

“Joseph the Dreamer”

Genesis 37:3-14, 17b-36

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For the past three days at Vacation Bible School we have explored the story of Joseph from the book of Genesis- it's one of the longest and most drama filled narratives in all of scripture. Through arts and crafts, drama and games the participants at VBS have gotten to know more about Joseph the Dreamer, favorite of his father Jacob who gave him that beautiful coat of many colors. Today we begin a mini series on the saga of Joseph and his family. If some of you are old enough to remember the TV saga Dallas, you might get a hint of what this story of Joseph is like. Jealousy and deception, attempted murder and seduction, wild dreams and dramatic reunions - these are all things these two family sagas have in common. If you ever thought the Bible was a boring book, you have not read the last 14 chapters of the book of Genesis! If you are looking for something productive to do these next couple of weeks, I encourage you to study Genesis. Let's turn now to God's Word, Genesis chapter 37, the beginning of Joseph's story.

Now Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he was born when Jacob was old. Jacob had made for him a long robe. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him and couldn't even talk nicely to him.

Joseph had a dream and told it to his brothers, which made them hate him even more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had. When we were binding stalks of grain in the field, my stalk got up and stood upright, while your stalks gathered around it and bowed down to my stalk." His brothers said to him, "Will you really be our king and rule over us?" So they hated him even more because of the dreams he told them.

Then Joseph had another dream and described it to his brothers: "I've just dreamed again, and this time the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." When he described it to his father and brothers, his father scolded him and said to him, "What kind of dreams have you dreamed? Am I and your mother and your brothers supposed to come and bow down to the ground in front of you?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father took careful note of the matter.

Joseph's brothers went to tend their father's flocks near Shechem. Jacob said to Joseph, "Aren't your brothers tending the sheep near Shechem? Come, I'll send you to them." And Joseph said, "I'm ready."

Jacob said to him, "Go! Find out how your brothers are and how the flock is, and report back to me." So Joseph went after his brothers and found them in Dothan.

They saw Joseph in the distance before he got close to them, and they plotted to kill him. The brothers said to each other, "Here comes the big dreamer. Come on now, let's kill him and throw him into one of the cisterns, and we'll say a wild animal devoured him. Then we will see what becomes of his dreams!" When Reuben heard what they said, he

saved him from them, telling them, “Let’s not take his life.” Reuben said to them, “Don’t spill his blood! Throw him into this desert cistern, but don’t lay a hand on him.” He intended to save Joseph from them and take him back to his father.

When Joseph reached his brothers, they stripped off Joseph’s long robe, took him, and threw him into the cistern, an empty cistern with no water in it. When they sat down to eat, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with camels carrying sweet resin, medicinal resin, and fragrant resin on their way down to Egypt. Judah said to his brothers, “What do we gain if we kill our brother and hide his blood? Come on, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites. Let’s not harm him because he’s our brother; he’s family.” His brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the cistern. They sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver, and they brought Joseph to Egypt.

When Reuben returned to the cistern and found that Joseph wasn’t in it, he tore his clothes. Then he returned to his brothers and said, “The boy’s gone! And I—where can I go now?”

His brothers took Joseph’s robe, slaughtered a male goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the long robe, brought it to their father, and said, “We found this. See if it’s your son’s robe or not.” He recognized it and said, “It’s my son’s robe! A wild animal has devoured him. Joseph must have been torn to pieces!” Then Jacob tore his clothes, put a simple mourning cloth around his waist, and mourned for his son for many days. All of his sons and daughters got up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted, telling them, “I’ll go to my grave mourning for my son.” And Joseph’s father wept for him. Meanwhile the Midianites had sold Joseph to the Egyptians, to Potiphar, Pharaoh’s chief officer, commander of the royal guard.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

When it comes to understanding the story that unfolds in the Old Testament, you’ve got to pay attention to one thing - and that is family. You see, God’s promises are passed down from generation to generation, and so it’s really a family story. It starts in the book of Genesis, chapter 12, with Abraham and Sarah. God chooses these two nobodies, tells them to pack up and leave their home and move to the land of Canaan. God makes no promises except one - God promises them that from their descendants will come a great nation, and not only will God’s blessing rest on their descendants but get this - God promises Abraham and Sarah that “all the families of the earth will be blessed because of you!” (Genesis 12.1-3). So the drama begins! But here’s the kicker - when Abraham and Sarah receive this message from God, they are quite old and the prospect of having kids seems impossible. But as we learn, with God all things are possible! The 100 year old parents miraculously have their child named Isaac, and so the promise rests on him. “Look up at the sky and count the stars if you think you can count them... This is how many children you will have.” Isaac grows up and marries Rebekah, but like Sarah before her she is unable to have kids at first. After much prayer the Lord gave the gift not only of one kid but of two - Rebekah and Isaac have twins named Esau and Jacob. And here is when things get interesting! We are told that even in their mother’s womb the two brothers were fighting - Esau came out first but Jacob was holding onto his brother’s heel, as if he wanted to hold him back so he could be the first born

(25.26). Sibling rivalry from birth! Although Jacob is the younger one (just by a few minutes coming) he grows up and deceives his father to pass the family inheritance to him and not to Easau. This results in a falling out between Jacob and Essau that lasts for many years.

