“*Perchance to Dream*”

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How many of you have siblings or close cousins? By close cousins I mean cousins who were such a close part of your early life that they were almost siblings. Many of you have heard my stories of growing up on a family farm. There were four households on this farm, my grandparents, two uncles and their families and my family. Now I was my mother and father’s only child. One aunt and uncle had three children and the other had five children. Each family had its own house but that was about the only thing distinctive about these eight adults and nine children.

My cousins and I were raised pretty much as if we were siblings. We were loved and cared for equally by all the adults. Where ever we happened to be at meal time was where we ate. Often, where ever we were at bedtime was where we slept. The raising and nurturing of all the children was shared by all the adults. I was about 5 years old before I realized that of the four houses on the farm, one was somehow distinctively mine.

The farm was large and our nearest neighbor was about a mile away. These neighbors were an elderly couple whose children were grown and moved away. The closest neighbors with children were probably two miles away. The social center of life was the farm. Until kindergarten, I had hardly any contact with other children except for occasional visits with cousins from my mother’s family and when friends of the family stopped by and brought their children. My cousins and I were a very close knit social group.

Looking back, I remember my youth fondly, even idyllically. This is not to say that we children did not have our problems. There were the inevitable squabbles and disagreements found in any group of children. The ebb and flow of different cliques meant that at times some of us were on the outs and some in. Often, it was the older children not wanting to be with the younger children. There were times when for one reason or another everyone else would gang up on one person. These were never physically violent. Usually it was temporary exclusion from the group in response to the one person violating the unwritten code of group conduct. However, mutual love and caring always predominated.

There was one thing that did cause friction with some of my cousins, a friction that lasted even into adulthood. This was my status in the extended family. This may sound strange to many of you, but I was the firstborn of the firstborn of a line of firstborns extending back more than ten generations. “So what?”, you may ask. In an Irish-Catholic family, being the first born in such a line of first borns carried a special status. My grandfather was, in theory, the head of a large extended family of people separated by many generations. When my grandfather died, that responsibility fell on my father. At my father’s death, it would fall to me.

Even as a child, more was expected of me than my cousins. I was given a respect and deference by my grandfather and even my uncles that my cousins did not have. None of us children understood it, but my cousins were at times resentful and I must admit I was arrogant because of it. By adulthood I understood the anachronism of this system but the die had been cast. Most of my cousins left this behind but some still harbored some resentment. However, some of my cousins continued to view me as having some responsibility for the health and well-being of the family.

Today’s text begins the “Joseph Story.” This story, or some version of it has been popular for many generations of Christians. Perhaps most of us today when we think of Joseph think of the play, “The Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat” or a Bible story we learned as youngsters. It is natural for us, as humans, to be drawn to uplifting and heroic narratives. Our psyche responds to the positive, not so much to the negative.

But if we respond only to the positive in the story of Joseph, we miss an important message which this story contains. The story of Joseph is only a part of a greater story, the story of Abraham and his descendants. This story plays out through most of the book of Genesis, chapters 12 to 50. The story documents the lives of an increasingly dysfunctional family and the effects this has on God’s plans.

Both Isaac and Jacob were not the best of fathers. Both had a child that they favored to the detriment of their other children. Neither did well in healing the rifts that developed in their families. This led the children of both to deceit, arrogance, anger, hatred and the possibility of murder. The vicissitudes of these families played out against the backdrop of Abraham’s other descendants who were the fathers of nations often at war.

I’m sure at least some of you are saying, “Yes I can see your point about problems in these families, but wasn’t Joseph a hero?” As with most people, the answer is qualified, simply put yes and no. As Joseph matured into adulthood, he grew in wisdom learning to interpret his dreams and using them for leadership. But as a youth of 17 years, he was self-centered, arrogant and willing to curry his father’s favor at the expense of his brothers. This led to his brothers plotting his murder and ultimately selling him into slavery.

God has a plan for the creation and God has chosen to work out at least part of this plan thru the agency of human beings. A critical part of this plan was to establish a holy nation in the area we now call Palestine. This nation was to be a shining beacon of love, righteousness and justice for the rest of the world. To this end, God selected Abraham to be the father of this future nation. (Genesis 12). God led Abraham to the Promised Land, settled him there and blessed him with a son, Isaac, also blessed to carry on God’s plan.

Isaac remained in the Promised Land and God commanded him not to go to Egypt. (Genesis 26). Isaac had two sons, the first-born Esau and the second born Jacob. For reasons, we can only speculate, God chose Jacob over Esau to be blessed with carrying out God’s plan. Because of his deceit and Esau’s murderous rage, Jacob had to flee to his uncle Laban, back in the land from which God had brought Abraham to the Promised Land. God’s plan had been frustrated by human actions.

Jacob eventually returned to the Promised Land and had twelve sons. Again, for reasons we do not know, it appears that God chose Joseph to be the bearer of the promise. Because Joseph, at the time the youngest of the brothers, was greatly favored by Jacob, there was bad feelings between him and his older brothers. Joseph began to have what were apparently divine dreams. Young and arrogant, Joseph simply blurted out his dreams and left those who heard him to interpret their meaning for themselves.

Joseph’s brothers already angry with him saw in the dreams that Joseph was to become the master of them all. For this, his brothers determined to murder him to keep the dreams from coming to pass. In the end, they sold him into slavery in Egypt and told their father Jacob that Joseph had been killed by wild animals. So, it came to pass that the future of God’s holy nation now was in Egypt, the place where God had instructed Isaac not to go.

In the story of Abraham and his descendants, we see how God’s choice to work through weak and frail human agents is often frustrated. But we also see that God’s plans will not be forever denied. The Sovereign will of God will always be done. Why is this message important to us? Because, like the people found in the Bible we are also frail and weak and can frustrate God’s plan. As humans we can be deceitful, arrogant, angry and prideful. We make decisions and do things as if we know what is best.

As Christians, we believe that it is God who knows what is best. God has revealed what God wants for us, which is *shalom*, a peaceful and fulfilled life for all humanity. God has also revealed what God expects of us, “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God” (Mic. 6:8). Yet when we exercise our free will without checking with God there is no peace or fulfillment for ourselves and others.

God is with us always and is always speaking to us, telling us what to do. Yet, time after time, our minds wander away from the holy. We must train ourselves to hear what God is telling us. Every time we decide to act, we must discern whether our decision is in accord with God’s will. This is not easy, but if we always keep God in our mind and always seek God’s will, God is there telling us what is right. God is always training us to be aware of his presence, God only expects us to cooperate in this training.

It is difficult for us to always be aware of God. This should not dismay us, it is the nature of humanity. We need to learn always to look to God in all aspects of our lives, God will guide us through this chaotic world. God will tell us if our will is in accord with God’s will. We are the beloved children of God who is always within us. God has a plan for us, “plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jer. 29:11), God is working always to bring about these plans, and God will not ultimately be denied.