

January 18, 2015    “God's Grace In the Nought”    Gen. 37:12-36

We seldom see the word “Nought” used in English text today. So once again I begin by turning to my Oxford Dictionary. The definition offered is crisp, short, clear...nought means nothing. Mathematically it is represented by the number zero. The story of Joseph reminds us that God's grace is not only revealed in things that happen...good stuff, blessing, things we understand as good. But God's grace is also revealed to us in the nought, in the zero, in other words in things that do not happen.

Have you had this experience. You are afraid of what you think may happen. Perhaps you fear a medical diagnosis, an appointment with the doctor. And in fact what you learn is that there is nothing of significance wrong....perhaps a mild allergy. Perhaps an adjustment of an medication you are taking. God's grace is revealed in what does not happen. In what is not revealed. In the absence of what we feared. In the nothing. In the nought.

Jacob has become an old man. Jacob had sent his older sons to shepherd his flocks to grazing lands. They were to head for an area near Shechem. He wants a progress report. He is not being snooty, he is not micromanaging his sons work. These flocks represent the wealth and well being of the family. In the same way a wealthy man in our time might daily review his investment portfolio, Jacob wants to review how the grazing of the flocks is going. It is Jacob who owns the animals in question. It is Jacob who provides for this large family and its servants and workers and their households. If the Shechem pastures are not rich, he will make a further decision and have the boys move the animals to other grazing lands.

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But Jacob is old. He is not going to go and see for himself. He assigns that task to his youngest son....the errand boy. “Go and see if all is well with your brothers and the flocks.” He wants a progress report. He sends Joseph as he has done in the past to be his eyes and ears. Not to make decisions, but to bring an accurate report. Did the older boys find grass and water? Where precisely are they located? Are things going well, or does Jacob have to adjust the forage plan? It is about business. It's about

prosperity. The flocks, sheep and goats, represent wealth, and they represent food supply for the extended family and everyone who works with them and for them.

Joseph is to go and find them, see what is going on and bring a report. It has been a task Joseph has performed before. It allows Jacob to stay in relative comfort at home, in the office. It allows the family to do “business”. And at first Joseph fails to find his brothers or the flocks they are shepherding. But Joseph had a good head on his shoulders when he wanted to use it. He met someone, or was met by someone and he asked the question, “I am looking for my brothers. Have you seen where they are grazing their flocks?” The operation was a large one. Jacob's boys and his flocks would be known.

Discovering that they have moved on to Dothan, either because there was not enough forage, or because the flocks have already consumed it, Joseph moves on. He finds them. Actually he finds the flocks first, and his brothers are still a distance away. They spot Joseph coming when he is still a long way off. He is wearing that many coloured dreamcoat Jacob made him. He sticks out like a sore thumb. His brothers not only spot him, they make decisions. This is as good a time as any. They are a long way from home. They are alone. It is a singular opportunity. They decide to kill Joseph.

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They plan how to do it.

There are cisterns in the area. If they throw the body in one of them there is a good chance it will never be found. They can say a wild beast must have killed him. With Joseph gone they will all be happier. The thorn in their side will disappear. Isn't it surprising how easily, even in very religious families where faith is valued and ethics are taught, the temptation to do what is wrong has incredible power, and is mysteriously attractive. They have a plan, they have opportunity, they intend to do it.

To his credit, Reuben recognizes killing Joseph is the wrong thing to do. I suspect he also knows one of the lessons that comes with age....doing wrong leads to other troubles. It may take some time, but they will get caught. And besides, Joseph may be a pain, but he is irritating, nothing more. He suggests they simply give him a good scare. Let's just

throw him in one of these cisterns and let him cool his jets for a while. Don't shed his blood. Reuben was hoping he could think of some way to get Joseph out of there and send him home where he would be safe.

There was agreement. That is what they did. They roughed Joseph up a bit. They took his many coloured coat and they tossed him into an empty cistern. It was like putting him in an empty well. Reuben went off to attend to his duties, and the others sat down to have lunch. No lunch for the dreamer in the cistern. Maybe that would fix him.

Two things happened. They spotted a caravan coming in the distance. Ishamaelite merchants from Gilead. Their camels are

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loaded with trade goods. They are heading for Egypt where they will sell their goods. Judah comes up with another suggestion in Reuben's absence. Why don't we sell Joseph to these traders? We won't be guilty of shedding his blood and we will be rid of him. It really makes the point that they did not like Joseph. The young punk. The group decided it was a good idea. So they fished Joseph out of the cistern, and sold him to Ishmaelites.

What a terrible thing they have done. And are we not tempted to say where is God in all of this? Imagine selling a little brother into slavery as though he were a commodity. They got 20 sheckles for him. And he is gone. They are sure he will never darken their lives again. The fact is the grace of God is in the nought. The grace of God is in what did not happen. Joseph is still alive. And in fact it is in Egypt that his destiny awaits him. It is in Egypt that he will become powerful. In Egypt he will become the right hand of the Pharaoh's administration. In Egypt he will become the one who will save the lives of his father and his brothers in a time of terrible famine. In that Joseph is not killed by his brothers....all of that can and will unfold. What they have done done to him is terrible. No question! But they have left him alive. As a result Joseph can be used of God to save many from the environmental catastrophe that is taking shape just over the horizon.

Sin always leads to guilt. And often guilt leads to more...sin. Now they have a new problem. Reuben returns and discovers his plan has been thwarted. They have sold Joseph to the Midianites and he is gone. What are they going to tell Jacob? They need an explanation for his

disappearance. They need to have a good cover story. And so they conspire together to cover their tracks. They conspire together so that Jacob will never find out what they

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have done and so that he will not invest a dime, or pound of wool, to try and find Joseph and bring him back. Their plan is perfect.

First of all they will claim they never saw Joseph. He never arrived. They never saw him and they never saw what happened. And they create the evidence that will prevent any searching by them or any other resources Jacob might have chosen to muster. They take the coat, that precious many coloured dreamcoat and they rend it. They tear it. Then they kill a goat...they are going to bbq it for dinner anyway...and they daub that coat with the blood of the goat. They take it back to their father Jacob. And they plead their innocence. "We found this." They do not even flesh out the lie. They let their father fill in the blanks.

Jacob recognizes it is Joseph's coat. They found no body to bring home to bury. It is obvious what happened. He has been attacked and killed by an animal. A lion maybe. A bear maybe. And they stand back and let the drama unfold. Joseph, Jacob concludes is dead. His youngest son is gone. He mourns. His family mourns with him. They do their duties. They keep their silence. Jacob refuses to be comforted by his sons, by his daughters. Jacob says he will never get over this. His sons may have wondered about that but they held their tongues. They stared at the ground between their feet and they played their part this season of loss.

Meanwhile, a world away in Egypt, the Ishmaelites from Midian arrive at their destination. They market the trade goods they brought on their camel train. They sell the slave they took possession of near Dothan. He is bright. He is a capable servant. He's young and he is relatively healthy. One of the Pharaoh's officials, a captain of the guard, buys Joseph. And Joseph's true destiny begins step by

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step to unfold. Where is God's marvelous hand? Upon Joseph. He is alive. He is suddenly more mature. He is learning to cope and to survive. And it is all because of what did not happen. God's grace is in the plan that came to nothing, his brothers did not kill him. And though they will not know it for decades....Joseph has been spared by God's grace to serve on a world

wide stage.

Let us pray....

God sometimes we think we know what is happening because of the evidence that is placed before us. There are times when the meaning of events are hidden from us, mystefy us, and even trouble us. Help us to remember that your ways are often not our ways. And your ways are perfect. Help us to trust you and to follow where you lead us. Amen