

Down in the Pit

As you all know, I started planning out our summer sojourn in Genesis some months ago. When I first noticed that the Revised Common Lectionary this year focused on Genesis throughout the summer months, I thought it would be a good opportunity to explore some Old Testament stories that many of us remember, or think we remember, from childhood Sunday School lessons and books of Bible stories. Conversely, the lectionary's focus on familiar tales also allowed me to pursue a project that had been in the back of my mind for some time – having a series of conversations on some of the many stories in Genesis that are hardly ever heard in a Bible study or from the pulpit. So, on Wednesday nights this summer, we've been mostly grappling with some of those obscure passages while Sunday mornings have found us digging into the more well-known stories.

The story of Joseph may be one of the best-known stories in Genesis and one of the most beloved. It's hard to resist the dreaming boy with the colorful coat, his father's favorite, who rises above every setback and becomes the second most powerful man in the most powerful nation in the Ancient Near East. We celebrate him for his courage and his faith in God, which allows him to become the savior of the Children of Israel in their time of need. We may remember him, too, for his benevolence to his brothers, who had not behaved very well toward him. The story is so well-known and loved that it helped launch the career of Andrew Lloyd Webber, who composed his original version of "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" with lyricist Tim Rice as a children's cantata long before the worldwide success of "Evita," "Cats," or "The Phantom of the Opera."

I must confess that I was surprised to realize this week that the lectionary only gives us two short excerpts from the Joseph saga, perhaps because it is so well-known, leaving out many pieces of the story that we might expect to hear. I will mention a few of those this week and a few more next week but mostly today I want to connect this early part of the tale of Joseph with themes found previously in Genesis, with matters from the later histories of Israel and America and, finally, with our own lives. For while it is the "boy's adventure story" aspect of the Joseph narrative that we may remember best, it is the underlying, implied themes of the legend that may resonate most with our own deepest needs.

So, what about the pieces of the picture that the Revised Common Lectionary leaves out of this first foray into the Joseph story? To begin with, there are the boy's two dreams, which combine with his tendency to be a tattle-tale to make him very unpopular with his ten big brothers. Perhaps you remember these from the missing verses in chapter 37:

⁵Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. ⁶He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. ⁷There 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." ⁸His 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. ⁹He 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." ¹⁰But 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?" ¹¹So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

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It's not clear from the Genesis telling how long before Joseph's exile these dreams came. We know from verse two that he was 17 at the climax of the story. So it's hard to know whether Joseph was young enough to be naïve about the likely reaction of his brothers to these dreams or whether he was a cocky, even arrogant, teenager, so confident in his father's favoritism that he used his dreams to thumb his nose at his older brothers. They would certainly have resented and even feared these nocturnal revelations, for in those days, dreams were taken seriously as disclosures from the divine. As Nahum Sarna points out in his book, Understanding Genesis, the brothers would have seen Joseph's dreams as confirmed as revelatory by coming in a pair. Joseph was essentially telling his 10 older brothers that he would leap-frog over them all in the inheritance, not only because of their father's preference but because of God's blessing. With the usurped right of the first-born, he would be head of the tribe after Jacob's death, with a double portion of the estate and authority over them all. The dreams may well have engendered the first truly murderous thoughts from Joseph's brothers, as commentator Chris Haslam writes, "In the ancient world, dreams were believed to be divinely inspired, but to be only effective as long as the dreamer lived." Even Jacob was offended by his favorite son's second dream. There's a wonderful bit of New Testament foreshadowing in his reaction. In the Genesis statement, "his father kept the matter in mind," we hear an echo of the better known reaction of Mary to her own precocious son's claim that he must be about his Father's business: "His mother treasured all these things in her heart."

The lectionary passage also cuts off the end of chapter 37, in which we learn of the reactions of Joseph's most charitable older brother and of Jacob:

²⁹When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. ³⁰He returned to his brothers, and said, "The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?" ³¹Then they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. ³²They 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." ³³He recognized it, and said, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." ³⁴Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵All 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. ³⁶Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

Reuben, it seems, was willing to talk his brothers out of killing Joseph and would have even rescued the boy from the pit and restored him to their father but once his plan has been short-circuited by the appearance of the traders' caravan and Judah's greed, he can only think of himself. His subtext would seem to be, "I'm the oldest; Dad's going to blame me for this." So he falls in with the plan to tell Jacob that his favorite has been killed by a wild animal. The less charitable of the brothers must have taken great delight in making Joseph's famous garment the key to their deception. It's unclear, by the way, exactly what that garment was. We get the idea of a coat of many colors from the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, but the oldest Hebrew texts seem to indicate instead a robe with longer than usual sleeves. Many Old Testament scholars point out that a long robe such as this is usually reserved for royalty and its length and its sleeves would make it impossible to wear when engaged in manual labor. By

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giving his pet such a robe, Jacob is implying that the toil with which his other sons must support the family is beneath Joseph.

