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Joseph the Dreamer
Genesis 37:1-28

Several years ago at the Downtown Rotary Club in Tampa, Florida, the guest speaker for the day began his talk with the story of a Classic Drama and Writing teacher giving his students an overview of the course syllabus. Their grades would come from the one paper to be turned in at the end of the semester—which would be the writing of a one-act play. The professor continued, telling his class that the four elements often contained in classic drama were religion, royalty, sex, and mystery.

“For the remaining few minutes of class today,” the professor said, “I would like for you to quietly consider some possible themes for the play you will write over the course of the next four months.”

After a couple of minutes, a jock on the back row slumped in his desk with his head starring up at the ceiling.

“Mr. Simmons, is there a problem?” the teacher asked.

“Oh, no. I’m finished.”

“You mean to tell me you’ve settled on a theme for your semester’s work in the last three minutes?” the professor quizzed.

“No sir, I’ve finished my one-act play.”

“Class,” the professor interrupted, “we have in our presence a genius. Mr. Simmons has completed the semester’s assignment during the last three minutes.”

“Mr. Simmons, would you please stand and read for the rest of us your work, which we reflects at least one of the classic themes of religion, royalty, sex, or mystery.”

The lanky boy stood up with paper in hand and read: “Oh, my God, the Queen is pregnant. Who done it?”

If only real life circumstances were that simple and short. In truth, they are often complex, difficult to fully understand, have points of no return, and

sometimes are never resolved. Where did we get the idea that things are to always be perfect? Where did we get the idea that life is supposed to always be fair?

I suppose the question I really want to focus on this morning is: “What do we do when life goes wrong?”

The Old Testament passage for today is one in a long line of stories about the lineage of Abraham...our forefather. None of the sagas—Abraham with sons Isaac and Ishmael, Isaac and his sons Esau and Jacob, and now Jacob and all his sons—are anywhere near perfect. Each generation in Abraham’s lineage has its dysfunction and chaos.

Actually, the opening verses of Genesis symbolically provide an accurate picture of life. The Spirit of God moving across the storms—chaos—of the waters before light was created. Perhaps it is from that second creation story of Genesis—the Adam and Eve one—that we get the idea that life and creation is suppose to be perfect...as long as we don’t eat any forbidden fruit. A constant theme throughout all of scripture is that life isn’t perfect and that bad things happen to innocent people, and that life is filled with many points where we make mistakes. Even the symbolic story of the first family—Adam and Eve—contained dysfunction with one son killing the other.

In the Joseph story, we find more conflict and dysfunction. When Joseph was seventeen years old, his disconnect with his brothers came to a head. On his father’s orders to go find his brothers in the field and strengthen his relationship with them, he was met with much anger on their part. They stripped him of his special coat, which was not a coat of many colors—a bad translation in the King James version which was taken from a secondary translation (the Latin Vulgate), rather than directly from the Hebrew language. It was a long coat with long sleeves—a coat of leisure rather than a workingman’s coat. Joseph was thrown in a cistern—a pit to catch water—while the brothers ate lunch. Upon seeing a passing caravan of Ishmaelites or Midianites (depending on which tradition of literature you follow), Joseph was sold as a slave, his “special” coat was stained with the blood of an animal, and the brothers returned to their father, Jacob, with a fabricated story that Joseph, his favorite son, had met his death. Jacob mourned Joseph’s supposed death until his own death.

But, let's back up in the story. Joseph did nothing to warrant his brothers' desire to kill him. Had it not been for Reuben, the oldest son of Jacob and Leah, he would have been killed and his body thrown in a pit. But, Joseph was guilty of provoking his brothers' wrath and jealousy. He carried bad reports about his brothers—a tattletale we might say. Whether Joseph's "tattling" was true or false, we do not know.

