

## *Dreams and Schemes*

Genesis 37 July 23, 2017 Pastor Roger Barkley

Has there been a time in your life when you felt on top the world, confident, living the dream, but when it suddenly all crashed down around you?

A time when all your dreams and plans unraveled?

A time when God went silent?

Welcome to Joseph's world.

We've spent several weeks following the promise God made to a barren couple, Abram and Sarai, to become parents of a great nation that would become a blessing to the world.

Genesis 12:1-3 *The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.*

*"I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you."*

They left their family and all that felt safe and familiar to journey into Canaan, but after decades of waiting, they remained childless.

For them, the overarching issue was, "How can there be this blessing without children?"

Later, in Genesis 15, God spoke directly with Abram, affirmed that a child would come, but God also foretold that later generations would be oppressed in a foreign land.

Genesis 15:13 *Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there."*

Abraham struggled with keeping his faith – which is what God tested him for by asking for Isaac's sacrifice.

The issue for the next generation became, "Which of two children would bear the father's blessing, the rightful heir, Esau, or the deceitful Jacob?"

Jacob stole the blessing, forcing him to flee for his life.

But after two decades of setbacks, he then struggled with resilience: could he hold on to the blessing after so much discouragement and as an outcast from his family?

Resilience was the object of his testing by God in the divine wrestling match we discussed last week.

Today we turn to the third generation where the issue has become, “Can the blessing survive a conflicted family of twelve sons?”

Now the test will be, “Can this family break their cycle of resentment and revenge that threatens the promise?”

Picking up from last week, Jacob and Esau finally reconciled but settled in different parts of Canaan.

Between his various wives and servants, Jacob has fathered twelve sons who become the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel.

His beloved Rachel, who died in childbirth, produced Jacob’s two favorite and youngest sons, Joseph and Benjamin.

When people’s lives feel off-kilter, they sometimes turn to the Bible in search of godly people to model themselves after.

That is usually a mistake.

The people we meet in the Bible are not models of morality, but are mirrors of identity.

In them we see ourselves – our flaws, our family dysfunctions – and then we see how God works through them.

This is especially true with Jacob and his clan.

As one who had experienced a childhood of rejection by his father, we would hope that Jacob would become a father who treats his children equally and fairly.

But as is often the case, he blindly perpetuates the hurtful family dynamic – in this case, favoritism.

Although they were the youngest, and traditionally the least eligible for the father’s blessing, Jacob dotes on Joseph and Benjamin.

As we heard in today’s reading, while his brothers are out doing the arduous work of shepherding, Joseph runs to his dad to tattletale on them, and then is left out to hang-out at home.

The special robe Jacob gave Joseph may be a sign of flagrant favoritism, or it may be a symbol of actual rank he’s been granted over his brothers – kind of like stripes on the sleeves of military and police.

In any case, Joseph is spoiled and full of himself, and as we heard in Michael's reading, he has two dreams that prophesy his own family members bowing down to him, which he proceeds to rub in their faces.

Some people might excuse him by saying he was just a foolish boy.

But remember that in his day and age, seventeen wasn't all that young.

There were kings younger than Joseph.

More likely, he was just a jerk, and his brothers had had enough of him.

Then, one day, Jacob sent Joseph out to the fields to check-up on his brothers.

*Genesis 37:14b-15 When Joseph arrived at Shechem, a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, "What are you looking for?"*

He's traveled about twenty miles to Shechem without finding them, when he encountered this stranger who happens to know that they've moved about 13-miles north to Dothan.

A lot has been made of the contrast of how God was intimately involved in the lives of Abraham and Isaac, but not so much in Joseph's.

People say that because God spoke directly to both Abraham and Isaac on multiple occasions, but now God is silent.

But, in fact, we do see God's hand on all that unfolds – and one particular example is right here, in this moment.

The authors of Genesis waste no words.

People don't just randomly appear in scripture without a purpose, and so we ask how come a stranger happens to appear at the moment Joseph is lost?

And how come this stranger who appears out of nowhere, at just the right moment, happens to know where his brothers have moved their flock?

This is not a coincidence.

Genesis is showing that we don't have to directly hear God's voice to know that God is at work in our lives.

In the Joseph narrative, God works behind-the-scenes, through moments of seeming coincidence and chanced meetings.

I've shared with many of you about the afternoon about fifteen years ago when I hiked up Mission Peak.

That is a hike I've done hundreds of times, and often right after church on Sundays.

Normally I go home, grab some lunch and then walk to the peak and right back, usually being home by 3:30 or so.

But on that Sunday I was running late.

I don't remember any more if it was something here at church or something at home that held me up, but I do remember not getting started until after 4 PM.

In fact, I almost decided to skip the hike altogether, but I went ahead and did it anyway.

Just as I was cresting the hill, I came upon a group of eight or ten people.