If you think these families were made up of moral, upstanding people that we can all follow as role models, and that is why God picks them, then you are in for a surprise. As you read through the book of Genesis you begin to realize these families are anything but perfect - they are real and as full of dysfunctions as any family you might know, including your own. And so when we come to the story of Joseph and his brothers, we shouldn't be surprised to learn that father Jacob has already picked favorites. Joseph was born when parents Jacob and Rachel were up in years, and so Jacob chose Joseph to be his favorite. If you know anything about what makes family systems healthy, picking favorites is not the thing to do. But dysfunctions are often passed down from generation to generation, and remember Jacob was the younger son, too. To make matters worse, Jacob gave his favorite son a very expensive coat with long sleeves, often referred to as a coat of many colors. Back in those days coats were not mass produced or readily available - it took much effort and time to make fine garments, and so when the favored Joseph wears this in front of his much older brothers, they are upset. The scriptures actually say "they hated him and couldn't even talk nicely to him" (37.4). And to make matters even worse, the 17 year-old Joseph is either clueless or naive, or likely a little of both. He goes on to share with his brothers two dreams he has. "When we were binding stalks of grain in the field, my stalk got up and stood upright, while your stalks gathered around it and bowed down to my stalk.... And oh, here's another one dream I just remembered! This time the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me" (37.8-9). Not only did this make his brothers even more jealous of him, it even bothered his dad Jacob who scolded him. "What kind of dreams have you dreamed? Am I and your mother and your brothers supposed to come and bow down to the ground in front of you?" (37.10)

Now, it's one thing to have feelings of jealousy and hate in your heart, but it's another when these feelings lead to actions. When the older brothers see Joseph approaching them out in the countryside while they are tending sheep, they hatch an evil plan to kill him. "Here comes the big dreamer! Let's kill him and throw him in one of the empty cisterns." Two of the brothers, Reuben and Judah, speak up and object to killing him. Reuben floats the idea of just throwing him down into the pit, but Judah takes it a step further and encourages selling Joseph as a slave to the traders passing by.

But what are they going to tell their father Jacob? Well, just as Jacob deceived his father Isaac to steal his birthright from his older brother Esau, Jacob's kids do the same to him. They take Joseph's coat, dip it into the blood of an animal, and then take it to Isaac. He immediately thinks Joseph has been killed by a wild animal, torn to pieces. So the grieving father tears his own clothes and enters into a period of deep grief for many days. There is no pain as great as when a parent loses a child, and Jacob refuses the comfort that was offered to him. "I'll go to my grave mourning for my son." And Jacob wept for him.

If Jacob's tears were the end of the story, we might not be here today. You see, the great promise God gave to Abraham and Sarah - that through them all of the nations of the world would be blessed - this promise has to continue down the family tree, and if the favored Joseph is killed by his brothers in an act of jealousy and hate, there's good reason to believe that the great family tree of promise would have been not only broken, but chopped down for good. Not only did the older brothers try to get rid of Joseph, they lied to their father and caused him tremendous pain

and grief. Best case scenario, Joseph might make it as a slave somewhere, but with him being taken away by foreign travelers, the chances of seeing him again are slim to none.

One of our key verses this week in VBS is the one from Jeremiah, spoken to the people in exile: *“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope”* (Jeremiah 29.11). As we will see in the chapters ahead, God is not done with Joseph and his brothers. Yes, God is able to work through the dysfunctions of this rather messed up family! We get a hint of this hope right at the end of today’s passage, when the narrator tells us Joseph is indeed alive! He has been sold to the Egyptians, to Potiphar, Pharaoh’s chief officer, the commander of the royal guard (37.36). **Though everyone believes the great dreamer has been killed, we know that the dream is still alive!** It’s God’s dream to bring blessings not only to Egypt but to all the nations of the world.

As Christians we believe that this promise of hope has come to the whole world through Jesus, the one who showed us in the flesh God’s love for the whole world. Through the gift of God’s Holy Spirit we have been adopted as children of God, and there’s nothing in life or in death that can ever separate us from God’s love or from one another. In the chapters ahead in Joseph’s saga, we will see that God is indeed active, working through the gift of Joseph’s dreams to bring healing and love and reconciliation to this very dysfunctional family.

In closing I want to share something remarkable about our passage from Genesis. In reading [Rev. Eileen O’Brien’s blog](#) I learned that “outside of Room 306 at what used to be the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, there is a plaque that quotes a line from Genesis. Room 306 at the Lorraine Motel is where Martin Luther King, Jr. spent the night of April 3, 1968, his last night on this earth.” She goes on to say, “So, you might expect the plaque to have an excerpt from his ‘I have a dream’ speech. You might expect to find the words that are on his tombstone, ‘Free at last.’ Instead, what is written there on that marker is a verse from today’s story of Joseph in Genesis, the taunt of his brothers who say, ‘Behold, here cometh the Dreamer. Let us slay him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.’”

Friends, in a world where dreams and dreamers are still slain, we can choose to have hope and not despair. For we belong to the One who is the Dreamer of all good dreams - dreams of justice and love, dreams of peace and reconciliation - God’s dream that the whole world will be blessed, including you and me.

Thanks be to God, now and always. Amen.