

Violence and the Family of Blessing

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One gift that the Bible offers us is to hold up a mirror to us. We are invited into what Karl Barth referred to as the “strange new world within the Bible,” to see ourselves in its stories and prayers. We’ve been doing that this summer through the ancestral family stories of Genesis, which are filled with surprises and disruptions. In these stories, we have seen the massive disruptions and conflict that surround and erupt from the family of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah; Isaac and Rebekah; Jacob, Leah, and Rachel, and now this week as we move into the 4th generation with Joseph and his brothers. Disruptions abound.

The same could be said of our own time. COVID-19 has disrupted our common life in many ways, as over 157,000 people have died in our country from the novel coronavirus. We are undergoing significant social turbulence, especially around issues of race, as we are coming to terms with the long legacy of racism in our country, and how we – especially those of us who are white – bear responsibility for working to acknowledge, change, and heal the structures of our lives that have perpetuated racial inequity and racial injustice. There is intense polarization around us and within us – polarization so thick that it’s like the air we’re breathing, a reality that can drive us to see our *neighbors* – each one of whom is a beloved child of God – as *threats and enemies*.

What we also see in the Genesis narrative, however, is that surprises are also to be found, alongside of and within the disruptions. God’s blessing and promise are durable and resilient, working themselves out, precisely in and through this chaotic family. God’s presence is experienced in places of danger and hostility. All of which leads us to *anticipate* that God is going to show up in surprising places in our day as well, and to keep our eyes open for where God’s blessing will be revealed.

This week and next week form something of a mini-series within the larger summer series, as we have two episodes from the story of Joseph. This two-part mini-series has four essential movements: There is a dream. The dream provokes violence. God’s providence swallows up the violence and uses it to work blessing. And there is forgiveness. Dream, violence, providence, and forgiveness. This week, we will be dealing with the first two, and next week, we’ll follow with the other two.

Side note: as we are moving through this two-part mini-series, I would invite you to notice and listen for echoes between Joseph’s story and the story of Jesus. We should not push this too far, and there are admittedly differences, but there are

intriguing echoes between these stories. Both tell of a beloved Son, who was the bearer of a particular mission and vision that threatened those around him; he suffered violence from those who were threatened by him; but he was not undone by that violence, and he turned out to be a vehicle for God's providence and mercy.

But we digress.

The Joseph story begins in chapter 37. Right off the bat, we are given notice that there's gonna be trouble, for we are told in verse 3 that Father Jacob, known now as Israel, "loved Joseph more than any other of his children." Favoritism in a family, particularly when it is blatant and when it is embodied in material privilege, as with a long robe with sleeves (or a technicolor dreamcoat) is going to cause trouble. And sure enough, we are told that the other brothers are well aware of their father's preference for young Joseph, and the text says "they hated him."

Verses 5-11, which the lectionary skips over, tells of two dreams that Joseph has. Joseph is a dreamer. And in these dreams, though he is the 11th son of Jacob, Joseph becomes the one of prominence. He promptly tells his older brothers about the dreams: "There we were in the field, binding our sheaves. And suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, and all of your sheaves bowed down to me." The little one announces a dream of inversion, of the last becoming the first. Though the text does not tell us the precise tone of voice that Joseph used to tell his brothers about his dreams, we may be forgiven, I think, if we detect more than a little glee in this youngest brother's proclamation of his envisioned superiority to his older brothers.

Using terms that are loaded with political freight – terms which foreshadow Joseph's rise to political power in the Egyptian imperial regime – Joseph's brothers respond with hostility: "Are you to *reign* over us? Are you to *have dominion* over us?" The text goes on to say, "they hated him even more."

In verse 18, Joseph's older brothers see him coming and conspire to kill him. "Here comes this dreamer. Let's kill him and throw him into the pit." Instead of outright murder, however, they take Joseph by force, strip him of his beautiful, notorious, robe, and sell him to Midianite slave-traders, who (we learn at the end of the chapter) sell him into slavery in Egypt.

This story - of family, of dreams, and of violence – draws up alongside our own stories in a variety of ways, including the awful realities of the slave trade in our own country's past. If it is true that the Bible holds up a mirror to us, we are invited to notice where we find ourselves in this story. Violence and hostility have lived in this family, in this book, ever since Cain and Abel back in Genesis 4. According to the Bible, the family of blessing lives dreadfully close to violence and hostility. It does not take much imagination to see that this is true of us, just as it is of the family in Genesis. And we can identify several reasons for this. A fundamental reason for our proximity to

violence is *our own sinfulness*, our own anxiety and impatience that does not trust others easily and that can have a hard time waiting, and our multiple fears that can easily be turned to violence.

We also live close to hostility because, at our best, the church speaks with and from the kingdom of God, the kingdom that is in the world but not of the world, the beloved community that will be perceived as a threat by all the other empires of the world, as the kingdom of God embraces the outsider, the enemy, the other, all of the ones against whom the world defines itself. In this, the church follows Jesus, who also carried a word of inversion, of the blessed importance of the least and the littlest, and who suffered violence from the religious elders who did not much like the dreams he carried *and* from the political powers who could not tolerate any king but Caesar. From within and from without, because of the world's quick embrace of violence and because of our own, the family of blessing makes its faltering way in the presence of opposition and hostility, through the valley of the shadow of death, finding tables set by God in the presence of our enemies.

If we allow this story to hold up a mirror to us, we may examine ourselves to see where we find ourselves in this story, allow this story to interrogate us. In what ways are we like Joseph? The one who is easily belittled by others, who is held back and not permitted to go with the older ones out to the fields. The one who has a dream of a future, in which things are different, in which the status quo arrangements of power are changed and inverted, when the little ones are given seats of honor, the one who finds the courage to share those dreams with the bigger, older brothers in the world.

Or are there ways that we are like Joseph, sharing our dreams and visions and plans, but not in ways that others can hear, sharing them – perhaps even with a vindictive glee – in ways that threaten others, ways that are less about seeking the common good and more about promoting our own agendas, establishing our superiority, at the expense of others?

How might we be in the place of the older brothers? The ones who – both through the circumstances of their lives and their own efforts – have achieved and been given positions and roles of importance in the family or community. They are the ones who keep things going, who pasture the flock, who have borne responsibility for the functioning of things, and who do not appreciate the dreams of others who want to do things differently, and perhaps we feel threatened by those dreams and visions, and perhaps we have even allowed a spirit of hatred to develop in us, a spirit which may make us susceptible to violence.

This story comes alongside us, in our time of difficulty, and asks, How are we going to respond? Will we respond like this family, or can we respond differently? It is surely the case that the world needs people these days who will seek to build up the common good and who will focus on the needs of the most vulnerable, people who will

cultivate cooperation to face our common challenges, people who will love the poor and who will love their enemies. People who will – as Pastor Jen shared with us in the Monday Message this past week – live without lies; listen without judgment; grieve without fear; love without losing yourself.

Friends, how are *you* being called to allow God's blessing to move through you during this time of disruption and difficulty, waiting patiently and expectantly for God's surprises to reveal themselves? To God be all the glory, now and forever, Amen.