

Sermon – “Messy Heroism”

Sunday, May 5, 2019

Scripture Readings: Genesis 37:1-35 and Genesis 50:15-21

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Our first reading tells the beginning of the ancient story of Joseph, son of Jacob, who was also known as Israel. Listen for God’s word to you in Genesis 37, verses 1 through 35.

*<sup>37:1</sup> Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan.  
<sup>2</sup> This 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. <sup>3</sup> Now 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. <sup>4</sup> But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.*

*<sup>5</sup> Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. <sup>6</sup> He said to them, “Listen to this dream that I dreamed. <sup>7</sup> There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.” <sup>8</sup> His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?” So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.*

*<sup>9</sup> He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, “Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” <sup>10</sup> But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, “What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?” <sup>11</sup> So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.*

*<sup>12</sup> Now his brothers went to pasture their father’s flock near Shechem. <sup>13</sup> And 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.” <sup>14</sup> So he said to him, “Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me.” So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.*

*He came to Shechem, <sup>15</sup> and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, “What are you seeking?” <sup>16</sup> “I am seeking my brothers,” he said; “tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.” <sup>17</sup> The man said, “They have gone away, for I heard them say, ‘Let us go to Dothan.’” So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. <sup>18</sup> They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. <sup>19</sup> They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. <sup>20</sup> Come 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.”*

<sup>21</sup> But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” <sup>22</sup> Reuben 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. <sup>23</sup> So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; <sup>24</sup> and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

<sup>25</sup> Then 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. <sup>26</sup> Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? <sup>27</sup> Come, 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. <sup>28</sup> When 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.

<sup>29</sup> When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. <sup>30</sup> He returned to his brothers, and said, “The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?” <sup>31</sup> Then they took Joseph’s robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. <sup>32</sup> They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, “This we have found; see now whether it is your son’s robe or not.” <sup>33</sup> He recognized it, and said, “It is my son’s robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.” <sup>34</sup> Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. <sup>35</sup> All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Thus his father bewailed him.

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Our second reading visits a point near the very end of the Joseph saga. Hear now Genesis chapter 50, verses 15 through 21.

<sup>15</sup> Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph’s brothers said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?” <sup>16</sup> So they approached <sup>[a]</sup> Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this instruction before he died, <sup>17</sup> ‘Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.’ Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. <sup>18</sup> Then his brothers also wept, <sup>[b]</sup> fell down before him, and said, “We are here as your slaves.” <sup>19</sup> But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. <sup>21</sup> So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

This morning the children are putting on their annual spring musical, and this year it is *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. My own words are fewer than usual, as most of the preaching this weekend belongs to our children. There is nothing like children's presentations of Bible stories, and our primary impressions of the Bible even long into adulthood, at least for those who grew up in the church, are often built around the tellings we heard in childhood of Bible tales, centering on Biblical heroes.

One of the things we tend to forget about Bible heroism—or may never have entirely noticed about it—is that it is messy. One of reason Bible stories cannot be heard to teach us in quite the same way as fables, where characters represent virtues and vices, and the whole story sums up in a simple moral at the end, is that characters in the Bible don't neatly map to those virtues and vices. Sometimes they do when taken only in little excerpts, but usually not when seen as a whole.

The Bible, maybe unusually for a set of books written by faithful people who look up to the heroes recorded in those books, does not (for the most part) whitewash its characters, even its lead characters, or Photoshop out the flaws to present some shiny, pure, crystalline image for us. It gives us a record of what they did, and, just as in our own lives, this means people's mixtures of moral successes and failures result in a whole lot of complexity. It means the moral lessons are sometimes harder to draw out...but it also means that they can speak to us from a place closer to our own realities than simple, fable-like versions of the stories of ancient Israel would.

