

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
August 13, 2017

**“The Dreamer:
Down, but Not Out”**

“... they took Joseph and threw him into a pit.
The pit was empty; there was no water in it.”
Genesis 37:24

PRELUDE

During the weeks of this summer we have
been focusing upon Old Testament scripture lessons from
the book of Genesis. We will continue,
but not much longer, for our summer
pastimes are soon to be over.

This material invites careful reading,
for we have texts with subtexts,
themes with counter themes,
designed that we might comprehend
more fully the life that God desires,
and that our faith in God might be
well placed,
as opposed to misplaced.

In recent weeks we've touched upon the lives
of Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebekah;
Jacob and his dreams, along with his wives,
and children, and his new name;
Jacob as Israel,
Israel as the one who “wrestles,”
who strives with God and humanity.

In my family circle this past year, we
took the bait offered by Ancestry.com,
submitted spittle in a vial,
sent it off to Salt Lake,
curious to know what lab results disclose,
linking our present with past,

revealing where our ancestors
might once have wandered.
The results confirmed some things,
canceled others, and in some instances,
gave rise to new awareness of our composition,
tied to past family meanderings.

The book of Genesis, in part, is a
literature that accounts for our origins.
Where have we come from,
how do we account for the world
of which we are a part?
How deep into the past
can we trace
our faith and family lineage?
Through whom, to whom, does it lead?

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This morning our lesson introduced
“the story of the family of Jacob” (Genesis 37:2).
Our lesson fixed upon **Joseph**,
the first born of **Rachel**, the one wife Jacob is
said to have loved, and the one child Jacob/Israel
“loved more than any other of this children.”

Joseph was favored in his father’s eyes.
Joseph was held in esteem by Jacob,
the scripture states,
“because he was the son of his old age.”
That’s a rather vague accounting for affection,
and not precise.
Rachel bore two children by way of Jacob,
Joseph already mentioned,
and a second son, Benjamin.
She died in labor giving birth to Benjamin (Genesis 35:19).
Rachel’s tomb is in Bethlehem, where today the wall,
the **“Israeli West Bank barrier,”**
zigs, zags, separating the space,

effectively annexing the tomb,
so that it affords Israel citizens access, while
denying Palestinian contact.

Jacob loved Joseph, and
he showed his love.
Gave him the coat of many colors;
the older brothers got nothing
of comparable value.
The brothers did not take kindly to
this slight.
The scripture states clearly:
**“They hated Joseph,
and could not speak
peaceably to him.”**

Like his father, Joseph was a dreamer.
If being the father’s favorite caused family friction,
so also do the dreams.
In his first dreams, Joseph is elevated
to lofty status, and his brothers
bow down to him.
Sharing such dreams with his brothers
didn’t help matters. The dreams engendered
more contempt amongst the brothers,
such that they conspire to kill Joseph.

“Here comes the dreamer,” they said to one another,
**“Let us kill him, and throw him into
one of the pits ... we shall see what becomes
of his dreams”** (Genesis 37:20).

There is objection to this plot,
first voiced by Reuben, then by Judah.
Both reference blood.

“Shed no blood,” says Reuben. **Throw
him into the pit** (Genesis 37:22).

**“What profit is it if we kill our brother,
and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him ...”**
(Genesis 37:26).

They seem aware that blood
upon the ground cries out,
as when Cain killed Abel,
and God asked of Cain,
“Where is your brother?”
Recall that Cain said: **“I do not know.
Am I my brother’s keeper?”**
And the Lord said,
**“What have you done?
Listen; your brother’s blood is
crying out to me from the ground”**
(Genesis 4:10).

So into the pit Joseph is thrown.
The pit was empty and with no water.
The dreamer, the one loved by Jacob,
despised by his brothers, is down and out.
And he is sold to those who trafficked in flesh,
bound for Egypt. The receipt for bill of sale read:
one dreamer, in exchange for
“twenty pieces of silver.”

This is but the beginning of the
story of Joseph and his brothers;
it is a story described in an old commentary
(*Interpreter’s Bible*) as **“cruel and malevolent,”**
an **“ugly witness”** to what can transpire when hate
festers in the human heart, when brothers
cannot speak peaceably one to another.

Curious, the story of Joseph and his brothers
takes up 1/3 of the entire book of Genesis.
The story of creation takes up two chapters
(34 verses creation story no. 1;
creation story no. 2 takes 21 verses).

The story of Joseph takes up 13 chapters, 93 years. So there is considerable interest and detail in this material. Indeed, **“it is sustained and artistically crafted ... (with) considerable literary finesse”** (Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 289).

And it is important to remember:
we don't know the outcome until the end.
We will deal with this next week (I hope) -
for Joseph who has been wronged,
Joseph who is victim of hate,
 forgives;
and the brothers, consumed with contempt,
who perpetrated a horrific misdeed,
 repent.

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Today, what might we make of this?
Let me advance a couple of thoughts that
I hope will serve to edify.