Of course, as we know, this theme of inversion, of preferring the younger over the older against all cultural norms is a recurring theme in Genesis and it is often connected with violence. It is God's preference for the offering of Abel that triggers Cain's murder of his younger brother. Abraham's preference for younger son Isaac allows him to be convinced that his first born, Ishmael, and the boy's mother should be thrust into the wilderness, presumably to their deaths. Jacob himself receives the favor of God and of his mother, Rebekah, over Esau, resulting in deception and Jacob's flight to Haran. In Haran, Jacob prefers Rachel over Leah, causing a conflict with their father, Laban, that would have eventually resulted in armed conflict between the two men and their parties, were it not for the intervention of God. And even if Jacob hadn't so openly favored Joseph, isn't it likely that the sons of Leah, who was so clearly unloved by their father, would have resented the sons of the favored Rachel? The ascent of the unlikeliest candidate may further the plan of God but it generally draws the opposition of humans.

The ruse of the brothers to convince Jacob that Joseph is dead also repeats elements from stories both earlier and later in the family's history. Jacob, after all, had used his brother's clothes and a slaughtered goat to deceive Isaac into giving him the blessing meant for Esau, by dressing in Esau's clothes and putting the goat's pelt over his hands and neck. In chapter 38 of Genesis, as some of us discussed on Wednesday night, unexpected clothing and a sacrificed goat also play a part in Judah being deceived and getting his comeuppance from a mistreated woman. If you've not read the story of Judah and Tamar, you might do so this week and also look for the contrast between the extravagant grief of Jacob over the supposed death of Joseph and the rather callous attitude of his son, Judah, over the deaths of his own sons and wife and the death sentence of Tamar.

But perhaps that is unfair to Judah. After all, as Walter Brueggemann points out, to Jacob, Joseph's death is not just the death of the dreamer but the death of the Dream. If Jacob does indeed believe, as Joseph's dreams foretold and his own "coronation" of the boy with a royal garment indicated, that Joseph and not one of the other brothers was to be the inheritor of God's promises, then the dream of the nation of Israel, the countless progeny of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who are to bless the whole world, dies with him. We know the end of the story, that Joseph survives and masterminds the plan that saves his family from famine, taking them on another crucial step towards their God-given destiny, but Jacob only sees the manufactured evidence of the Dream's bloody end. And, ironically, after Joseph has fulfilled his part of the greater story, it is the descendants of his out-of-favor brothers who pick up the mantle of God's saving plan for the Children of Israel and all the world. Although Jacob has repudiated his son Levi over the violence in Shechem connected with Dinah in chapter 34, it is Levi's descendants Moses and Aaron who lead the Israelites out of Egypt generations after Joseph led them there. And were it not for the peculiar coupling of the cold-blooded Judah with Tamar told in chapter 38, the tribe of Judah would have produced neither King David nor Jesus, son of Mary. The very ones who would be the killers of the Dream in this morning's story are the fathers of the Dream's greatest heroes.

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I want to turn, in the time remaining to us, from these great thematic threads to more personal concerns; specifically, what we might learn from the reaction of the boy Joseph in the pit. This requires less scholarship and more empathetic speculation because the Bible, of course, says very little about the reaction of the boy in the pit. Nevertheless, we can make some informed guesses that will help us to put this story in further context of the greater story of God's people in history and of ourselves today. We do know, from the conversation of the brothers in chapter 42, that Joseph was "in anguish" and that he "pleaded" with them. Initially, the boy would have been in fear for his life, for his brothers intended to leave him there without food or water. But he would hardly have been comforted by the arrival of the Ishmaelite caravan and the news that he was to be carried away to Egypt. In the ancient world and even now, the sentence of exile is almost equivalent to death. To be uprooted from one's home, one's family, one's culture, never to see them again, to be thrust into a strange place with an unknown language is terrifying. As I considered Joseph's possible reaction, I thought of another young man in literature, faced with exile. Shakespeare's Romeo, exiled from his home of Verona for his vengeful killing of Tybalt, cannot contain his grief:

Banishment! be merciful, say 'death;'
For exile hath more terror in his look,
Much more than death: do not say 'banishment.'
There is no world without Verona walls,
But purgatory, torture, hell itself.
Hence banished is banish'd from the world,
And world's exile is death; then 'banished,'
Is death mis-term'd. Calling death 'banished,'
Thou cutt'st my head off with a golden axe,
And smil'st upon the stroke that murders me.

