

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
September 15, 2019

Series: The Story of Joseph

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**Genesis 37:12, 18-29**

**Psalm 13**

**Ephesians 8b-10**

**The Reuben Alternative**



This fall we are looking together at the longest (and perhaps the most interesting) of all the accounts in Genesis, the story of Joseph -- son of Jacob and Rachel, the great-grandson of Abraham and Sarah. This is the First Family of Israel who were chosen by God and blessed to be a blessing to the whole world. Do you ever wonder what the world would be like, how many things would be different, if we who are part of the Abrahamic faiths were to make it our purpose too -- blessed to be a blessing to the world? Not to convert the world, or force everyone to think and act as we do, not to conquer it or take the soils, but to bless -- the world. God's dream: blessed to be a blessing. That would work.

Jacob, Abraham's grandson, had an odd take on the blessing. The easiest way to say it is that Jacob had something to prove. He saw everything as a contest, a chance to one up someone, first his brother Esau, then Laban, his father-in-law. Jacob married four women and had 12 sons.

Joseph, son number 11 or 12, was his pet. Joseph was coddled and clothed in a majestic coat of many colors, haughty and entitled. His brothers hated him for it. What's worse Joseph was a snitch, bringing bad reports about them to their dad. He got away with all kinds of things they never could. Those are just some of the reasons they hated him.

And there's another reason. Joseph had dreams. These weren't his own dreams exactly, but God's dreams -- dreams of a great reversal where the oldest would bow down to the youngest, *The first shall be last, and the last first,*<sup>i</sup> a dream in which the meek inherit the earth,<sup>ii</sup> the poor are blessed and, *Whoever would be great among you, must become a servant*<sup>iii</sup> -- those are Joseph's dreams.

Joseph's brothers heard his dreams and decided right then and there that that kind of subversive talk could not be tolerated. That's how angry and insecure we are sometimes -- imagining every new idea is an insult, jealously guarding our own positions and influence. The religious authorities and politicians who heard Jesus had the very same response to the dream. They convinced themselves that it meant **they** would no longer be important, or in charge, *so they plotted together to kill him.*<sup>iv</sup>

But this is Joseph's story. Listen to Genesis 37, beginning at verse 12.

*Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem.*

*They saw [Joseph] from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams."*

*But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him"—[he said this] that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.*

*Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.*

*When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes.*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

God of the ages, our hearts are restless until we rest safe in you. Today we pray that you will give us humble, teachable and obedient hearts, that we all may receive the word you have revealed, and do as you have commanded. Draw us to one another and to yourself. Give us your Spirit. In Christ's name, Amen.

In a famous sermon he delivered during the Apartheid era,<sup>v</sup> South African civil rights leader Allan Boesak referred to Joseph's dream as the power of God. He wrote:

*"The dream is a vision of history...inverted, undermined, changed against all odds. Joseph's dream is a power that neither tradition nor force can resist. It is a dream in which the impossible happens, the weak become strong, the lowly are raised up, the powerless are crowned with glory."<sup>vi</sup>*

Joseph will not live to see that dream fulfilled. But he will embody it, playing his part in the divine drama, carrying it tenderly in his generation, then passing it to prophets and teachers, until finally the dream resounds in the voice of a young pregnant woman in Galilee who sings:

*God has brought down the powerful from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly,  
Filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty.<sup>vii</sup>*

Joseph's brothers hated him for that. Those whose power has been undermined in order to lift up the lowly typically do see that reversal as a good thing. Joseph's brothers were not simply unkind to him. They wanted to destroy him. "Crucify him," they all but said it that way.

But the dream is not that fragile. There is a wrinkle in Joseph's story that's often overlooked, but important. It involves Reuben, the oldest of the brothers; he was not with the others when they decided to kill Joseph. When he discovered their plans he presented what Allan Boesak calls "The Reuben Option."

That's not a sandwich ☺. Sorry to distract you with that at brunch/lunchtime.

The Reuben Option was a compromise; at least Reuben hoped it would be. As the oldest he had some special responsibilities and extra clout in the family. He was supposed to protect the family. When Reuben came back and discovered what his brothers had done, he had to make a split second decision. Grabbing him out of their hands, Reuben suddenly became Joseph's protector. But rather than standing up to his brothers he said, "Wait! Don't hurt him. Just stick him in the cistern over there."

He said this so that he could secretly go back later and snatch his brother away and return him to their father with a juicy story of what almost happened to him. It was a calculated move. Reuben needed something, some kind of leverage to get back in his father's good graces. Back in chapter 35 Reuben committed a terrible sin against his father. He slept with Bilhah, his father's concubine. You just don't do that. It was more than a passing seduction; Reuben had tried to solidify his place as the alpha male, heir and soon-to-be leader of this crazy clan.

He saw an opportunity to ingratiate himself to his father, and he grabbed it; but it turned out he was grabbing at air.

"Don't kill him," Reuben said. "Throw him into that pit, instead." Thanks a lot Reuben! Reuben left and when he returned, he discovered that his Neanderthal brothers had grabbed their own opportunity and SOLD their annoying little brother to some passing slave traders.

