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Grace and Holy Trinity Church
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Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him 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" —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.

Matthew 14:22-33

Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Before I begin...let me say just a bit about yesterday. Charlottesville had a traumatic day yesterday, our country had a traumatic and sad day. We pray for those who died. And for us, this is not just news, it is personal. It is Virginia. My son Tom was there yesterday as a peaceful counter protester and I bet you know people who there as well. Seeing the level of hate, and the vile doctrine of white supremacy, out in the daylight is a shock for us all. The conversations we are having around race, conversations focused on statues of confederate soldiers, reveal to us the depth of our divisions, and our seeming inability to work through complicated and difficult topics with anything approaching civility. We must pray, hard, for peace and reconciliation. And we, as Christians, must model civility in our conversation and conduct. We must try, in our own ways, to be the little leaven that leavens the whole lump. Today in the Prayers of the People we

will lift up our concerns. I encourage you to continue to pray each day in your personal prayers. Like Peter we are stepping out into the wind and the waves, and our fears can overtake us. So keep your eyes on Jesus, and keep the faith. And never give up hope or adopt the strategies of the enemy.

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Back in 2006 The Episcopal Church adopted the Revised Common Lectionary. It is a three year cycle of scripture readings to be used on Sundays and it is not just something we did, but a large number of denominations helped develop it and are using it. It is a great piece of ecumenism and connectivity amongst Christian denominations.

The Revised Common Lectionary improves on earlier ones used by the church because it allows the Old Testament stories to be read in sequence, during part of the year, as opposed to always linking the Old Testament lesson to a theme sounded in the gospel reading. This means, that in corporate worship we are getting to hear some stories we've never heard in that setting.

This summer, we have been immersed in the awesome family sagas from the Book of Genesis....and I can't get enough of it! I've read them all before, numerous times, but each time something new and fresh emerges or I am struck all over again by the power by a well know passage.

Last time I preached I talked about Jacob, that trickster, and how with his favorite wife Rachel and her maid Bilhah, and with another wife, Rachel's sister Leah, and her maid Zilpah... Jacob, who was eventually renamed Israel, had twelve sons...hence the twelve tribes of Israel. Four wives. One husband. Twelve sons...not to mention, daughters. Quite the saga.

Today we move down one generation, and we are hearing about Joseph. He was one of two children of Rachel –the favorite wife- and...Joseph was a child of Jacob's old age. So, for a variety of reasons, Joseph was special. And he knew it and poured a whole lot of sand into the gears of the family dynamic because of it.

In our reading today we hear about him tattling to his father about some of his brothers. Now part of the story got left out. You may have noticed that the reading skips verses 5 – 11. Well in that section we read about two of Joseph's dreams. "Once Joseph had a dream which he told to his brothers; and they hated him even more." They were binding sheaves in the fields...a sheaf is a bundle of grain stalks laid lengthwise and tied together after reaping... at any rate Joseph's sheaf stood up and remained upright while the other sheaves representing his brothers, bowed down to his sheaf.

That went over so well that Joseph thought it a good idea to tell his brothers about another dream where the sun, and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to him...that is Dad and Mom and all his brothers were bowing down. That story even offended his father.

One could argue that Joseph worked hard to egg his brothers on...and is it then really any surprise, that they take the dreamer and sell him into slavery? At least they didn't kill him.

Reuben, the eldest son of Jacob by Leah, convinced them to just throw him in a pit...with the idea he could circle back later and rescue him...but...before that could happen the brothers saw some traders ...and they sell Joseph to them. They got rid of an aggravating family member and made a profit to boot. Joseph ends up in slavery in Egypt.

Who hasn't wanted to lose family member, from time to time? Maybe you've been that family member.

Now you remember what happens then, right? Joseph, in spite of getting thrown into jail for refusing to have an affair with Pharaoh's wife ...that's right, refusing to have an affair with Pharaoh's wife –...ends up in a position of great power and he controls the store houses of food during a pervasive famine. Joseph, who looks thoroughly Egyptian at this point, meets his brothers again when they come begging for food. Once they figure out who he is, their next thought is, "He is going to kill us."

