

Finding ourselves in deep

Menno Mennonite Church

August 16, 2020

Outdoor Service

Purpose: To consider the ways that God comes to us in the difficult moments of life.

Message: As people of God, we are not immune to the challenges of life, but neither are we alone.

Scripture: Genesis 37:1-4; 12-14,18-28

Synopsis: We spend a great deal of time with stories of happy endings. Our narratives by in large go only upward, with everyone living happily ever after. Accordingly, we do the same in our faith, wanting to end up in a good spot.

But sometimes, some stories don't go there, at least not immediately or easily. We know in our own lives the ways and means of conflict and the many chapters that can lie between argument and reconciliation. Sometimes it is a matter of days. Other times it can be generations away. Yet within this, God comes and is present to us, walking with us, even when the Lord can seem hard to find.

Note: this is the first of a 2 part sermon

Settling into the area; passing of one generation to the next from that of Essau and all the trickery with Jacob to now this.

This also contains the episodes of the dreams (of the sheaves and the planets bowing low) so they can be hardly blamed for taking a dislike to the little twerp.

Genesis 37 (Tanakh) (Selections)

37:3

Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons,
for he was the child of his old age;
and he had made him an ornamented tunic.

⁴And when his brothers
saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers,
they hated him so that they could not speak
a friendly word to him.

¹²One time,
when his brothers had gone
to pasture their father's flock at Shechem,

¹³Israel said to Joseph, "Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem.
Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "I am ready."

¹⁴And he said to him, "Go and see how your brothers are and how the flocks are faring,
and bring me back word."
So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

¹⁸They saw him from afar,
and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him.

¹⁹They said to one another, "Here comes that dreamer!
²⁰Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits;
and we can say, 'A savage beast devoured him.'

We shall see what comes of his dreams!"

²³When Joseph came up to his brothers,
they stripped Joseph of his tunic,
the ornamented tunic that he was wearing,
²⁴and took him and cast him into the pit.
The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

²⁵Then they sat down to a meal.
Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites
coming from Gilead, their camels
bearing gum, balm, and ladanum to be taken to Egypt.

²⁶Then Judah said to his brothers,
“What do we gain by killing our brother
and covering up his blood?”

²⁷Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites,
but let us not do away with him ourselves.
After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.”

His brothers agreed.

²⁸When Midianite traders passed by,
they pulled Joseph up out of the pit.

They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver
to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt.

This is one of those passages of the text where our new year's resolution to read through the whole of the biblical text gets a bit tough. There is still some narrative here, even a little bit of action once you pick it out of the surrounding explanations of genealogies and what not. But there is a lot going on here, and, it can seem, as the story teller would have it, YHWH has not spoken recently. What's more, what is happening is sketchy at best—another sorted interaction of family and relationship which can leave us a little bit uncomfortable. We may well know from Sunday school and what have you that this is not where this story stays—and we are eager to point to the second half of the good stuff. But that is not where we are today. We are left with a troublesome brother sold off and ignored. Today we find ourselves in a place that may be even a bit familiar: facing a future of circumstances that are questionable at best, and not quite knowing where it all leads us from here.

Because that is nothing if not human. Nothing if not familiar. What intrigues me about this story is the natural dynamics at play here. Families are not always ready for their social media close up. Siblings do not always get on with each other (something which we have begun having to explain to Luke and Anna). Sometimes, our anger, jealousy, avarice and just plain bad temper can get the better of us. As addicted as we are to the happy ending (I mean who's not), that is not where this story starts, and we know well that not all stories arc easily or completely in the real world. Like mourners at a funeral, we must not skip too easily over the suffering before us in its many forms, or the questions it provokes, even if we do have a sense of where the story is going, and who is at work, behind the scenes, the whole time. Never mind that this is one of the few biblical narrative converted into a successful Broadway Musical; we have to start where we start. Because sometimes we just find ourselves in the pit, in well over our heads, on our way to nowhere. We need a good news that can visit the places that sometimes are not all that good.

One of the pastimes that we have adapted as a family of late on the occasions when we are together is the family story telling. Usually at a meal, my brother and I will take turns telling and more often than not correcting the other's versions of the various stories of our childhood. There is a practice to this which generally involves actually letting my parents in on the specifics of what we really got up to while they were off to work. Like my being dipped upside down in the rain barrel by ankles by my brother and his friends. Or riding around our rust belt town and finding places to haunt that really would have been better left alone to be like climbing the railroad trestle and the marching through open storm sewer that ran under downtown. These

places were off limits, and frankly dangerous playgrounds, but what mom and dad didn't know didn't have to worry them, or require us to get in trouble. Now that we are well past the powers of my parents to do much gasp and laugh with us, and admonish us in their amazement that we could ever be quite that stupid, it's all fun and games now. I am glad to report that most of the exploits ended well enough, usually with only minor injury and a near scrape.

