

June 30, 2024 - "Here Comes That Dreamer" – Katy Fazio

I invite you to keep an open mind and remember that I am offering you AN interpretation, not THE interpretation of this story. In line with our theme this summer, "God is still speaking," we know that our sacred stories contain many truths for many people.

I also want to give a couple of language notes. I'm going to be using the terms 'Queer' a lot in this sermon. The word queer has been weaponized against LGBTQ folks, and it has also been reclaimed by people like myself to describe identities that fall outside of the cisgender and heterosexual expectations of society. So "queer" can refer to somebody's gender, somebody's sexual orientation, or both.

It's a word that is sort of nebulous and nimble, and that's part of the beauty of it. Queerness is by definition, expansive and imaginative. All LGBTQ folks are daring to imagine a world in which they can exist free from repression, where they can be seen and loved exactly as God made them to be.

Which is why I chose the story of Joseph today.

That dreamer. That dreamer who was cast out by his family. That dreamer who was sold into slavery. That Dreamer, who was sexually harassed and assaulted by his boss's wife. That dreamer who is tossed into prison for years. That dreamer who never, not once, loses his connection to the divine, and who continues to dream and to prophecy, to humbly work to save the people of Egypt from famine and then finds the grace to save his estranged family as well. That dreamer, Joseph.

Joseph's story is long and full of action and drama, revenge and reconciliation. Again and again Joseph is betrayed by people who hold more power than he does. He endures with an abiding faith in God, faith that is sustained through this mysterious gift he has of interpreting dreams. "Here comes that dreamer," his brothers say, "Let's kill him."

I was first introduced to Joseph as a queer biblical figure not in seminary, but on Twitter. Rabbi Danya Ruttenburg, a Jewish writer and teacher was pointing out that Hebrew word I left untranslated in the reading that Steve did. *Ketonet Passim*. It's usually translated as 'ornate robe', or if you're a fan of musicals, the technicolor dreamcoat.

Now, most bibles have a note that the translation of *Ketonet Passim* is uncertain. We just don't know exactly how to translate the name of this special garment. But it does appear exactly one other time in the Hebrew Bible in the book of Samuel, which was written about 400 years after this story, so this isn't a foolproof method of translating, but bear with me.

2 Samuel, chapter 13 says, "Now, *she* had on a *ketonet passim*, because this is how the maiden daughters of the King were clothed." The *she* in this story is Tamar, the daughter of King David. Tamar had on a *Ketonet Passim* because that's what the daughter of the king - the princesses - wore. The *Ketonet Passim* is the dress that princesses wore.

It's the gift that Jacob crafts for Joseph that enrages his brothers. It's such an ostentatious garment that as he approaches from a distance, his brothers recognize him instantly and begin to plot to get rid of him. "Here comes that dreamer. Let's kill him"

The text says that Joseph is stunningly beautiful. Medieval Jewish rabbis commented that at seventeen, Joseph should have been considered a man, but the text calls him a youth because, the rabbis say, he curled his hair and painted his eyes and walked with lifted heels.

What do you call a beautiful seventeen year old boy who wears a princess dress, curls his hair, paints his eyes, and sashays his way from place to place? Do you call him a dreamer?

Now I'm not going to project identity labels like gay or transgender or nonbinary back to the cultural context of 3000 years ago. But I do think

it's a fair lens to use to say that Joseph might have been outside of the cultural, societal expectations of his gender. That Jacob might have had a soft spot for his queer, mystical, dreamer child. That the brothers might have been acting out of more than just envy, but also violently enforcing the gender norms of their time.

Joseph's brothers humiliate him. They strip the *Ketonet Passim* from his body. They throw him in a ditch. They sell him into slavery in a foreign country. And finally, to cover their tracks, they take the *Ketonet Passim* that Jacob had lovingly made and they cover it in goat's blood so that everybody thinks he is dead, and nobody comes to rescue him.

Beloved, God never leaves a child in the pit. God never leaves a child abandoned.

The text tells us that in Egypt God blessed Joseph in his work over and over again. Joseph is assigned to the household of one of Pharaoh's captain of the guard, Potiphar, and the text tells us that "The Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands," so he is promoted to manage the household. And things are good for a while, until Potiphar's wife starts taking an interest in him. She repeatedly tries to seduce him, and after multiple refusals she rips the shirt from his back and has him imprisoned. In prison he meets two servants of Pharaoh and interprets their dreams, and he stays in prison in Egypt for several years.

When Pharaoh has a troubling dream of seven fat cows and seven starving cows, "That Dreamer," Joseph is remembered and brought out of his cell to interpret. He says, "There will be seven good years with plenty to eat. And then seven years of famine." Joseph says to the Pharaoh, "Find someone wise to help you store up the grain from the surplus years, so that you'll survive during the years of famine." And Pharaoh replies, "*You* are wise." So Joseph oversees this famine-prevention program, and eventually becomes Pharaoh's sort of right hand. When the famines do come, they come not only to Egypt but also to Canaan where Joseph's brothers and father live. The brothers come to

Joseph as refugees, looking for food to bring back to their family. And there is enough. There is enough food for the Egyptians and for the Hebrews. After again a kind of dramatic back and forth and big flashy reveal of Joseph's identity, Joseph is reunited with his father, forgives his brothers, and the whole family lives in Egypt together, reconciled. "That dreamer" Joseph saves the very people who persecuted him.

I hope this lens of interpretation can teach us that queer people have always been beloved by God, have always been called by God, and have always been created in the divine image of God.

Today there is no shortage of dangers to the queer community; in legislatures, in schools, and in churches across the country who reject difference at the expense of the most vulnerable people. In particular, trans and gender nonconforming people, especially children, have recently been the subject of vicious propaganda and attacks on medical care, with about 600 anti-trans bills being introduced nationwide just this year. .

So it bears repeating from this pulpit that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Asexual, Transgender, intersex, and nonbinary people are beloved by God. Folks whose identities are not named or are nameless, are beloved by God. We know this! That's why we are Open and Affirming, it's why we support things like the Rainbow Youth Alliance, why we hosted the Trans and Nonbinary panel. Because God is Love, and Love is expansive enough for every. single. person. Even and especially when they are cast out by their families, by their communities, by their churches.

In fact, these dreamers continue today to, by the power of imagination, create communities of care and connection that teach us how to be in relationship with each other. Divinely inspired 'found families,' or 'chosen families,' that are blessed examples that the church should be learning from and uplifting. Queer people know how to survive, how to hold onto a dream of plenty in a world of scarcity. And so, we celebrate Pride this month with a renewed covenant to welcome

and affirm LGBTQ folks. To honor those who dream of justice by daring to create the world we dream of.