It's another kind of death, isn't it...taking away someone's freedom, his agency? Years later, when he met his brothers again, Joseph said, *You meant it for evil but God intended it for good.*<sup>viii</sup> "The grace of God that turns evil into good can never be an excuse for continued sinfulness," wrote Boesak. Reuben was not an evil man, but he was, "A coward, and the killers of the dream will not be restrained by a responsible coward."<sup>ix</sup>

This is a danger we all face as well, "The Reuben Option."

**We** might call it, trying to be a little bit Christian -- taking the easy road, grabbing the low hanging fruit. Reuben won't openly support Joseph because he doesn't want to give up his popularity with his brothers. He knows he'll need their support later, when he's head of the clan, so he opts for the feeble role of behind-the-scenes protector of the dream.

It reminds me of that story of the guy who was coming out of church one morning, and the pastor grabbed his hand.

“Friend,” the pastor said to the man, “It’s time you joined the Lord’s army.”

“I’m already in the Lord’s army, pastor,” the man said.

“Then how come I only see you at Christmas and Easter?”

The man moved nearer to the pastor’s ear and whispered, “Because, I’m in the secret service.”

That happens a lot. Today, there are problems in our community that threaten the dream: the epidemic of gun violence, opioid deaths, lack of affordable housing, the environmental crisis, systemic racism, healthcare, and immigration... We know that lifting up those in need and providing solid opportunities IS what it means to live out the gospel, but we hesitate. What if someone doesn’t like it? What if working to keep guns out of our schools makes some of our friends angry? What if advocating for affordable housing causes some of our neighbors to turn on us? Maybe we should stick to feeding the hungry and keep quiet. That’s taking the “The Reuben Option.”

We cover ourselves, don’t risk too much, grab the low hanging fruit and feel good about it -- while the problem, the sin, the injustice go merrily on.

It’s much easier to notice this in others than it is to recognize it in ourselves. Boesak wrote:

“[In the past] we have justified slavery, violence, and war... sanctified racism and split our churches on the issue of the preservation of white supremacy. We have discriminated against women and kept them servile while we hid our fear of them behind claims of “masculinity” and sanctimonious talk about Adam and Eve. We have grown rich and fat and powerful through the exploitation of the poor, which we deplored, but never really tried to stop. All in the name of Jesus Christ and his gospel.

Now this same gospel speaks to us and we can no longer escape its demands. It calls us to love and justice and obedience. We would like to fulfill that calling, but we do not want to risk too much. The Reuben Option.”

When I read that for the first time it took my breath away. I wondered how many times I had chosen the Reuben Option. There have been plenty.

Churches are famous for choosing The Reuben Option. “Be nice,” we tell ourselves. “Don’t get too political.” Of course the church doesn’t want to divide the faithful. You know what the problem is with that? Jesus. Jesus spoke out on nearly every controversial topic of his day. Right now, the stakes are simply too high for those God has blessed to be a blessing to remain silent.

You can think of examples – people who have taken great personal risk to follow Jesus Christ. Rosa Parks sat down on the bus and Dietrich Bonhoeffer stood up to the White Supremacists.

Kaj Munk (Kai Moonk) was a Christian in Denmark in the 1940's. He became the spiritual force behind the Danish Resistance. He wrote, "The signs of the Christian church have been the lion, the lamb, the dove and the fish but *never* the chameleon." <sup>x</sup>

The story of Reuben and Joseph could not be more relevant to our time. Last week's text forced us to think about hate crimes. On Friday a synagogue in Minnesota was torched...burned to the ground.

Today's reading begs us to remember the 700,000 people who are sold into slavery every year, 80% of them women and girls, 50% are minors. There is no Reuben Alternative with human trafficking, and no option for neutrality, no possibility for believers to look the other way. That's why Woods Church is financially and personally involved with Samaritan Women, a national organization that provides support for survivors of human trafficking.

Our elder of the day, Bill Hadley, is a volunteer at Samaritan Women. He told me about a young woman who was a resident there—widely trafficked in the U.S. She was so badly abused by her traffickers that she said she did not recognize herself when she looked in the mirror. Bill and Beth helped her prepare for the GED exam which the young woman believed she could not pass. Here's the good news—she passed! And she is now an undergrad.

When I agreed to preach this series on Joseph's story, I didn't realize just how deep and difficult some of these stories would be. But there is also gospel here too, good news of great joy that *In all things God works together for good for those who love God.* <sup>xi</sup> Joseph will go to Egypt, first as a slave, then as a prisoner, and finally as the second most powerful man in the land. He will have a family, and finally meet the family who betrayed him. But that's to come.

The dream is alive – it is embodied in the lives of those who choose courage, even in those times when we feel most at risk – remember -- we are never far from the grace of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 20:16

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 5:5

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 20:26

<sup>iv</sup> John 11:53

<sup>v</sup> Allan Boesak, *Walking on Thorns: The Call to Christian Discipleship*, World Council of Churches Publications, 1984, 35-41

<sup>vi</sup> *ibid*

<sup>vii</sup> Luke 1:52-53

<sup>viii</sup> Genesis 50:20

<sup>ix</sup> Walter Brueggemann by Allan Boesak, *op. cit.*

<sup>x</sup> Boesak, *op. cit.*

<sup>xi</sup> Romans 8:28