

As the Biblical World Turns
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Genesis 37:1-28

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. These are the descendants 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. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children because he was the son of his old age, and he made him an ornamented robe. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him.

Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. 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." His 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.

He 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." But 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?" So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He 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.

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.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." But when Reuben heard 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 on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the ornamented robe that he wore, and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

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. Then Judah said to his brothers, "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." And his brothers agreed.

When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

Biblical families, they're just like us! In our story this morning we are introduced to Jacob as a father with twelve sons. His favorite being, Joseph, his eleventh son. Thanks to Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, we have some familiarity with Joseph's story thanks to *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. The arc of the Joseph narrative covers 14 chapters in the book of Genesis. The lectionary gives us two snippets of the story, the first being today and the conclusion of the story being next week. It is tempting to want to fill in the rest of the story now and give you the hope and goodwill that the end of the story brings, but I think that it would do a disservice to the beginning of Joseph's narrative that we just read. While it is not an easy part of the story to sit with, I believe it has much for us to wade through. So, let's dive in.

We are introduced to 17-year-old Joseph. He is the eleventh son of Jacob and the first son of Rachael. Rachael is Jacob's favorite wife and whom Jacob set out to marry. Rachael's father tricked Jacob and after working to marry Rachel, is given Leah instead. He marries Leah and then works extra so he can also marry Rachael. In addition to being married to Leah and Rachael, they also have two slaves Bilhah and Zilpah. Despite trying, Rachael is unable to have children, so she and Leah offer up their slaves to Jacob to have children on their behalf. So, Jacob has children with Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah. Then Rachael is finally able to bear a child and gives birth to Joseph. She then goes on to have a second child, Benjamin with whom she dies in childbirth.

In the world they live in, family is everything. People are relentlessly loyal to their family. And within the family structure birth order matters. Ruben is Jacob's oldest son, and he should stand at the top of the sibling pecking order. (Note: there were probably many sisters, but in this patriarchal society they just don't matter) So while Ruben should be favored as first of the male siblings, instead, we are told that Joseph, the first-born son of Jacob's favorite wife, has bypassed all his older brothers and risen to the top. Additionally, you'll notice in the beginning of our story that it is Jacob's sons whose mother's are slaves that are outside working; the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. There is an alternative hierarchy within the family.

So the ten oldest brothers—who are sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, the slaves—are out shepherding the flock. Jacob sends out Joseph to help them and act as his eyes and ears. Joseph comes back and gives a bad report of his father. We can assume that Joseph's brothers get in trouble because of the unfavorable report that Joseph gave their father. Joseph is not winning any popularity contests with his brothers. And it can be assumed that with Joseph being 17 years old, this animosity has built up over the last 17 years.

Additionally, we are repeatedly told that Jacob loves Joseph more than anyone else. This is a well-known fact within the family. Jacob doesn't try to hide it, in fact he goes out of his way to show favoritism to Joseph including gifting him an elegant, ostentatious, ornamented robe; a robe only worn by royalty. Then, as if Joseph is oblivious to all the tension surrounding him, he shares with his family that he has had multiple dreams that seem to symbolically represent Joseph rising above and reigning over his family. We later learn that these dreams are emblematic of what is to come and his ability to interpret dreams becomes important. But in this moment, Joseph needs to work on keeping his mouth shut and winning favor with his siblings.

Jacob again sends Joseph out to “work” with his brothers. And to do this “work” he wears his flashy coat. Seeing him coming their way, Joseph’s brothers devise a plan to kill him. Ruben comes up with his own plan, he talks his brothers into just leaving him in a pit which Ruben will later come back, retrieve him, and win favor with his father by returning his favorite son. While the plan is in motion, a caravan of Ishmaelites comes by, Judah proposes that they sell him into slavery so at least they can make some money by selling him. Off Joseph goes to Egypt.

As an avid reader, I find I am constantly searching within stories for people I can root for, relate to, or at minimum that I like. But like a good soap opera, each of the people in this story are problematic characters. They are flawed. And while on the surface level it is easy to point out alternative actions that could help defuse the family drama—like maybe don’t overtly favor a child, may don’t gloat your superiority over your siblings, maybe don’t try to kill your brother that you don’t like—those are just a few suggestions. But look a little deeper and we see that these seemingly juvenal actions are symptoms of larger generational trauma.

Jacob works hard for seven years to earn the right to marry Rachel, then on his wedding night he finds out that he has been tricked and was married to Leah instead. Jacob then works an additional seven years to finally marry Rachel. Then in an even cruller trick, it is Rachel, whom he loves dearly, who is unable to have children. And when she finally bears children, she dies in childbirth. Trauma.

