

S.230813 First Presbyterian Church Champaign “God’s Wonderful Works”

Scriptures: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28, Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-13, 17-28

¹Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan.

²This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father’s wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father.

³Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. ⁴But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

¹²Now his brothers went to pasture their father’s flock near Shechem. ¹³And Israel said to Joseph, “Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.” He answered, “Here I am.”

¹⁸[The brothers] saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. ¹⁹They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer.

²⁰Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” ²¹But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” ²²Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into

this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him” — that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. ²³So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; ²⁴and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

²⁵Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. ²⁶Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed. ²⁸When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

Sermon

There is nothing wonderful about sibling rivalry. Anyone who has grown up with brothers and sisters knows there is no possible way for every sibling to receive exactly the same kind of attention from a parent. Life doesn't work that way. I like to think the early chapters of Genesis are a kind of description of what is in human life, Jungian archetypes of life. And we see, siblings are not treated the same. And we see, jealousy rises. It is an emotional growing pain to learn how to share, to

learn how to enjoy the apple of our parent's eye some of the time and share that spotlight other times. It is like a muscle that needs exercise to grow, we have to experience jealousy and forgiveness and love to gain wisdom. Unfortunately, sometimes horrible things happen before the wisdom is learned. That is the beauty of holy scripture. We can learn from God's Word and walk down a better path, if we only have the ears to hear and eyes to see.

The funny thing you discover when you read scripture over and over again is how many opportunities we have been given by God to not give in to those jealousies. Matt preached on Joseph a couple of weeks ago when he paired it with the Revelation of John of Patmos, from the beginning to the end! The Joseph story in Genesis seems like a repeat version of Cain and Abel or Jacob and Esau or even the tribal wars that are fought over land. Family patterns seem to be passed down from one generation to another. I imagine if you look in your own family history, you will see a similar thing. Every generation seems to repeat unhealthy patterns, even as there are efforts and even moments in which those patterns are broken and salvation emerges.

We are part of God's creation in which jealousy is a given. Scientists would say it is a survival coping mechanism, the jealousy or desire causes us to act so that we can save ourselves. Yet, in direct opposition to that primal instinct God's ten commandments demand this of us: Thou shall not covet. And in the New Testament Jesus demands an even harder development to this - "Love our enemy."

What the brothers did to Joseph is played out in our news every week. A woman's father's model airplane with no monetary value is stolen in a burglary for no reason. A woman's brother suspected of killing his sister in an effort to inherit the family farm. Joseph's brothers were tired of watching their father doting on their youngest brother. They were tired of sharing the apple in their father's eye, especially when they felt like they never got any of that eye. When they were younger, Jacob (also called Israel) worked hard to tend his huge family and his flocks of sheep. A nomad's life is really hard. He probably did not have a lot of time to spend with his sons. But, by the time Joseph came around, he had his sons working for him, and he could take a little more time watching this amazing blessing from God grow up, sit on his lap, play those little boy games, and hear the

fantastic tales that Joseph seemed to tell about his dreams that seemed to predict the future.

We know some other jealousies that may have been swirling around in the family.

The older son's mothers may have been jealous of one another, certainly of

Joseph's mother Rachel who scripture tells us in the very beginning was the one

whom Jacob loved. Children can pick up on petty adult rivalries. Hate, anger,

jealousy, greed are powerful emotions that indeed lurk around the corner waiting

to pounce. They are so intensely related to our survival instincts that our children

can absorb them from the adults in their lives. One can understand how the

oldest sons might have carried on the jealousies of their parents. The older boys

did an unthinkable thing. They took revenge, talked about killing their brother,

then abandoned him in a pit and sold him into slavery. Then they lied about it to

their father. Can you imagine? It just feels terrible to think about it, probably

because it is all too real.

It is hard to see how any good can come out of such horror but it does. God is a

redeeming God, God is saving God. The wonderful thing about telling these stories

generation after generation is that you can see that there is a larger narrative at

work in the smaller intrigues of the human story. When one thread seems like it is going to run amuck there is another thread running right along side of it pulling it back into God's big schema of salvation.