Joseph's tale runs mainly from Genesis 37 through Genesis 50—fourteen chapters of ups and downs, intrigue, adversity, and growth. He is sold by his own brothers into slavery,<sup>1</sup> rises to authority,<sup>2</sup> falls from grace to imprisonment,<sup>3</sup> interprets dreams of prisoner and king,<sup>4</sup> gains power second only to pharaoh,<sup>5</sup> administers a kingdom, successfully preparing it for and seeing it through a major famine,<sup>6</sup> and in the end meets his own brothers once again, choosing finally to meet their needs, be reconciled and forgive, and see how even in their wrongs God brought about the saving of nations.<sup>7</sup>

Joseph was a teenager when he had his own famous dreams, in which sheaves of wheat representing his brothers, and even the sun, moon, and stars were bowing down to him. His brothers and father Jacob interpret this as arrogance, for which Jacob rebukes him, although of course a father may have no one else to blame but himself if a 17-year-old boy shows signs of arrogance after clearly being treated as the favorite child for years, given splendid gifts beyond any of his siblings.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 37:25-28.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 37:36 and 39:1-6.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 39:6-20.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 40:1-23 and 41:1-36.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 41:37-45.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 41:46-47.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 42:1-47:12 and 50:7-21.

<sup>8</sup> See Genesis 37:3-4.

And Joseph is not the only one who has apparently been raised with some questionable attitudes, to put it mildly. Every set of siblings has its struggles with jealousy and rivalry, but these fellows take it to another level. Their response to his apparent arrogance is to hatch a plan, when they see him coming out in the wilderness, to kill him outright.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, this plan then gets amended; one of them, Reuben, doesn't exactly want to go that far, and talks them into just throwing him into a pit. They agree, but they decide to steal his fancy robe in the process. They don't seem to be sure what is to happen next; they are making this up as they go along, as a kind of revenge by committee.

At some point, when Reuben isn't there, killing seems to be back on their minds, but then Judah makes a motion that they sell him as a slave to a passing group of Ishmaelites instead, and his argument, that this lets them get rid of him *and* profit by it, carries the day. Reuben, who was thinking at some point they were going to set him free, shows up again to find his brother gone and despairs, and they all decide to cover up the whole mess by dipping the robe in blood and claiming that they found it out in the wilderness, leaving their father to mourn his favorite son.

Now this isn't just any set of people. The father here is Jacob, also known as Israel, father of the whole nation of Israel, and these are his twelve sons, fathers of the twelve tribes of that nation. It isn't, to say the least, starting off on its best foot as a nation.

This, along with the stories of just about every person whose life is told in the Bible, Old Testament and New, pretty clearly gives the lie to the idea that God's chosen people of any nation are chosen because of their exceptional moral character.

The folks in the Joseph story, like those who came before—Adam, Eve, Abraham, Isaac—and those who came after—Moses, David, the whole group of 12 apostles, Paul, and many others, don't seem to have been selected based on their worthiness. It seems more that God chooses to work with, and work within, people more like you and me, imperfect people whose hearts are motivated by all the wrong things, calling them to something more than what they start out as.

And this is indeed what happens in the story of these twelve brothers. This horrible start leads to a whole succession of events in which the flaws of all the characters are stretched, bent, revisited, and ultimately met by grace, with a reunification and forgiveness. And in the process, the populations of multiple nations are provided for through years of famine.

It isn't a final success for all time, for even this provision in the midst of need is made flawed by the people who live within it, resulting in slavery among the Egyptians themselves<sup>10</sup> and then even more strongly oppressed upon the Israelites,<sup>11</sup> which later brings us to another story of God's deliverance among another generation in the Exodus from Egypt.<sup>12</sup> But Joseph's tale is a breaking-in of God's grace, transforming and lifting up. Biblical hero stories are messy. But that's part of the point. Biblical hero stories aren't *about* the heroism of the heroes. They are about how God is present in the story.

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 37:16-20.

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 47:13-26.

<sup>11</sup> Exodus 1.

<sup>12</sup> See the entire book of Exodus from chapter 2 onward.

Which makes them a whole lot more relatable than the hero stories that often surround us in our popular culture. For in your life, too, and in mine, it is not our worthiness which earns us a call to be disciples of Jesus Christ. It is our call to discipleship which transforms us and through which we will find ourselves made worthy. Let us take up that call with enthusiasm and perseverance, remembering with faith and thanks that, even in the dramatic tale of our own lives, we are not the main characters, for God is in the story. Amen.