

**“Learning from a Very Human Story in Which God Is Involved”**

**Genesis 37:1–4, 12–28**

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**August 13, 2023**

When we left Jacob last week, he had been transformed. He wrestled in the night with a mysterious figure and ended up with a limp but also a new name and a change of heart. And that change was genuine, he soon reconciled with his brother Esau. But today we have fast-forwarded to a time when Jacob’s children have grown and what we see raises some questions about how well Jacob has fared as a parent.

We’ve skipped over not only Jacob and Esau’s reconciliation but the lovely story in Genesis 34 of Jacob’s only known daughter Dinah being raped and then several of her brothers killing all the men in the area, after deceiving them into thinking they had an agreement. Now we’ve moved on to the time when Jacob’s twelve sons have grown and have reached the place where their conflict has become violent.

Jacob, or Israel, has twelve sons by four different women — his wives Leah and Rachel, and their maids, Bilhah and Zilpah. There is some normal tension among the boys, in addition to issues based on their having different mothers, but Jacob also loves Joseph more than any of the others. Joseph is the firstborn of his favorite wife, Rachel, so perhaps we should not be surprised, but Jacob and Esau’s conflicts began with parental favoritism. One might have hoped that he could have learned something... but family patterns are difficult to break.

Jacob loves Joseph more and makes no effort to hide this. He has made for him a long robe with sleeves; a coat of many colors, in the KJV, and the musical. And Joseph doesn’t help matters. He has dreams in which he becomes an important figure and rules over his brothers, which is bad enough, but then he tells his brothers about these dreams. Is it any wonder that they have conflict?

As we follow the story today, the conflict becomes intense. Jacob sends Joseph to find his brothers, and when he does, they immediately ponder violence. “Here comes this dreamer,” they say, “let us kill him

and throw him into one of the pits.” Reuben is the sole voice pleading for Joseph’s life, saying, “Let us not take his life... throw him into this pit in the wilderness.” The pit is a hole or cistern which functions as a prison. Jeremiah is thrown into one, it has mud. This one has no water. So, Joseph will not drown, but nor will he have water to drink.

The brothers agree to Reuben’s suggestion, take Joseph’s coat, throw him into the pit, and at this point, the text says, “Then they sat down to eat.” What?! They toss their brother into a pit and seem prepared to leave him to die, and then say, “Let’s go to Bojangles and get a chicken biscuit.” This seems more like a crime family than a holy family! They are not at all unsettled by what they have done?

But it only gets worse. They decide not to kill him, not out of compassion, but because they realize they can make money by selling him into slavery. “What profit is there if we kill our bother?” they say. So, now we can add human trafficking to the list of their indictments!

But before they can make any money, Midianites come along and beat them to it, pulling Joseph up and selling him to Ishmaelites who take him to Egypt. As the story continues, Reuben returns and is horrified. The brothers smear some goat’s blood on the coat and deceive their father, the deceiver, into thinking a wild animal has killed Joseph, and he is devastated. And here this episode ends. There is more to the story, but we’ll have to wait until the next episode to find out what it is.

It is a horrible story in a series of horrible stories. If people want to ban some books, perhaps they ought to begin with the Bible! I’ve been speaking less than five minutes, and already I have said several things that make me feel uncomfortable in a room where all ages are present, but all I am doing is retelling the biblical story, with some care.

What are we to make of this story? In church, we look for a redemptive word, a God word, and there is one here, but I want to begin with how realistic this story is, how human it is, because this is helpful.

People often think of the Bible as some kind of utopian vision of a holy society with lofty teachings and people who follow them. What is actually in the Bible is a collection of stories of people aspiring to faithfulness but failing far more often than they succeed.

It's a bit like the contrast between what people think of as the biblical family and the actual families of the Bible. This biblical family has a man and a wife, and another wife, and two maids, at least twelve boys and one girl, and all of them seem to be a mess!

The Bible does not see the human condition through rose-colored glasses. The Bible holds up a mirror to our lives, not that we always function like a crime family, or that biblical characters are always miserable. But they are fully human like we are fully human in every way. And being able to see them gives us perspective on our lives.

The purpose is not to normalize dysfunction, but to allow us to get a handle on our challenges. Family patterns like favoritism and deceit don't have to continue. Tension and conflict are human, but violence is never healthy. Trauma needs to be addressed. Sometimes it is easier to see our less-desirable tendencies through the lens of a story. And once we see things we do not like, we have a better chance of altering them.

Consider the prophet Nathan's confrontation of King David in 2 Samuel 12. Nathan doesn't name David's sin with Bathsheba and subsequent actions that get her husband killed. He tells a story about a rich man who took a poor man's lamb to feed a guest. David can clearly see this man's condition. "He deserves to die!" he says. Nathan replies, "You are the man!" Shocked, David now begins to address his sin.

As we read about Jacob's boys and their foibles, what can we see in ourselves? What might we change going forward? We are not beyond hope in our struggles. Change is always possible. God does not give up on these people nor will God give up on us.

But this brings us to the question of where God is in this story. It is a very human story. How is God involved? A common interpretative move is to go to the end of the story. In Genesis 50:20, after Joseph has become powerful in Egypt and used his influence to help his family, he says to his brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people..."

This is more than, "All's well that ends well!" There is Divine purpose, intentionality, but we need to think through this view carefully. Does this mean that God has directly caused everything that has

happened, even the violence? What if Reuben hadn't prevailed and they had just killed Joseph on the spot? To say that something is God's intent, purpose, or will does not say exactly how it is.

In a series of messages on God's will, delivered during World War II, English minister Leslie Weatherhead distinguished between God's intentional will and God's circumstantial will, saying that God never intends harm, but works in the context of all circumstances to bring out the Divine intent. As the best translation of Romans 8:28 says, "In all things, God works for good with those who love God..."

God is working for good in the Joseph story, weaving every human choice, good and bad, into a tapestry of Divine intent. Just as God uses the cross for good, God uses Joseph's brothers' destructive choices to enable Joseph to be in a position to save them. In like manner, God uses everything in our lives to achieve God's intent.

A friend in another setting faced a challenge she saw as unfair. She went to seminary later in life and found the requirement for a mission immersion experience to be unreasonable. She had children at home and a husband who worked, but the faculty refused to budge. So, she went to Zimbabwe, kicking and screaming. That experience transformed her life. She not only went back many times, but has invested her ministry in the people of Zimbabwe. We never know how God might use things in our lives we would never choose.

But there is another message in this story about God's involvement in human experience. God chooses this family to accomplish God's purposes, the one with schemers and murderers, parents who show blatant favoritism and brothers who sell brothers into slavery. We might say, "What other kind of family is there?" All families have frailties and flaws, but are all families this bad? God seems to choose the very worst among us to demonstrate the fact that there is no limit to God's ability to transform us. If God can work through them, God can work through us.

This is a very human story, but God is involved in it, just like our story. We may want to cover our eyes at times — when we read the Bible, when we look in the mirror — but there is benefit in keeping them open, in seeing ourselves, and in realizing that God is there too.