8-9-20, The Holy Way

Sermon on Genesis 37: 1—8, 12—28

1. Introduction
2. This is the introduction to what is often called “The Joseph Cycle.”
3. This story begins to provide the explanation for how the people of Israel end up in Egypt, which in turn sets the stage for the Exodus.
4. In this story, as in a number of others in the Old Testament, we encounter the idea of the first-born son not being the one called to privilege, honor, and favor.
5. Jacob, the patriarch in this story, is the son of Isaac and Rebekah. He has sons by four women: Leah, whom he is deceived into marrying, Bilhah and Zilpah, who were his concubines, and Rachel, whom he loved most. Of his sons, the youngest were Joseph and Benjamin, whose mother was Rachel.
6. Prayer
7. The text
8. (v. 1—8) **Jacob’s family**
9. (v. 1 &2a) Jacob settled in the land where his father [Isaac] had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. This is the story of the family of Jacob.
10. (v. 2b—4) 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 [roughly speaking]; And Joseph brought a bad report of them to his father. [It isn’t clear whether the report Joseph brought was fair or even true.]
11. (v. 3) Now Israel [another name for Jacob] loved Joseph more than any of his other children, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a long robe with sleeves. [The idea of the “coat of many colors” comes from the Greek and later Latin translations of the Hebrew Scriptures. Whatever its style and design, it was distinctive and desirable, and it was a constant reminder that he was his father’s favorite.]
12. (v. 4) But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.
13. (v. 5—8) Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more
14. (v. 6 & 7) He said to them, “Listen to this dream that I dreamed. There 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.”
15. (v. 8) His brothers said, “Are you going 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.
16. In verses 9—11, Joseph has another dream, in which the sun, moon, and eleven stars bow down to Joseph. Jacob chastises Joseph for sharing this dream and for its content.
17. (v. 12—28) **Joseph and his brothers**
18. (v. 12—14a) Now his brothers went to pasture their father’s flock near Shechem. [This is about fifty miles from Hebron where the story begins.] And Israel said to Joseph, “Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.” [It isn’t clear why Joseph has stayed home, although it may be because of the friction his dreams and stories have caused.] He [Joseph] 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.
19. (v. 14b—17) 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.’” [Dothan is about fourteen or fifteen miles further away.] So, Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan.
20. (v. 18—20) They saw him from a distance [the distinctive cloak he was wearing may have made the identification at a distance easier], and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer [the language might mean something like “this big, fancy-pants dreamer”]. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits [these were probably cisterns for storing water]; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.”
21. (v. 21 & 22) But when Reuben [the first-born of the brothers] heard of 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 upon him”—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father.
22. (v. 23 & 24) So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe [the word used is also used for skinning an animal], the long robe with the sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.
23. (v. 25—28) 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. [The location is on a trade route.]
24. (v. 26 & 27a) Then Judah said to his brothers [Reuben isn’t with them at this moment], “What profit is it 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.”
25. (v. 27b &28) And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders [the Midianites were a part of the larger group of Ishmaelites] passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. [This was a regular price for a slave.] And they took Joseph to Egypt.
26. What shall we take away from this text?

I think one of the things we can do is to look at Joseph. If we were going to pick a hero to assure the survival of God’s people, would Joseph be our first choice? Probably not. The culture of the time would have chosen Reuben, the first-born. When we get down the line to Joseph, we find a seventeen-year-old who doesn’t seem to get how his report of a dream in which his whole family bowed down to him would impact his family.

Of course, those of you who have read ahead in the book know that, in fact, the family does bow down to Joseph when his position of authority in Egypt allows him to save them from famine. But still. My wife sometimes quotes her mother as saying, “You don’t have to tell everything you know.”

So, Joseph might not be your or my first choice, but he was God’s choice. And God has a tendency to do that. I could have gone on with my career on the Tucson Police Department, regretting that I hadn’t studied for ministry, but making the most of my work. However, God intervened, unsettled my heart, and wouldn’t be satisfied until I had started in seminary and left police work to serve in a church role. And that ultimately led me here to serve you until a called pastor is in place.

A second lesson that we can take away is that God is in control of events. No one could have predicted a happy ending to a story in which his brothers sell Joseph as a slave. It’s better than killing him, but really! And Joseph remains faithful to God throughout the entire story. He becomes a pivotal player in God’s love story to God’s people, despite the bad things that have happened to him.

When my sons were young, I used to think from time to time, “Could someone please send in the smart parents for a little while?” And I feel a little bit that same way about this season of life at The Holy Way. Everything’s a little unfamiliar and unclear right now, but you and I are going to keep moving forward, knowing that we aren’t alone. We are loved by the God who created the mountains and the skies and the sea. That love will carry us forward, and that love will keep us together. May it be so. Amen