In response to their legitimate fear, Joseph utters one of my favorite passages in all scripture. Joseph says, “You meant what you did for evil, but God meant it for good, so as to bring about the survival of many people. So fear not.”

I talked some about this in my last sermon...God drawing straight with crooked lines. God can take whatever we throw at him and work his will through it...even if it is a cross upon which we crucify his Son. God expects the best and deals with our worst. Joseph doesn't excuse his brothers for their sin, but he does forgive them and he also helps us all see the hand of God at work through it all. There is no excuse for our sin, and yet even then, the mystery and majesty and power of God is such, that God's will prevails.

All of that comes out of the Joseph story. But what I want to focus on for just a bit is this question. What does it mean to be special, to be chosen? Joseph certainly was special. He was the son of his father's old age and the child of his father's favorite wife.

For Joseph, as a brash 17 year old, being special meant being completely obnoxious. Lording it over the others. Tattling on his brothers to his father. Joseph used his position to belittle others in the family.

As this story was told over and over and eventually written down...as this story found its place in the Torah and was remembered down the generations...it must, I think, have been heard as a warning to the people of Israel as a whole, a word to the chosen people.¹

What does chosenness mean? What does being special, called out, mean? There is Joseph in his younger years, completely obnoxious. And there is a tempered and tested Joseph, who could have had his brothers all killed, but who forgives, and saves the family from starvation.

¹ Suggested by commentary in The New Interpreter's Bible, copyright 1994, volume one, page 602.

You see, “(i)n God’s plan to rescue his creation”², he chooses (a particular people) through whom to work. This people, the people of Israel were to be a light to the world.³ To show the entire world what God wanted for creation.

Despite great faithfulness at times, despite the courageous work of the prophets to call the people back to the call, ultimately the people failed in this mission, and the world went dark. It was left to Jesus, the one true Israelite, to complete the mission...and complete it he did, upon the cross.

What came into being in Jesus was life, and the life was the light of all people. That light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John chapter 1)

“The Messiah does what Israel was supposed to. He demonstrates the faithfulness Israel was supposed to. Messiah is the living and dying embodiment of Israel.... (It all comes together in him.) The church is now commissioned to continue the story as the light of God to the world.”⁴

So we can relate to the ups and downs of Jacob’s story and Joseph’s. We are not any better. We are not in a position to judge because as individuals and as the church we’ve made our own set of mistakes. But, each day, we have a choice, don’t we. We have a new opportunity.

We can channel 17 year old Joseph and talk about how special we are, as opposed to everyone else. We can think and act as though it is all about us. We can adopt a consumer mentality and think church exists to meet our needs. We can put the light under a bushel basket because for heaven’s sake we wouldn’t want to share with any unworthy folks. OR...

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<https://books.google.com/books?id=vKVzBQAAQBAJ&pg=PA106&lpg=PA106&dq=nt+wright+failure+of+israel+to+be+a+light+to+the+nations&source=bl&ots=sRRORmRfXt&sig=qn9qwslo1bxGQYydMvMSxGl5Fww&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjg-77e2MjVAhXM3YMKHXnoD5MQ6AEIUzAH#v=onepage&q=nt%20wright%20failure%20of%20israel%20to%20be%20a%20light%20to%20the%20nations&f=false>

³ Cf Isaiah 49:3ff

⁴ <http://timneufeld.blogspot.com/occasio/2014/05/nt-wright-at-fuller-3-who-are-the-people-of-god.html>

We can grow in the Spirit, and realize that just as Jesus came not to be served but to serve, we are servants...our role is to be a light to the world...our call is to go out, in the name of Christ Jesus...sharing the story of God's redemptive work through Israel, in Jesus and yearning toward a new heaven and a new earth.

We can invite others to experience the joy that comes by baptism into Christ's death and rising to new life. We can invite others into the faith, into what gives us meaning and purpose...to embrace with us the truth sets people free.

And that is why every single act of Eucharistic worship ends with these or similar words...Go in peace and love to serve. Go forth rejoicing. Go in the power of the Spirit. Go blessing the Lord. But...Go! That is your vocation as a Christian. This is where our stories intersect God's story of hope for all creation. Amen.