

January 11, 2015 “When Things Go Wrong” Genesis 37:1-11

The story of Joseph has been popularized in many ways: books, films, and the musical, Joseph and the Many Coloured Dreamcoat. It is a complex story. Which is to say it is not simply the story of one man's faith and rises to power. It is the story of his faith journey. It involves hardship and suffering, displacement from his homeland, the decline of his relationship with his brothers, and at least part of that decline in relationship is something for which he bears responsibility. And yes, there is his spectacular rise to power...a reflection of the value the Pharaoh of Egypt placed on his faith, his character, his ability to administer and organize, and his singular honesty and trustworthiness. As I said it is a complex story...the growth of a young person into manhood, and his growth with both God and man.

This morning we start off by looking at the story of Joseph as a youth. And it is a checkered story. There are details here that make the point that some of Joseph's difficulties he played a role in bringing about. His story as a young person displays his sin as a young person. His lack of wisdom. His lack of maturity, his shortsightedness, his inability it seems to notice that he was doing things, saying things and participating in things that clearly hurt others. His ability to hurt his older brothers is where everything seems to turn sour. Where things start to go wrong. And at least for us, one of the lasting lessons of Joseph's story, the story of his journey, is a clear reminder that God has his hand on our lives. That God has a plan for us. That even the bad things that happen in the midst of our experience even the most hurtful things that happen to us, may be used by God to blessing to our lives, and to the lives of many others.

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Do remember this is not Joseph's version of his story. Of his faith journey. We are told in simple clarity in verse 2 of chapter 37, this is Jacob's story. This is what Jacob understood about his youngest son. And the first thing Jacob shares with us about his youngest son is the fact that he could be counted on to carry tales. To gossip. To report on the conduct of his older brothers and to put them in the worst possible light in the doing so. He was a snitch. And Jacob also tells us, or at least we may infer it from his silence, he did nothing to deter this habit on the part of Joseph.

What does all of that mean? I tend to be biased toward Joseph by the way. You see, I have an older brother. And there were times when I was very young that my older brother was probably my best friend. But there were also times when he was simply bigger, tougher, rougher and obviously able to goad me into a fight which I would inevitably lose. I would be the one that would run crying to my mother or my father...mother was preferable if there was a choice. Because, I was younger. Because I was vulnerable. And because in the politics of family life, I knew I could use that. In fact there were times I felt that was the only weapon I had.

So Joseph would run to Jacob. He would tell Jacob what the older brothers were doing. And if they got in trouble, it is obvious Joseph derived some pleasure from the reality. In other words, Joseph caused some of the trouble if not most of it that grew between he and his older brothers. Jacob is to some extent caught in the middle. He is also wrestling with another factor, he is not only the father, he is an aging father. And I have a suspicion, Joseph was indeed...cute. He carried tales. He embarrassed his brothers and got them in trouble. That's where the trouble started. It is not where the trouble finished.

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Jacob fell into the biggest trap that can ensnare any parent. "He loved Joseph more than any of his other sons." I say it again because this really important. That's not Joseph's version of the story. That's not the version of one of the older brothers. That's Jacob's confession. He favoured his youngest son. He justifies that reality by telling us it was because he was growing old. His relationship with Joseph is almost more like the relationship between a grandfather and his first grandson. And the truth is his other sons were of an age where they could see what was happening. And they suspected they knew why. What Jacob tells us is that his elder sons understood what he was feeling, they saw it working out in day to day life. And they resented it.

The coat of many colours, this richly ornamented robe, was an exceptional illustration that the family relationships are not a level playing field. None of the other sons had ever received such a gift. They received no such gift at the time. The boys understood it pure and simple as the favouritism of the "old man" and jealousy began to harden into

resentment. Jacob, mistepped. He made a mistake. And he did nothing to correct it. And I suspect given what we have been told about Joseph, and because I am a younger brother, it would not surprise me if Joseph played it for all it was worth. “Na-na-na-na-na-na!” Remember that game?