What always amazes me with our various mishaps is how the idea took root in the first place. I am happy to report that my brother did not try to advertise my death falsely, but time and again the same mechanism would be at work. One of us or the friends around us would be stuck with an idea which would be instantly and fervently taken up by the gathered assembly who would confirm not only the validity of the idea, but the righteousness and virtue of it as well. Suffice it to say that sometimes I think the IQ displayed by a group of any kind, boys especially, is mathematically locked into the number of people there are to validate, reinforce, and execute the idea, even if it is a bad one. The power of the group is quite often quite something to behold and to fear; something we ought to take seriously. Especially when there was something to prove, or worse yet, someone to show off to. Then anything representing good intent flies out the window.

I think that's what's going on here with the sons of Jacob. Joseph's position given him by his father, especially in that day and age was not a good or easy one, and he didn't make things any better by asking his brothers to interpret those dreams of power that seemed to be his. If you read the whole of the generational saga here, there is a whole bunch of stuff that goes into this. The brothers come together here to find their agreed course of action with the most base of human inclinations coming readily into view: Jealousy and the wanting of what has not been given us opens the door to wishing for something else. From there it doesn't take long for us to explain what we are feeling by blaming the other—they are too nosy, too powerful, too stupid—whatever—and from there no end of mischief is launched. The text in describing the place where the brother formulated the plan of action offers an interesting thought. In verse 18 we are given that the brothers *Conspired* with each other around Joseph—plotting perhaps as they watched him coming from a long way off. The Hebrew verb form offers a more reflexive notion: *the cause deceit in themselves* which, when you think about it is one of the better ways to explain conspiracy that I have ever heard. Many times when we feel the inequities of life and that the world is not as it ought to be we are prone to bringing our own deceits into play, never

mind how much fiction that they contain. We want to explain the world, and in explaining the world we look for something, someone to blame and we take that deceit into ourselves. We do this all the time: in our lives, in our families, in our world, in our churches. We know that the world is not as we would have it. And we can struggle to explain it. Then all those explanations need to be codified into social practice is the agreement of group think that takes us down the road. How much sin in this world is the simple acceptance of the explanations that everyone else offers without question, especially when those deceits might convince us that there could possibly be people unloved and unvalued by God. Insofar as that is never true, we owe it to ourselves to time and again question ourselves when we see that deceit in our midst, in our selves. In these days of wondering yet again about the racism that resides within, we do well to mine deeply for the deceits that we carry within us, holding them open not in defense, but in the reality and grace of being broken people in a broken world as we all are.

The whole of Genesis—the story of the very beginnings of God and God’s people starts with “In the beginning” and the goodness of ALL creation and all time. You go from the creation of the cosmos down through the generations to this intimate family quarrel. It is a quarrel of jealousy, mistrust, deep hurt, and yes, sometimes violence that can so often be part of our family stories. Many times, these are the stories that run within us most deeply, that we hold most dear, and that remain the most tender and the most heated along the way. For every pleasant story of sibling relationship, there is also a story or two of manipulation, hurt, pain, jealousy to go with it. As such, this story of Jacob’s family is not all that unique, nor entirely foreign to our experience. We know that we can be wounded by that which others have and we want—especially when it feels a whole lot like love that might not be open to us. Our jealousies run deep and most of the time silent. We don’t need to go back thousands of years to think about the jealousies and hatreds between brothers, between people and the divisions they can foster. All of this is alive and well.

I think this is a story that, as odd as it is, is also intimately familiar. We might find ourselves in the cast of characters: Joseph the wronged, going into a bleak uncertainty. Jacob, the broken father who “ponders all this in his heart”. The brothers, angry, looking to fix their problems and regain their love. In all this and many more, the question of why arises, and seemingly goes unanswered. Yet isn’t it good to know that these failings are not of our time and our responsibility—at least not entirely. Of course we don’t want to live in a broken world. Of

course it can be painful to admit that sometimes we have a role in creating brokenness around us. Sometimes the old family stories cannot be told around the supper table because the hurt is so raw and the pain so near. Sometimes we find ourselves in the middle of the story with no real answer, and many substantial worries. I know that I do both personally and globally. I am guessing I am not alone. It can be disconcerting to find ourselves here wondering where any of this leads.

But even here, even when the story is in the middle, we must cling always to the fact that we are not alone in the story. Rather, God resides in all of our stories all the time. Even the stories that we are not proud of, or that we would rather not tell. Answers, real answers, rarely come quickly or easily for any of us. Sometimes the best we can do in the middle moments of the story is only to raise our hands in wondering and pain, and hope that we are heard. Because the story is not yet over, and God is never done speaking.

Come back next week, for the rest of the story. And may we give our stories—all of them—to the God who is never done writing. Amen.