Something was up, they were confused ... it was like they were there for a purpose but didn't know quite what to do.

So, I said "Hi" and asked what's up.

One of them said that they had hiked up there because his dad had died and that this used to be one of his favorite places and so they were honoring him.

But, once they sweated their way up there, they didn't quite know what to do next.

Well, I said, I happen to be a minister and then asked if it would be helpful if I said a few things ... and oh, yes that would be wonderful, they said!

So, I know the scripture and few prayers, and so we had a ten-minute memorial service then and there.

Was this a coincidence that this particular afternoon I would be off schedule?

Was this a coincidence that I arrived at that very moment ... because five minutes one way or the other and this would not have happened.

I think not.

It is just this kind of encounter that we see throughout the Joseph narrative of Genesis 37 to 50.

Anyway, once Joseph found his half-brothers, they decided to kill him because they so hated the privileged braggard.

They throw him into an empty well without food or water and then blithely sit down to share lunch together.

That's when the caravan of Ishmaelites appears and they get the idea of making a few bucks by selling Joseph into slavery.

By the way, who were the Ishmaelites?

Well, remember when Joseph's grandfather, Abraham, lost faith in God's promise to give him and Sarah a son, and how he took matters into his own hands and fathered a child through Sarah's servant, Hagar?

That child's name was Ishmael, and because of Sarah's jealousy Abraham disowned him, driving him and his mother into the desert and an uncertain future.

Ishmael survived and began his own family, eventually becoming the patriarch of the Arab tribes.

Those were the Ishmaelites.

So, the offspring of the rejected eldest son of Abraham now carries away the favored younger son of Jacob.

Then the brothers took Joseph's coat, smeared goat's blood on it, and concocted the story that he'd been killed by a wild animal.

I'll let you read the next few chapters that deal with Joseph's incredible life in Egypt.

They include accusations of rape, time in prison, betrayal, prophetic dreams ... it reads like the script for a daytime soap like *Days of Our Lives*.

The Reader's Digest version is that although he arrives as a slave, through a series of dreams and unlikely events he finds himself as the Pharaoh's righthand man overseeing the nation's economy and preparing the nation for a seven-year famine.

The famine spreads up to Canaan where Joseph's family becomes so desperate that some of the brothers venture down to Egypt in search of food.

The dramatic tension builds as the brothers are brought before the powerful governor to plead their case and fail to recognize the governor as Joseph.

He toys with them a bit, but ultimately reveals himself as their brother whom they had sold into slavery.

Eventually, out of appreciation for all Joseph has done, Pharaoh invites the entire family to relocate on some of the choicest land in Egypt, which they do.

After seventeen years of being settled in Egypt, Jacob dies, and immediately the brothers begin to worry that Joseph now has no reason to withhold revenge for the crime they had done to him.

They are haunted by the memory of their sin and bound by fear of retribution.

Sin does that.

Genesis 50:15 *When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?"*

We keep our sins alive by mentally replaying our pasts, and we are haunted by fear as we wait for the other shoe to drop.

But Joseph is a changed man who does not hold his brothers accountable.

He looks back over his life and sees how what had been so wrong and unfair had been used by God to bring good to him and his family ... and to keep God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob from perishing.

In one of the most famous lines in the Bible, Joseph says,

*Genesis 50:19-20 ... "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."*

But this is more than a heartwarming ending to the Book of Genesis.

It is the breaking of a cycle of dysfunction that began with Abraham rejecting his first born in favor of Isaac, and Isaac who, in turn, showed favoritism to Esau while dishing ditching Jacob - while their mother was plotting to steal Esau's birthright for her own favorite child.

And it continued with Jacob doting on his two youngest sons because they were from his favorite wife, while neglecting his other ten sons.

With each successive generation, the resentment grew, finally boiling over with attempted murder and slave trade.

We've seen how God was silently at work, overcoming obstacle after obstacle to bring Joseph into a position where he could provide for his family during the seven-year famine.

And, God's hand can also be seen in Joseph's response to his brothers' sin.

The one who had previously been arrogant and boastful, is now humble and able to forgive.

I know from experience that forgiveness is something I cannot always do through my own power.

I need God to help.

But as we forgive, we break the power of sin, and we unhook from the cycle of tit-for-tat revenge.

I invite you to look at histories of recrimination and revenge, histories of unforgiven wrongs that you carry with you ... or maybe that your family has carried for generations.

The Bible warns that the sins of parents continue through three or four generations.

What can you do this week to break that cycle in your friendship or family ... or within the story you tell yourself?

God will be your partner in this, just as He was with a snotty young man named Joseph who became so hated by his brothers that they sold him into slavery, where he was thrown into prison, betrayed by friends and eventually used his unique gift of prophetic dreams to rise to a position of power from which he could both save his family, and say no to his right for revenge.