The relationship between Joseph and his brothers has gone down hill, to the point where they openly resent him, use the word hatred, and could not say a kind word to him. Civility has perished. That is to say this story of one of the Bible's great heroes is in fact mired in a stew of sinfulness.

And Josesph (bless his pea picking heart) does nothing to
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help make things better. Joseph has a dream. I call it Dream I. What he remembers about that dream is picturesque. It is harvest time. The end of the summer with blue skies and warm weather. The grain is being harvested. First it is cut down. Then the stalks are gathered, and aligned like bouquets of flowers. These stalks are bundled and tied into sheaves to stand and dry before the gleaning of the grain is done. In his dream Joseph saw his sheaf become the center of a circle of sheaves, each one representing one of his older brothers. And their sheaves, the circle, bowed to his sheaf the center.

I can tell you from experience it is a scary thing to have a dream given by God. Been there done that. It is the short story of how I wound up in Pickering back in 1983 starting a church from zero. I had said publicly I would never have the faith to do that. God's dream showed me a skyline of a community. I knew it was a God given dream. And I did not understand it. Taken to Pickering I saw that skyline, and realized God's plans for me were different than my own. I was afraid for a while that I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. So I kept it secret lest anyone should discover my being mentally unbalanced. Joseph did not. He told the story to his brothers. Na-na-na-na-na-na! And their hatred grew. The kid was trouble. Too big for his britches. As Ralph Cramdan used to say, “One of these days....bang....zoom.”

Dream II was the icing on the cake. The symbols are the sun, the moon, and the stars. Pop, Mom, and of course the older brothers. Same pattern. Circle around Joseph. He stands. They bow before his

obvious superior whatever. “I had another dream,” Joseph says to them. Even to Jacob, he says, I had a dream and you and mom and my brothers bowed before me. We are told Jacob rebuked Joseph. His father's public words amount to “never gonna

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happen, boy!” But privately Jacob thought about these things. What is going on in the young one's mind? It's reminiscent of Mary's experience of the angel that addressed her, the sharing of her pregnancy with Joseph, their breakup, his experience of the angel that addressed him, the journey to Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus, the shepherds showing up to see this thing that God had done. Remember? Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. Joseph's brothers were jealous of him. They had reason to be jealous. Doesn't mean it was right, but they had cause, they had reason. “But his father kept the matter (of these dreams) in mind. Jacob believed God's hand was upon his life. He prayed God's hand was upon the lives of all his sons. And oh, how he prayed God's hand was on the life of young Joseph. And there was so much of this Jacob simply did not understand.

And what is the lesson for us? One thing is for certain. It is clear as we read young Joseph's story that the first cause of things going wrong in our lives is the chain of decisions and choices we make in the midst of our circumstances. No one can relieve Joseph of the fact he bore responsibility for helping to create and fuel an enflame the hatred and jealousy of his brothers. A second thing is also certain: people who should know better, who should have wisdom can also make matters worse. Jacob his father was no help in the matter of changing Joseph's ways, in fact in a number of ways he aided and abetted Joseph's pursuit of disaster.

It is also true that the Bible teaches from cover to cover, that there is a divinity that shapes our ends. God is not absent from the story even when he does not appear to be a main player. He is always the main player! And that is why we can never end the story at the multicoloured dream coat or even when the tragedy explodes

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in what appears to be an out of control fashion. God is present. His Spirit hovers over the waters of our troubled lives. His grace, God's grace restores and renews.

Let us pray;

Lord the story of your servant Joseph begins at a place where it seems everything is wrong an sin's power is rampant. Where love ought to abound, there is hatred, jealousy and sinfulness on all parts. Help us to remember that you are near and present. That we do not know the end when we are in the midst of troubling things. Grant that we may fix our eyes on you and your Son Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of our salvation. In Jesus name we pray. Amen