Genesis is a great family story. The Joseph narrative is one of the more developed stories in scripture written in three scenes just like a play. In fact, if you ever have a chance to see the play/movie called Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, you should see it. The church, McCarter Presbyterian, which I served in Greenville SC went to see the play all together and had a great time launching stories of our own jealousies and triumphs.

The Joseph narrative weaves itself into the Psalms hundreds of years later. the Psalmist 105 (which was used for our call to worship, writes about God's wonderful works,

*16 When [God] summoned famine against the land,
and broke every staff of bread,*

*17 he had sent a man ahead of them,
Joseph, who was sold as a slave.*

*18 His feet were hurt with fetters,
his neck was put in a collar of iron;*

*19 until what he had said came to pass,
the word of the Lord kept testing him.*

*20 The king sent and released him;
the ruler of the peoples set him free.*

21 He made him lord of his house,

*and ruler of all his possessions,
22 to instruct his officials at his pleasure,
and to teach his elders wisdom.*

45b Praise the Lord! (Psalm 105)

The Psalmist sings about the jealous treachery with thanksgiving. You see, gratitude is the antidote to jealousy. She notes the beauty in it, the wonder of how this horrible treachery became the very way the people who did the treachery (his brothers) were saved. God used the brothers' sin, selling Joseph into slavery, to save them later.

The confessions say God is sovereign and all things are governed by his providence. 2 Helvetic Chapter VI (5.029) "*We believe that all things in heaven and on earth, and in all creatures, are preserved and governed by the providence of this wise, eternal and almighty God.*"

We can only see this in hindsight though. It takes faith to believe there is a plan when you are in the pit like Joseph was or even when you are in the throws of jealousy like his brothers were. When we look back in time we see God's saving acts that have been at work all along, despite our efforts to turn them aside.

Suffering and death never have the last word. That knowledge is a word of hope when we are at the bottom of the pit or imprisoned by our emotional and

instinctual states. God is not causing the pain, but God can use it. God is a saving God and salvation has the final word.

Once a group of colleagues and I went on retreat. The primary part of our retreat was in a pottery craft hut in Montreat called The Left Bank. If you go to Montreat in the summer, you can go to the Pottery Barn at the Left Bank and make things. You can enter into creative activity. We were there to understand our vocation and to explore what God was doing in our lives. It was a retreat about vocation. We spent a day making our own unique clay bowls. They were beautiful. One friend had little flowers on hers. I had made geometric designs on mine. Another had a pot that looked like a Charleston basket. We had to let them dry overnight before we could stain them and then put them in the kiln to fire. We went to sleep that night in our room dreaming of how we were going to paint these pots the next day.

The next day we arrived and our leader told us we had to destroy the pots – rip them up, break them apart, mash them. It was a devastating experience. It doesn't feel natural to destroy your creation. Then we were told as a group we had to take all those pieces and make a large bowl. That took another day. We

actually had enough pieces to make two bowls. They were gorgeous. We stained them, fired them. We gifted them to the Presbytery. I don't know if they are still there or not. But, we were able to use one of those bowls at a Presbytery meeting following our retreat as the baptismal bowl during our communion service.

God is like a potter and we are like the clay, says Isaiah 64:8. God creates wonderful things and sometimes destroys that creation in order to make an even better creation. In Jeremiah 18 we read, *“The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²“Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear^[a] my words.” ³So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.”*

There are times in scripture as in Genesis, as in the book of Jeremiah, even as at the crucifixion of his own son, when it seems that God has abandoned the pot, broken it apart, destroyed it, sometimes it seems at random, at other times it seems purposefully in order to recreate. But, the overall desire of Yahweh is absolutely for God's people to be saved, for

God's people to repent and turn back to the way of the Lord, a way characterized by justice, mercy and ever loving kindness.

What wonderful works God creates, reminds the Psalmist. She sings how the treachery of Joseph's brothers were redeemed so that God's people might be saved. And, so it happens again and again. We are God's wonderful work like that.

Eternal God,

you are present with us throughout our lives,

even when others plot to do us harm.

May we learn to live together in unity,

that in all we do,

we may sing your praises now and forever. Amen. (<http://>

lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers.php?id=154)