

Flipped Scripts and Empty Pits

Last Sunday we left Abram just outside his tent, counting stars and renewing his faith in the promise and the God who makes that promise, at least for a moment. Abraham and Sarah as God renames them, become the parents of Isaac only after Abraham fathers Ishmael with Hagar, a woman enslaved to Sarah. Isaac later marries Rebekah who gives birth to Esau and to Jacob, her favorite. With his mother's help, Jacob swipes his brother's birthright and his father's blessing. He wrestles with a divine being and God changes his name to Israel. Jacob is not alone in his trickster ways, however. His father-in-law Laban tricks Jacob and requires him to marry his older daughter Leah before he allows Jacob to marry Rachel. And with these two women, along with two others, Jacob fathers twelve sons, including Joseph. [Read Genesis 37: 1-8, 18-24, 29-35]

As if tattletale Joseph and his fancy pants coat weren't already a thorn in his brothers' sides, after he dreams about them bowing down to him, he decides it's a good idea to tell them all about his dream. Perhaps he doesn't understand how his father's excessive doting might not make him his brothers' favorite. I don't blame Joseph, really. I probably do blame Jacob a bit. He seems bent on continuing the legacy of favoring one child over another, a pattern that has torn at his family for generations at this point. Yes, God has continued to insist that this is still the blessed-to-be-a-blessing bunch. At the same time, there is no dodging the fact that love unequally lavished generates deep hurt as well as resentment and vengeance that can be difficult if not impossible to repair.

As you may recall, Joseph's time in Egypt has more twists and turns than the most imaginative storyline on *Days of Our Lives* or *Gossip Girl*. While he is imprisoned, Joseph catches the attention of court officials as a dreamer who is fluent in the language of dreams, both his and others'. He capably deciphers Pharaoh's dreams and prepares Egypt to withstand famine, resulting in his being promoted again and again, rising from foreign prisoner to trusted royal insider.

Famine strikes Egypt along with the entire region, leading Jacob to send his sons to Egypt to buy food for their household. When the brothers arrive in Egypt for the first time, Joseph immediately recognizes them, but they somehow do not recognize him. While Joseph does not fully avenge their leaving him for dead, he does toy with them a bit, leading them to wonder with one another if God is somehow punishing them for their deeds and their deceit. Two decades later, their grieving father has still not been told the full truth. Two decades later, their collective guilt still haunts them.

After bringing Benjamin, the youngest brother back with them to Egypt at Joseph's command, the brothers head out once more to return to Canaan and their father. To their horror, a silver chalice has made its way into Benjamin's sack of grain, placed there by a servant at Joseph's command. The brothers had been hard-pressed to bring Benjamin with them on this trip. Benjamin is the only other child Jacob shares with his beloved, now-deceased Rachel, and the thought of losing this child is more than the old man can bear. So, the prospect of returning home without Benjamin—much as they returned home without Joseph twenty years earlier, brings the brothers to a breaking point. And Joseph decides that the time has come for the big reveal. In chapter 45 he tells his brothers who he is, and they are shocked and frightened. Joseph insists that they not be afraid and that God sent him before them to Egypt for the sake of their family and countless others.

After this reunion, the brothers return home once more and bring Jacob with them. After Jacob dies, they are still haunted by what they did to Joseph—and Jacob, for that matter—all those years before. [Read Genesis 50: 15-21]

God does not stand center stage in the Joseph saga. And yet, God—or some notion of God—is present, very present. The brothers are convinced that God is punishing them for their misdeeds. Joseph is convinced that his prophetic gifts are God-given. And in the end, Joseph declares that God has been at work in all their lives all along. Joseph claims that he knows what God intended, and perhaps more significantly, in the end, it is God's gracious intention that shapes Joseph and how he responds to his brothers.

