

PSALM 105:1-6, 16-22

- ¹ O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.
- ² Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wonderful works.
- ³ Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.
- ⁴ Seek the LORD and his strength;
seek his presence continually.
- ⁵ Remember the wonderful works he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered,
- ⁶ O offspring of his servant Abraham,
children of Jacob, his chosen ones.
- ¹⁶ When he 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.

GENESIS 37

Jacob 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.

5 Once 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.

9 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.' 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.

12 Now 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.' ¹⁴So 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, ¹⁵and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, 'What are you seeking?' ¹⁶'I am seeking my brothers,' he said; 'tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.' ¹⁷The 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. ¹⁸They 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.

25 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. ²⁶Then Judah said to his brothers, 'What profit is there 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.

29 When 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 for 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.

SERMON

The story of Joseph is one of the most beloved ancient stories of the middle east. It appears in very similar forms in both the Hebrew Bible, used by Jews and Christians, and the Quran, studied by Muslims. Joseph is considered a patriarch of the Jewish and Christian faiths, a great prophet of Islam, and a character juicy and vivid enough to be explored by Andrew Lloyd Webber in the Broadway musical, "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." It's a wonderful story, spanning about ten chapters of the book of Genesis, and it's filled with far more detail and adventure than we'll be able to cover in 5 weeks. However, we're going to do our best here, because it's a wonderful little soap opera, and it's shot through with themes of God's generosity and provision.

Joseph was born the youngest of 12 brothers to the great patriarch Jacob. The family of Jacob was set up to be a soap opera right from the start. Jacob didn't have one wife, he had two, Rachel and Leah, and to make matters much more complicated, they were actually sisters. And in addition to these two wives, he also had many sons and daughters by two slave women, Bilhah and Zilpah. And, as you might expect, Jacob had a favorite wife, it was Rachel, and so Rachel's son, Joseph, the youngest of the boys naturally became

Jacob's favorite of the bunch. In case it wasn't obvious enough, Jacob went out of his way to honor Joseph, weaving him a long sleeved, fancy robe...a visible reminder to Joseph and all of his brothers just whom his father loved the most. And, as any good parenting book will tell you: playing favorites with your wives and your kids is a recipe for disaster. The older brothers took notice, not just of the coat, but of all the favoritism and special treatment he received, and the Bible tells us that "they hated [their brother.]"

Now, things go from bad to worse between the teenaged Joseph and his older brothers at the start of this story. Joseph, it turns out, is often on the receiving end of dreams and visions from God, and as a somewhat naïve teenager, he makes the mistake not once, but twice over, of telling his brothers and his father of his dreams. First, one night while sleeping, Joseph sees eleven sheaves of wheat stand up and bow down before his own sheave. On another night, Joseph dreams that the moon and sun and eleven stars bow down before his star. The implication of these dreams seemed pretty clear to everyone: Joseph thought his whole family, all of his brothers, even his parents would one day bow before him, the youngest of them all. As if it weren't bad enough to be dad's favorite, Joseph really seems to go out of his way to antagonize his family as much as possible...sharing visions with them that really would be better kept to himself, even if he did think they were visions from God. Who knows, maybe he was just a dumb kid, or maybe he was such a coddled youngest child he was deluded enough to think the others would be proud of him. Whatever the reason, the brothers' rage goes from a simmer to a full boil at this point.

Now, time passes, and all 11 of the elder brothers go out to watch the sheep near Shechem, somewhere on the hills of Dothan. Jacob sends his youngest son, the hated Joseph, to check in on his older brothers, and as he goes, the brothers see him approaching from afar. As they see Joseph come closer, the brothers hatch a plan to murder him. Now, at least one of these brothers, Reuben, seems to have a shred of decency left in him toward Joseph, so he encourages them to not kill him, but instead, just throw him into a pit, where this brother, Reuben secretly hopes to sneak off to and save him that night. But, as so often happens in a good soap opera, things do not go according to Reuben's plan. The brothers, spotting a travelling band of traders and merchants see a business deal ahead, and they sell young Joseph into slavery for twenty pieces of silver. Because, you know, you might as well make a little money on the side while committing acts of treachery against your family.

When Reuben comes to the empty pit, discovering the sale of Joseph, he's furious and wracked with guilt. He tears his clothes and demands the truth. Upon hearing where Joseph has been taken, he and his brothers decide to bury their deceit under the guise of an animal attack, soaking Joseph's beautiful coat in blood to fool their father, Jacob. The plan works. Jacob is tricked, thinking his beloved son dead, mauled by a wild beast. He tears his clothes and weeps in grief and agony. And so far as the brothers are concerned, their treachery is finished, covered up, and Joseph is miles away, on his way to being sold into slavery and obscurity. Never to be heard from again. The skeleton has been entirely stuffed into the closet.

And that's exactly where Joseph is, miles away, sold as a slave into the house of Potiphar, the captain of the guard for the Pharaoh of all Egypt.

As you can see, this story starts in a place pretty devoid of good, moral lessons. This is a messy family situation: four wives, 12 sons, countless daughters. Sibling rivalry, murder, greed, lies, slavery, favoritism, arrogance, and so much more. No one comes off here looking all that good. The brothers are pretty awful, contemplating murdering one of their own. Ruben seems ok, but he's not sorry enough about Joseph being sold to tell his father the truth about what happened. Jacob, the father, we don't hear from him much, but it's a dangerous game for any parent to openly play favorites. And even Joseph, who will become the hero of our story, he doesn't start from a great place. He's young and arrogant, more than willing to bask in the affection and favor of his father. And then he's dumb enough or cocky enough to share these dreams of his family bowing before him not once, but twice! He's not exactly sympathetic.

But this inauspicious start is, in fact, a major part of what makes this story so important and memorable for us, thousands of years later. I mean, I hope none of us have brothers or sisters contemplating fratricide in our own homes, but aside from the exaggerated details, isn't this a profoundly human place to begin? Favoritism, hatred, anger, jealousy, arrogance, grief, and stupidity...it's a pretty recognizably human story from the outset. And so this is where I want us to dwell this week, in the grimy, dirty, deeply human situations we find ourselves in. We may not act on it, I hope we don't, but I think we can relate to those jealous brothers or the proud Joseph or the slightly dotty and unwise actions of their father

Jacob. What we'll come to see and experience in the coming weeks is the way God's graciousness and mercy weaves into the story of this dysfunctional family. But before we get there, let's just spend some time in the human beginnings of this tale, and the humanity we all share in, together. Because it's here, on the dusty road to slavery, in the dark, grieving corners of Jacob's house, in the hardened and angry hearts of the brothers...in the everyday stuff of human life...it's here that God is going to meet us and do surprising things.

So, this week, take some time to reflect on the places in your life where you most experience what it means to be human, in all the messy components of who we are. For Joseph's story to have an impact on us, I think we need to get in touch with the human parts of ourselves, both the joyful and the painful. And then stay tuned for next week, same bat time, same bat channel, as we start to look for the inbreaking of God's grace, in the life of Joseph, and in our own lives, as well.