

THE VICTIM RENEWED

Scripture Readings: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

Texts: Psalm 115:16; Genesis 37:25-28

Last month I shared with you that during Ordinary Sundays (the ones with green), the Hebrew Bible, Epistle, and Gospels readings are semi-continuous and don't necessarily relate to one another; rather, they co-ordinate with the readings of each section from week to week. At that time, I reflected on the story of Isaac's marriage to Rebekah. Now we are up to Joseph, Isaac's and Rebekah's grandson.

I think most of us might have a fair idea about Joseph's story especially because of the musical, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. While the musical gives us an imaginative outline of Joseph's story, the title gets one thing wrong—it isn't a coat of many colors, rather it is a coat with long sleeves, or, at least, that's what the Hebrew seems to indicate. The other problem, of course, is the backstory: just how did we get to Joseph?

We go back to his grandparents, Isaac and Rebekah, who have twins. While in utero, the twins are apparently in contention with one another so much that Rebekah asks God for relief. The relief only comes with the birth; the first child born is red and hairy, so he is named Esau. The second child comes tightly clinching Esau's heel as though to hold Esau from being born first, they call him Jacob which apparently means 'heel' in Hebrew. The naming is a cautionary tale to parents: be careful what you name your child because s/he may live up to the name. Further, the parents split on their affection for the brothers; Isaac favoring Esau and Rebekah favoring Jacob.

Jacob is the trickster; he tricks his brother out of his birthright for a bowl of lentil stew. Then with the aid of his mother, Jacob tricks his brother and his father by disguising himself as Esau to get the blessing intended for Esau. Esau was miffed, so Rebekah sent Jacob away with instructions to find his uncle Laban. Laban was Rebekah's brother who had arranged her marriage to Isaac with Abraham's servant.

Just like the servant before him, Jacob comes to a well near his uncle's house. This well has a large rock covering the entrance and when Jacob asks the shepherds why they don't move it to water their flocks, they let him know that they have to wait until all the shepherds arrive in order to move the rock. About this time, Rachel, Laban's younger daughter arrives with her flock; the story teller tells us that Leah, Rachel's older sister, has lovely eyes while Rachel was graceful and beautiful—she must have

been something because Jacob is so smitten that he moves the rock by himself...pretty good for a mama's boy don't you think?

After Jacob finds out that Rachel is Laban's younger daughter, he accompanies her home and tells Laban he wants to marry Rachel. Of course, Jacob has no wealth for the bride price, so he promises seven years labor to Laban. After the seven years, the wedding takes place; Laban plies Jacob with celebratory beverages and when Jacob wakes up in the morning, he finds out that he has married Leah! Jacob is not a happy camper and so when he goes to Laban, Laban relents (remember the rock) and says Jacob can marry Rachel next week but that he owes seven more years of labor.

The situation is not exactly good because Rachel is adored while Leah is unloved; the story teller says that because Leah is unloved, God enables her to become quickly pregnant while Rachel remains barren. Leah gives birth to Ruben and hopes her son will bring her love (unfortunately, no), so she gives birth to another son, Simeon, and she hopes for love (still, no.) Then follows Levi and Judah, and still she is not loved. In the meantime, Rachel is frustrated that she has had no children so she gives Jacob her maid, Bilhah, and she has two sons. In response, Leah gives her maid, Zilpah, and she has two sons. Leah then has two more sons and a daughter. Finally, as the story teller says, YHWH remembers Rachel and she has her first son, Joseph.

After the seven years and more are gone, Joseph negotiates with Laban so that he and his family can go home, and even though Laban tries to trick Jacob out of his pay, Jacob and Rachel get the upper hand. Before they get away, Rachel steals Laban's household gods, and when Laban catches up to Jacob, they agree not to cross one another's paths again.

On his journey home, Jacob has a wrestling match one night and he is renamed Israel (meaning one who strives with God) so we guess that Jacob's opponent is God. Even though Jacob has a new name, the story teller keeps forgetting to use it. Once Jacob gets home, he meets his brother, Esau—all seems to be forgiven though the two brothers don't really hang together. Esau appears in the story only once more at Isaac's funeral followed by a long genealogy.

The story lines in this part of Genesis get a bit muddled but finally we get to Joseph who is the favored son of his father, Jacob. Jacob gives him the long sleeved coat and the rest of the brothers grow jealous and angry because he tells on them. When Joseph has two dreams where he is the center of attention and of power, he tells his brother and their jealousy turns to hate.

When Joseph is sent by Jacob to find his brothers, they decide to murder him. They are only delayed when Ruben, eldest brother, talks them into taking Joseph's coat and throwing him into a pit—Ruben planned to come back later, rescue Joseph, and take him back to Jacob. But when Ruben goes away, some slave traders come by and Judah decides to sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt and the brothers trick their father as he had tricked his father years before.

Many of us may see a resemblance in Joseph's story to Jesus' story. Joseph, beloved by his father, is the hope for the future, his dreams become prophecy, and he is thrown into a pit by his adversaries. They send him into exile as the 'dead' son. I hate to leave the story at Good Friday; since I am not planning to use the Hebrew Bible reading next week, we can finish the story today—the Psalm reading has given it to us.

Joseph goes to Egypt, gets into even more trouble, and ends up in prison. He encounters two dreamers and displays wisdom as he interprets the dreams. One of the dreamers is released from prison but forgets Joseph for a while. When the Pharaoh has unexplained dreams, Joseph is remembered and released. Again Joseph displays wisdom and he is given a position of great responsibility and power.

When the famine that Joseph had anticipated arrives from pharaoh's dreams, people from everywhere in the Middle East are affected including Joseph's family. Jacob sends the brothers to Egypt and Joseph recognizes them. Even though Joseph plays some tricks on them, he does not take revenge on them for what they had done. He finally brings his whole family to relative paradise of Egypt where they can have enough food and safety—though we know that this garden will become tainted also. Just the Psalmist recognized, Joseph had reflected years later: if his brothers had not thrown him into the pit and sold him into slavery, he could not have come to a position to rescue them.

In bringing his family to the paradise of Egypt, Joseph completes the circle of Genesis. Jonathan Sacks has said that sibling rivalry is the dominant theme of Genesis. The rivalry begins with Cain and Abel. It extends to Ishmael and Isaac though that rivalry seems more dependent on the mothers involved. Sarah is jealous of Hagar, Ishmael's mother, and wants Abraham to cast her out for fear that Ishmael may prove a danger to Isaac. After Isaac, the rivalry extends to Esau and Jacob then finally to Joseph and the rest of his brothers. Within these stories of sibling rivalry, we see multigenerational patterns of anxiety, jealousy, trickery, and conflict.

But, perhaps, we consider these just Bible tales that have no relevance for us. After all, we don't have brothers and sisters who fight with one another. We don't see

family systems where anxiety and conflict extend through generations. Surely some children are not still favored by one parent or another; other siblings are no longer jealous that the family focus might be on one child instead of all of them. We don't do these things any longer, do we?

What I like about the Joseph story is that his story gives us the first glimpse of grace in a Christ like figure and we hear the story from the point of view of the victim. Despite the fact that his jealous brothers hated him and threw him into a pit of despair and a life of uncertainty, Joseph was raised from the darkness into light and power. Joseph did not let power be the ruling influence in his life; the storyteller lets us know that when Joseph sees his brothers again, he is moved by love. In the end, he does not extract revenge even though he has the power to take revenge without consequence, instead he acts in grace. He leads his family from their own pit of despair into the land of plenty and the pattern of Genesis is finally broken.

What would the world be like if we all took a lesson from that?

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