The text tells us how deeply the brothers hate Joseph early on, how intensely they resent him for being Jacob's singled-out, special one. Their hatred makes it impossible for them to speak even one kind word to

him. As I mentioned earlier, the brothers are following a familiar, destructive pattern. Ishmael is sent away because Sarah views him and his mother Hagar as a threat to the brothers' grandfather Isaac. And the brothers' own father Jacob is given preference over his older brother Esau, resulting in an angry and revenge-minded Esau being sent far away from the blessing and birthright swiping Jacob. This cycle of resentment and vengeance is all too predictable and seriously difficult to break...difficult, but not impossible.

Joseph's legacy is complicated. He is not purely heroic, of course. His shrewdness is a significant reason why the Israelites wind up in Egypt, the place they will not escape before suffering for generations at the hands of the very empire that initially welcomes them. So, like his father, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather before him, Joseph is a mixed bag, perhaps more of a mixed bag than I want my heroes and heroines to be, especially biblical ones. I want clear cut good guys and bad guys, my team and the other team, and I want the bad guys, the other team to get what they deserve, or at least I think I do. But even in our most sacred stories, it just doesn't work that way. God doesn't work that way.

Scholars debate whether Joseph forgives his brothers or not. The text doesn't say explicitly that he does. What the text does tell us is that Joseph chooses not to seek vengeance in any lasting way. He does not send them and their children off to fend for themselves. He does not leave his brothers in a pit. He finds a way to flip the script, to break the destructive pattern of resentment and deception. He chooses to embrace his brothers and to speak reassuringly to them, to try at least in this moment to embody God's gracious intention, to mirror God's grace.

One might be tempted to say that our larger common life is in the pits at the moment, and that one might be me. Our discourse is increasingly rife with resentment, distrust, and ugliness. On any given day we can all easily list how one sibling has been given preference over us, how one group may have gotten a better deal than we have. And we may be right. This morning's text straightforwardly tells us that Jacob loved Joseph more than the other brothers. That would make me angry. I might be tempted to leave the tattletale in a pit, too. Truth be told, left to my own devices I could be a gold medal pit thrower, a champion grudge holder. But there is no real winning in grudge bearing or revenge. That pit doesn't only hurt Joseph. His brothers struggle

to get themselves out, too. They have a hard time shaking off the pit, even after Joseph has welcomed them into his home.

The larger world seems to be stuck in a pit of sorts, an unending spiral of outrage, deception, cynicism, and anger. I have no magic wand or crystal ball in my back pocket. I am not a dreamer, and I cannot tell you in any detailed way what God intends for me or us or them beyond this one crucial truth: The pit is not the end of the story, for Joseph, for his brothers, for us, or for them. Grace is.

Grace does not wait in the wings until Jesus is born. God is merciful and gracious over and over and over again from the moment the love story between God and the people of God begins. Grace stitches garments to clothe Adam and Eve for their life in the world beyond Eden. Grace enables Cain to bear a mark of protection even after he kills his brother. Grace embraces Abraham and Sarah after they try to take matters into their own hands. Grace enables Jacob and Esau to reunite and reconcile before peaceably going their separate ways. It is grace that empowers Joseph to press pause on the spiral of violence and deception he and his family have inherited. And it is grace that saves the children and grandchildren of Jacob from starvation and ruin. By the grace of God, Joseph finds a way to change the pattern, to flip the script, to speak grace where grievance and payback have been the order of the day.

Lest we forget, grace is not fair. Grace means that not one of us ultimately gets what we deserve. God's gracious intention is to save us from every pit we fall into, every pit we dig for ourselves, and every pit we insist on digging for others, not because God loves us more or less than anyone else, but because God loves. Period. We worship the God who refuses to let the pit win, the God who raised his own crucified Son from the pit of death, so that we and everyone else might have life in abundance.

So the question is, how will we live in light of God's saving grace? Which script will we flip? What patterns will we break? What reassuring words will we speak in and for and to God's beloved, battered, and pit-filled world? Where and when will we speak grace?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.