If we remember that scholars believe that the book we know as Genesis took its final form during or immediately after the Babylonian Exile, this part of the story takes on greater relevance yet. It would have been heard and read by people who knew the terror of forced exile first hand or within a generation or two. Before he becomes a symbol of salvation for the people of God, Joseph is a forerunner of their greatest tragedy. In Joseph's eventual rise in Egypt, the exiles by the rivers of Babylon must have found one of their few glimmers of hope.

Likewise, the story of the captive Joseph has been seen by another people, both exiled and enslaved, as a promise for their own future. I am speaking of our own country's history and of the estimated 645,000 persons brought to the United States in chains and their enslaved descendents, whose numbers totaled over four million by the 1860 census. In his 2006 work, The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible, Allen Dwight Callahan refers to the lines of one Negro Spiritual that remember, "Joseph by his false brethren sold / God raised him above all." For some of us, this issue seems as buried in the past as the Babylonian Exile but it is not really so. As long as racism continues to be an issue in this country, as long as Blacks and Whites have unequal opportunities for success and as long as minorities face disproportional rates of poverty, child mortality and imprisonment, Black Americans will continue to feel the terror of the boy Joseph, led off to slavery. Perhaps that is why songs from the Civil War, such as "My Life Flows On," or Negro Spirituals such as "We Shall Overcome" or "Lift Every Voice

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and Sing,” also known as the Negro National Anthem, speak today, even to us. After my reference a few Wednesdays ago to the military concept of proportional response in context of the Genesis story of Dinah and the episode of the television series, “The West Wing,” that highlights that concept, Dave Johnson loaned me the DVDs of the first season of “The West Wing” and Connie and I have been watching them. We were reminded by yet another episode that the history of slavery in America still festers in our society as one character pointed out that General Grant’s offer of “40 acres and a mule” to the newly freed slaves was revoked by Congress, a reversal still rankling to many African Americans. And, to move from a fictional U.S. Government to the real thing, *Sojourners* magazine reported last week that the U.S. House of Representatives has finally approved a resolution apologizing for slavery and segregation. A similar resolution has been proposed in the Senate. To read the House resolution, see the website listed on the back of the bulletin.

Still, it may seem to many of us who have family histories that include neither exile nor slavery that the story of Joseph, the boy in the pit, has little relevance. But I would suggest that we are all exiles, that all of us have known slavery, that many of us have known the terror of the pit in our lives. The world in which we live, after all, is not the world that God intended for us, for God did not intend the power of death or the idols of materialism, success and gain to rule our lives. Until this world is completely healed, until all men and women live in harmony with God and with each other, we are called to be in this world but not of it. All of us have at some point in our lives realized that we were slaves to our own bad choices, held captive by brokenness, chained by sin. But the love of God through Christ frees us from that slavery to death in order to love and serve God who loves us as beloved children. As to the pit, I know there have been times in my life when I have felt that I was at the bottom of a deep and dark chasm, with no light glimmering above me, no hope for escape. When I have been confronted by death, when I have faced betrayal, when I have simply been overwhelmed by the expectations of those around me and felt completely inadequate to the tasks at hand, then I have known the darkness of the pit. Oh, yes, I feel a kinship with that frightened boy in the pit and I imagine that I am not the only one.

As I read the story of Joseph, I am amazed that he was able to carry on, to keep his faith in the God of his fathers and give thanks to God at every point. You see, unlike Abraham or Isaac or Jacob, Joseph never heard the unambiguous voice of God speaking to him. He had his dreams but God never appeared even in them. And yet, again and again in the Genesis account, Joseph attributes the good things in his life and the reversal of the bad things to God. So, we do not need to experience a theophany, an appearance of God, to know that God loves us. Like Joseph, or like Sr. Teresa of Calcutta, who wrote that she had not experienced the presence of God in years, we are called to simply have faith that God is there. And should we think that faith is beyond us, the good news is that even the faith is a gift from God, who longs to give us all good things. All we must do is open our lives to God, allow God to strip off our chains, to raise us from the pit, to lead us to our true home in God’s presence. And then, just like Joseph, whatever the forces arrayed against us, we shall overcome. Thanks be to God.