Joseph was also his father's favorite son, born to his father's first love, Rachael, though she was his second of four wives. (The custom of having more than one wife was an accepted practice of the day.) He was not expected to work, as his brothers were expected to do. This was symbolized by the long coat with long sleeves...and expensive leisure coat that none of the other brothers had been given.

A third point of conflict centered on the dreams Joseph experienced—ones told to his father and brothers. Both dreams related to the future of the family—dreams experienced only by someone who had the gift of prophetic dreams. Each dream carried the same message—that Joseph would one day rule over his brothers and even his father. The first dream was about all of the brothers binding sheaves in the fields and his sheaf standing upright and the other sheaves bowing down to his sheaf. The other dream was about the sun, moon, and eleven stars/constellations bowing down to Joseph. Obviously, the brother's resentment toward Joseph built. After all, the others were working in their father's fields and pastures while Joseph stayed close to his father. Three or four separate times the story says that the brothers "hated" Joseph.

So, three things were against him: Joseph was a "little snit" in some ways, he was his father's favored son, and his prophetic dreams reinforced his superiority over them. Some of the things he could have controlled better; some he could not have.

Ironic, isn't it, that Jacob (the father) had significant problems with his own brother, Esau. Now, he is witnessing contention among his own sons. The opening verses of the Joseph story refer to Jacob as "Israel," the new name God gave Jacob after successfully wrestling with the angel of God, and on the eve before being rejoined with his brother Esau. "Israel" means "I have struggled with God and survived."

So, what is the purpose of this story? Why was it remembered over the hundreds of years? Maybe part of its presence in the Old Testament literature is to ask the question we raised at the beginning of this process: “What are we to do when life goes wrong?” Let me offer some insight based on my own understanding of faith and scripture:

1. Remember that life is not perfect and was never meant to be a flawless experience.
2. Scripture, all of it, recounts mistakes made by every pilgrim in the Jewish Bible—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, David—and mistakes made by every follower of Jesus. How we respond to our mistakes is usually more important than what the mistake was itself.
3. Sometimes, bad things happen in the best of circumstances. Bad things happen when everything else was done correctly. To dwell on our plight in life will never serve to get us above the chaos.

Here are some suggestions for surviving the chaos of life:

1. Learn what you can from what has happened. Is my experience the result of my mistakes? What did I do wrong? How can I avoid those mistakes in the future? Focusing on “Next time...” moves us from the past, which can consume all our energy, to the future which can be the source of energy and life.
2. Accept the fact that despite your best efforts with your job, your family, and your friends, things sometimes happen that can’t be explained or avoided. Be compassionate and fair to others, and be kind to yourself. Move on with your life and avoid the trap of nostalgia.
3. Maintain your faith and keep your eyes above the chaos of life.

The Matthew passage in today’s lectionary reading also contains a chaotic story. After Jesus had taught, healed, and fed a crowd of followers, he asked his disciples to get in the boat and go ahead of him to another side of Lake Galilee. Jesus needed personal time for rest, reflection, and the strength that came to him through quietness and prayer. Early in the morning, the account tells us, Jesus came to his disciples in the middle of a storm—chaos—at sea. It is the “walking on water” story. When they first saw him they were afraid, thinking he was a ghost. Jesus said to them: “Take heart...don’t be afraid.”

The second piece of that story has to be read between the lines. First, we never walk on water as long as we stay in the boat. Those who never venture out of their comfort zone when they are being beckoned by God will never experience that thrill and satisfaction of going beyond their limits. Second, Peter began sinking when he took his eyes off Jesus.

As a teenager—a young man—Joseph was a dreamer. But he developed from simply being a dreamer to becoming a sufferer, to finally becoming an interpreter of dreams. Joseph grew up to become a mature leader.

May God give us the grace to accept the difficulties of life with the same energy we bring to our greatest enjoyments and accomplishments. And, may God place a song in our hearts when the ways are rough and uncertain. Amen.

Genesis 37:1-12

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.

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.

Matthew 14:22-33

²²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."