

Sermon for Sunday, Sept. 22, 2024

Selections from Genesis 37 and 50.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today's Scripture lesson is selected portions of a much larger story that spans about 13 chapters at the end of the book of Genesis. The primary character is Joseph, one of the sons of Jacob (whose name has been changed to Israel.) Joseph and his 11 brothers are the great-grandsons of Abraham and Sarah.

As you are likely aware, the story of Abraham and Sarah is much bigger than the brief lesson that we heard from Genesis 15 last Sunday. But this lesson was included because of the deep value to us of verse 6: "And [Abraham] believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness." Abraham's faith in God to act and provide him with an heir was important. We are heirs of Abraham's faith and this verse serves as a marker. It also serves as an encouragement to us as heirs of Abraham.

This week's lesson about Joseph has two purposes. The readings from chapter 37 are intended to give you some of the background and explain why Joseph is so deeply hated (and hated is the correct word—it's the word used in the original language) by his brothers.

The second reason why the story of Joseph is included is because there is a really important verse in Genesis 50. The immediate setting is that Jacob is now dead and buried. Joseph's brothers fear that now, at last, he will take revenge upon them for the evil deed that they foisted upon him all those years before. As a result they throw themselves down before him and beg for mercy.

In this moment Joseph had the opportunity to exert his power over his brothers. He holds a position of great responsibility in Egypt. He is in charge of all the granaries in the country. He could choose to send his brothers and their families away, in which case the entire tribe would likely starve or be sold into slavery. Some might even argue that the brothers deserve this punishment: that Joseph has the right to avenge the evil that has been done to him.

Joseph responds with what is arguably his most memorable statement, Genesis 50:19-20 "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended

it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today." Joseph did exert his power, but he used it for good and not for revenge nor for punishment. Joseph showed mercy.

There is someone else in the Bible who had power and the opportunity to exert it: but didn't. You know who he is: Jesus. When the disciples were arguing over who was the greatest among them (in other words who had the most power) Jesus taught (Mark 10:43-44) "But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

Not only did Jesus teach humility, he demonstrated it with his life. Earlier this week the 7th & 8th grade confirmation class and I read the second and third chapters of Mark. Over and over in those chapters Jesus demonstrates his power as God's son to heal. He spends time with the outcast people of society: the tax collectors and other so-called sinners; demonstrating that they are loved by God. He's healing them mentally and emotionally by reassuring them that they are also of significance to God.

Over and over in Mark's gospel (but also in the others) we read that Jesus' actions made the religious elite—the people with power—angry. Just as Joseph's words and actions made his brothers angry so did Jesus' words and actions. Yet, what did Jesus choose? Did he choose a way of violent punishment? Did he choose a way of revenge? No. He chose the way of the cross. He submitted himself to arrest, to beatings, to scorn, taunting and derision, and ultimately to crucifixion and death.

Just as Joseph said, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today." Jesus can pretty much say the same thing.

"Do not be afraid." Fear is real and we often find ourselves in situations that cause us fear. Fear causes us to react in ways that don't make sense and are often cruel or illogical. It takes effort but we can cast aside our fear as long as we strive to maintain our trust in the Savior who is committed to caring for us.

When Joseph said, "Am I in the place of God?" he is recognizing that he is just a simple human being. He does not take upon himself the task of judging his brothers. He reserves that for God. But it's clear that the lessons of faith and belief in God that he learned in his youth have stuck with him in spite of all of the trials

he has faced during his life. The faith of Abraham has been passed on to him and has remained strong within him.

“Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good,” The government officials and the religious elite intended harm upon Jesus. They wanted him gone, in part because he threatened their power. This was also true for Joseph’s brothers. They wanted him gone because he threatened their power. And in the midst of all of this God is at work. God takes the machinations of human beings and turns it upside down into something amazing and good. In the end the lives of many Egyptians, all of Joseph’s extended family, and likely countless others who heard “that there was food in Egypt” were saved.

Just as God took the machinations of human beings and turned them all upside down in the Joseph story, God does so again in the Jesus story. Through his death and resurrection our lives will be saved. We have the promise of the resurrection for each of us.

Joseph ends his statement with, “in order to preserve a numerous people.” And that’s what God does for us. You see God loves each of us as precious parts of his creation. Some people say that hell is permanent separation from God. God doesn’t want to be permanently separated from his human creations. God’s plan through Jesus is to restore, maintain, and preserve God’s numerous people. That’s us. But it’s also our neighbors: both the comfortable ones and the uncomfortable ones.

In conclusion then remember that Abraham and Joseph his great-grandson demonstrate faith in God. They stand as examples to us.

- “And [Abraham] believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.”
- “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.”

Choose as Abraham did. Choose as Joseph did. Believe in our redeemer, Jesus. He is the Savior of us all. Amen.