Or go back earlier. Jacob is a twin. His brother Esau is born mere seconds before him, giving Esau the birthright as the first-born son. Their parents, Issac and Rebekah, play favorites each choosing a twin to spoil and champion. It is easy to see where Jacob learns how to play favorites with his children, it was his reality growing up. It is with Rebekah’s help that Jacob tricks Issac into blessing him and in doing so steals Esau’s birthright. Trauma.

Or we can go back even farther. Sarah is unable to have children so she offers up her slave to have a child with Abraham on her behalf—despite God promising that Sarah would be a mother to many generations. Hagar the slave gives birth to Abraham’s son Ishmael. Then miraculously in her old age Sarah gives birth to Issac. And with Issac’s birth, Ishmael becomes obsolete; he and his mother are expelled without his promised birthright. Trauma.

Frequently in the Bible we hear the question asked “what sin did their parent’s commit” when addressing a problematic, ill, or unconventional child. And while the question seems preposterous to our modern ears, perhaps we can rephrase the question as “what generational traumas did this child inherit”. Then the question doesn’t seem quite so odd.

Three weeks ago, the McMinnville Youth Collective went to Wapato, Washington at the invitation of the Yakama Nation. We spent two and a half days working at the house of a community elder. We helped clear out their back yard of years of debris and yard waste. We were thankful for a large tree that created shade over most of the backyard. We worked hard. The other day and a half of our trip we learned about the culture and history of the Yakama people. We made moccasins. We had a delicious frybread and salmon meal. We visited a longhouse. We picked berries. We went to the grave of the last giantess. We watched and even participated in traditional dances—sidenote: we are working to arrange a time to bring their dance group to McMinnville to share with us sometime in the coming months. We also spent the afternoon at Fort Simcoe.

Fort Simcoe was built in the 1850's as a central place for US soldiers to keep an eye on the tribes in the region and subdue any uprisings. It only served as a military fort for a few years. Then from 1860-1922—for about 60 years—the fort was home to the Yakama Indian Agency and served as a boarding school where Indian children were sent to become “civilized” Indians by stripping them of their culture, traditions, language, and family in an effort to help them assimilate into American culture.

The effects of the boarding school are very much present 100 years later. There are still living elders in their community who are survivors of boarding schools. This history wasn't all that long ago. Ethnocide—the extermination of a culture—is still at work in the community today. The Yakama Nation is working to intentionally bring back the language and culture that was stripped from their community. It is easy to see the generational trauma living on within the community.

We can also look at the broader racial disparity in our country. The generational trauma created from slavery in the United States is not something that we can just “get over”. Both as African Americans and whites. There is baggage that is handed down through families and society. And on top of that, there are advantages, policies, and laws that work to favor one set of people over another. We like to think of it as something that happened long ago. But the generational trauma is still relevant today.

This past Supreme Court session looked at student loan forgiveness. Currently governmental student loans are set up with predatory practices. There are people who are working to determine the best way to right these wrongs, to stop generational traumas.

I want to pause and say that I know religion, politics, race, money, trauma are all things that are we're not supposed to talk about. They are controversial with a myriad of differing approaches. Deep breath. I promise I am not trying to tell you *what* to think about these topics. But I hope we can agree—despite our differing thoughts and methods—that we want to help break the pattern of generational trauma.

Be it Joseph and his brothers, Native Americans, African Americans, you, me, whoever, we get to choose to not sweep hard topics under the rug. As we name hardships, as we name traumas, we get to shine a light on problems that grow best when they are overlooked hiding in darkness. We are called to be a community of light. And being part of this community means working together to uplift the whole group. A rising tide lifts all boats. We are communally better when we are individually better.

Naming wrongs doesn't mean we have to take on the shame and the blame of trauma inducers. Instead, when we know better, we do better. As we identify generational traumas, we work to do better. As we shine a light on injustice, we are working to better. As we learn people's names and stories, they become more than a headline, and we can work to do better. As we work to bring about the Kingdom of God we work to do better. We get to know God better when we do better. We get the privilege of learning how to love each other because of our unique differences, not because of our homogeneity or sameness. We get to do better by being the change that breaks generational traumas.

The story and drama of Joseph and his family is an important part of our story. We give thanks to a God who shows up and meets us in the messiness of family and everyday life. And we give thanks to God who allows us to be co-creators in bringing about something new.

Amen.