreaming of a world where Christians will actually love their neighbor as themselves. I’m dreaming this morning. I know dreams can get you in trouble like Joseph, but I don’t want anyone to throw me into a pit today!

I’m dreaming of a world of intellectual interdisciplinarity that operates with some fluidity in relation to the life of Duke Chapel as a web of intellectual collaboration across schools and institutes that is fostered and strengthened in service to society for the glory of God. And if students are the heart of a university, which I believe is the case, I’m dreaming of a world in which the Chapel discerns and develops further ways to interface the formal curriculum of the classroom with the informal curriculum of student activities and life such that we connect with students offline and online, relating to academics and athletics, the fraternities and
sorories, even if they never step foot inside of the Chapel. I’m dreaming of a world of an ongoing intergenerational oasis in the Chapel where children and adults and students relate to each other in meaningful friendships. I’m dreaming of a world—signified most prominently by today’s music—of an international, intercultural, interracial/interethnic, interdenominational religious space where the organ and steel drums are liturgical best friends, a space of the Spirit in which we embody and reveal the breadth of the beauty of God expressed in the worldwide church. I’m dreaming of a ministerial world for high church folks, low church folks, and no church folks through which we transgress the normal boundaries of stereotypical difference and adapt to a changing global ecclesial and social reality for the larger purpose of reconciliation. An eclectic ecumenicity grounded in the Trinity.

Grounded in the triune love of God, we may just realize what it means to be the beloved community. And so I dream of a world in which we continue to look outward to Durham and beyond where the Chapel is known, not just as a significant icon of Duke gothic architecture of divine transcendence, but as the incarnation of God’s immanence and practical love in the world. To be God’s “cathedral of care.” Dreaming not just of the word in the Chapel, but as one of my colleagues, Charles Campbell, has written, “the word on the street” among, with, and for the people. To reach out while at the same time reaching in, to mutually love and learn. Dreaming of a world, as Dr. Martin Luther King puts it, where we finally realize that our “destinies are tied together” and that “I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.”

Dreaming of a world, as Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes puts it, “where love will bless the earth and peace its paths adorn.” To dream of a world like this is nothing short of a gift of Pentecost thus erudition may need to be expanded to include “et spiritus,” because without spirit, breath, there can be no life. Dreaming of a world! God’s world. God’s order. God’s kingdom. God’s dreams. But dreams are not always welcomed because they are dangerous, just as Joseph whose name means “add” is an unwelcome addition to his family. Every family won’t accept a dreamer in their midst. Every church won’t accept dreamers as members. Every institution won’t hire dreamers as employees. But I have news this morning—God’s dreams will prevail.

What is God’s dream for you? Once upon a time, I had a dream. I dreamed that I would be a computer engineer, a technologically-savvy Hewlett Packard employee in the Silicon Valley of California. Look where that dream got me. Right here! What I had dreamed did not come true because it wasn’t God’s dream. But God will preserve God’s dream even through detours, even when life is the pits. God is at work in hidden, mysterious ways. Your dreams may not have come true, but that might be because they aren’t God’s dreams for you. Or, God’s dreams for you may just be delayed for the moment. God’s dreams, like in Joseph’s story, may be deferred but will not be ultimately denied. Joseph is not murdered, though that was the initial plan, but God uses Reuben to save his life so that the dream does not die along with Joseph. God may be using unlikely people and predicaments to keep the divine dream within you alive.

And the dream is still alive. Dreamers know this. God’s dreams can’t be stopped. God’s dreams will prevail because God is preserving God’s dream for the world, this university, community, and Chapel. The threat of death to Joseph could not stop his dream, nor could Egyptian slavery. His dream was deferred but not denied. And not even Death could hold back God’s dream for the world in Jesus Christ who conquered the pit of hell to be Lord of all. We taste and see the dream at the table of the Eucharist. God’s dream is not dead. Setbacks are just setups for comebacks. Your tomorrows will not be crushed by tough todays. Dreamers don’t die easily. Are there any dreamers at Duke this morning?
This is not about dreaming of retirement, but dreaming God’s dream for your life and the world. Remember, it can be dangerous. You may have to risk your life or risk the way life is by dreaming it, but in the words of poet Langston Hughes,

“Hold fast to dreams for if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.
Hold fast to dreams for when dreams go
Life is a barren field frozen with snow.”

To dream is to live. Not to dream is to die.

So dream on. Dream on because God is not finished with you yet. Dream on because it does not yet appear what we shall be. Dream on for nothing is impossible with God. I’m signing up for the Dream Team. And guess who’s the captain: Joseph.