First, the story is told, not that we might
nod and agree and assent, the world is
broken, and the brothers are
dirty rotten scoundrels that merit
punishment.

No - let us consume and digest at this base level.
The story serves to move us to sympathy -
to identify with and feel the injustice
 that has occurred.

The ancestral family is a mess -
riddled with spite and envy, and we should
be eager for resolution, a correction,
 a good outcome.

The prophet Amos invokes
this story in his prophetic preaching.

**“Alas, for those who are at ease
in Zion ...
Alas, for those who are surrounded by luxury,
who lounge and eat,
who sing idle songs,
who indulge themselves,
but who are not grieved over the
the ruin of Joseph”**

(a loose paraphrase; see Amos 6:1a, 4-6).

Amos - critical of the callous and coldhearted,
who see to themselves, who see not, who care not
a wit, for the plight of others.

Amos is an important interpreter, I suggest,
for he reminds - that **“the ruin of Joseph”**
is not to be lost in the archives of our humanity,
but always upfronted, to measure
the compassion capacity of our hearts,
and how we respond to the **“ruins”** that
occur in our every day.

Genesis exposes the fault lines that
threaten God’s creation and desire for good,
the vanity of humanity - the capacity for cruelty,
that causes God grief (see Genesis 6:6). We are
invited to consider our capacity for error -
as well as our capacity for compassion,
which is a means of correction.

As I recall, Albert Schweitzer once said
something to the effect: **“Until we extend
the circle of our compassion to all living things,
we will not find peace”** (not exact, but close).
There is such an urgent need, not to cook or
seethe in our anger and envy, but to connect
and understand so as to halt the harm we bring
upon ourselves, and the grief we impose
upon ourselves and upon others. How urgent

is our need to ask – how in God’s name can
we repair the hurt that hate brings upon us.

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A second thought.

I spent some time this past week with the book,
Not in God’s Name – Confronting Religious Violence
by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. For a number of years,
Rabbi Sacks was Chief Rabbi, the United Hebrew
Congregations, in the UK – 1991-2013. He spends
considerable time in this book working through
Genesis themes. The rabbi argues: sibling rivalry
is “**the most primal form of violence,**” and that
sibling rivalry is “**the dominant theme of the book
of Genesis.**”

Part One of his book is prefaced with the title:
“Bad faith.”

According to Rabbi Sacks,
bad faith exists when religious people kill
in the name of the God of life;

bad faith is practiced when religious people
wage war in the name of the God of peace;

bad faith is demonstrated when religious people
display hate in the name of the God of love;

bad faith is illustrated when religious people
are callous and cruel in the name of the God
merciful and kind and compassionate.

When this happens, according to the Rabbi,
God dares speak: *Not in my name!*

We are in a moment in time –
a dangerous time – for Christians.

Bad faith is rampant.

There is a sickness in the soul of the nation
when choirs sing anthems: Make America Great Again.

There is **“bad faith,”** massive corruption of gospel
when preachers encourage assassination of political leaders,
as did the Rev. Robert Jeffries (First Baptist Church, Dallas)
this week, who pronounced: **“God has given Trump authority
to take out Kim Jong Un.”**

Does not that preacher know -
“You reap what you sow.” Does he not know
if thoughts, our prayers, our ideas - sow violence,
violence will be reaped; if we stoke such trouble,
we will inherit the wind
(see Proverbs 11:29; Galatians 6:7)?

This is reckless religion - bad faith religion -
misaligned - misleading - miscalculated -
not in the name of God.

Evil cannot overcome evil.
Evil can only be overcome with good.
Which is why we work and
pray to make friends the Jesus way -
even when it is hard work and fervent prayer,
especially so when the prospect of using
nuclear weapons would appear possible.

Wasn't it Martin Luther King who said:
**“Hate multiplies hate,
violence multiplies violence,
and toughness multiplies toughness?”**

It is not that we - as a people -
don't possess such impulses -
for indeed we do.
It is that we resist acting upon such surges.
For the vicious spiral can be broken only by love,
the darkness can only be dispelled by light.

So we pray restraint, self-control, as we plead in prayer:

**O God, help us see a way through
this time spared the foolishness,
the delusions, of those in charge.**

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A final thought.

A word to encourage us to practice good faith,
and encouragement also that we be dreamers,
not to live in a world of our making, but to
live at peace with God and each other in God's
world - for indeed - this is our quest as
Christians, at least as I have come to understand it.

So - a Charlie Pride quote:

**"I was always a dreamer, in childhood especially.
People thought I was a little strange."**

Do we need reckon that this could be us?
Christians - thought to be a little strange.
Thinking. Praying. Compassionate. Kind.
Eager to help and serve where the hurts of the world are acute.
Wanting to do our best - given our limitations,
along with our faults and foibles.

Good faith. A little strange. Seeking goodness - with clear thinking.
Seeking and praying mercy - with clear thinking. Serving, loving,
helping dispense Jesus-like love - with clear thinking. A little
strange. But always - always - always in God's name.
Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*