

The Favored One

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Matthew 14:22-33

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The story today from the book of Genesis is a difficult one to hear. Favoritism, jealousy, fratricide, slavery... These are all themes that erupt within this story. And – because it is so uncomfortable – we are used to covering things over and making it nice. Probably our strongest notion of the character of Joseph in this day and age is Donny Osmond singing the Joseph role in Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber's Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.

But the story IS in the Biblical narrative and it rings of honesty and of the trappings of the real world. And the real world isn't always nice. It is the father Jacob (now also known as Israel) in this story that as a young man tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright, and tricked his father Isaac out of his blessing. And favoritism is not only in this Biblical generation of Joseph. The Biblical narrative is clear that Isaac favored Esau, while his wife Rebekah favored Isaac.

And, going back even further, Isaac was tricked into marrying Leah, the older sister of Rebekah. And in that age when these men of status and wealth had more than one wife, Isaac eventually married Rebekah, too, and she became the favored wife.

If we continue looking backward, Isaac and Ishmael were brothers and both sons of Abraham. But Abraham's wife Sarah was jealous of Ishmael and his mother (and Sarah's servant or slave) Hagar, and she had them banished into the desert.

And going back to the earliest of generations, Cain and Abel were brothers who both offered sacrifices to God – Cain from his crops and Abel from the finest and fattest of his flock. God was pleased with Abel's offering, but not with Cain's. Cain was angry and ended up killing his brother Abel. And it is from this story that we hear phrases used in our wider culture like “*east of Eden*” and “*am I my brother's keeper?*”

Favoritism, jealousy, fratricide, slavery...

As we heard in the children's time, in today's story Joseph was a son, a brother, had a special coat, was a dreamer, a tattle-tale, was at one time very sad, but was ultimately (and always – whether he knew it or not) loved by God.

Our church school curriculum offers three different character perspectives for this story. Here is what it writes for Joseph:

“I lie in this pit, damp and filled with bugs. It's night and I'm cold and afraid. If only I could get a message to my father; would he ever let the brothers have it! Maybe it's not

surprising. I've seen it in their eyes for a long time how they can't stand me. Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut a little more, but it still gives them no right. Maybe they are used to living outside like this each night, but I'm sure not. I don't know the first thing about surviving out here. I look up at the stars and I remember the story my father told me from the time I toddled at his knees. It's the story of my great-grandfather Abraham who journeyed to this strange land. God told him in a vision that he would bring about a nation whose inhabitants would number that of the stars. At times like these, that story seems so silly and from such a different time. As if God speaks so plainly. Yet I do hold on to my dreams. I am bound for greatness. I don't know how or what will happen, but I will hold on to my dreams. Wait... I think I hear voices. The brothers said something about traders on this route."

Author Barbara Brown Taylor observes that earlier in the Book of Genesis, God was never hard to find. But now, in Joseph's time, she notes that God has become silent. ("Listening to Your Life," in *Gospel Medicine*.) There are no more direct addresses from God, even in response to fraternal violence. So, Taylor says, "When Joseph wanted to hear the voice of God, he listened to his life – to his dreams, to the people he met along the way, to the things that happened to him each day..."

I think this is a helpful notation for us as we live in a world where we believe that "God is still speaking," but not in the earlier versions of direct conversations, if you will.

But, Joseph seems to have an ego in addition to being spoiled and favored by his father. Being the favored one is not always the gift that it is meant or made out to be.

The crime has been committed, and Reuben – poor Reuben – he was away and as the oldest brother, he will be blamed for whatever happens. For the record, Reuben already has saved Joseph's life:

"But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, 'Let us not take his life.' 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."

And in the verses not included in today's reading it is Reuben who comes up with the idea to kill a goat and to rub the coat of many colors in that blood to show Jacob that Joseph has died. It is quite ironic that Jacob is now being tricked in a way not all that different than how he tricked his father a generation earlier.

I feel for Reuben, though. Here is the voice our curriculum gives him:

"I know you're probably thinking after hearing our story, 'Gee, what a coward,' that I didn't stand up to my brother to do the right thing by the prima donna Joseph. Here I am elbow deep in goat's blood, splattering it on his robe so we have something to tell our father. 'Joseph was killed by a wild beast, Dad.' It'll be my responsibility, you know. When I went back to the pit and found that Joseph was gone, I ripped my clothes and fell

to my knees. Any chance that I'll get to take charge of things in the family looks pretty bad now. I'm already on the outs with Dad for some things that I've done. I knew it. When the rest started talking the way they did as Joseph came closer, I knew it was only going to be a disaster for me as well. But it's never easy being the oldest son of somebody who is so unpredictable, who doesn't play by the rules. It was probably only a matter of time before something like this was going to happen to our young brother. If I told him once, I told him a dozen times, 'Fine, go ahead and have your dreams. But keep them to yourself.' Now this whole thing's going to be pinned on me."

When Reuben says: "*I'm already on the outs with Dad for some things that I've done,*" he may be referring to he and his brother's revenge against the men of the extended family of Shechem. Earlier in Genesis, their sister Dinah has been abducted and allegedly raped by the man Shechem and leader of that community. In response, the brothers trick the men of Shechem into being circumcised, and while they are still in pain and recovering, the brothers kill all of the men in the city.

In today's story, we hear the following: "*Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem.*" Shechem? Might Jacob be a little nervous about this? Murdering all of the men of the city isn't something that is just going to go away. So he sends Joseph to check in with them. And this isn't the best scenario, either. Dreamer Joseph wanders around, gets lost, and finally a stranger helps him find his way. For good reason Jacob is worrying from a distance. Here is the voice that the curriculum gives him:

There's no question my job as the father was to give Joseph a stern talking to for telling his wildly self-centered dreams to the rest of us. But there was a part of me that knew something else. I've been raised too much in a tradition that honors dreams as messages from God to ignore what was happening. I myself have had several nighttime encounters with the holy. In fact, the rubbing in my hip is a daily reminder not to take what happens in your sleep too lightly! Some will say, 'Get on with your life; you have eleven other promising sons, and daughters as well.' Anyone who's lost a child knows that loss can never be filled. And besides, there was something about Joseph, not just because he was younger or born in my later years, but because I had this feeling that the future of our people might somehow be tied up with his future. Now, try as I might to have faith that God works in mysterious ways, I fear that future may be plain cut off. Blood on that beautiful robe is more than proof that Joseph is gone; it's a sign that a message from God might be lost."

Jacob is in the valley – of sadness, of depression, of misinformation, of grief. He has no vantage point yet to see anything differently. And that is an honest and helpful assessment for all of us. We live in a culture that has no patience for sadness. Whether our generation watched Perry Mason or Murder, She Wrote or now watches CSI – we are used to the crime being solved and the dramatic confession coming just before the hour is up. In real life, it is a lot messier than that – maybe it will not be solved. Maybe there will be no confession. Today's story ends in the valley. But that does not mean that God is not present, that God does not care, or that God does not grieve along with us. And the story is ongoing. And the good news in that is that today is never the final word. Amen.

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. This is the story of the family of Jacob (*now renamed Israel*).

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. 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. 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.

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. 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." 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, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." 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. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. 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."

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

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. Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 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. 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.