

First Presbyterian Church
Greenfield, Indiana
Pastor John J. Paulson

August 7, 2011

8th Sunday After Pentecost

Brotherly Love?!

Genesis 37:1–4, 12–28
Psalm 105:1–6, 16–22, 45
Matthew 14:22–33
Romans 10:5–15

Joseph, sold as a slave!
Give thanks to God!
Jesus walks on water!
Believe! Jesus is Lord!

Informally before the sermon: I am an only child, so it wasn't until Pat and I had children that I realized what "brotherly love" was all about. I grew up living next door to a family with five kids and we had great times playing Monopoly or baseball or a multitude of other games together. But, there were times when they couldn't come outside to play or it was raining, and I had no one to play with. I was lonely, and I always imagined that the five of them were having a great time playing together and I was all alone. As I said, it wasn't until we had kids that I realized that the time they spent together was probably a lot less fun than I had envisioned. Now, with grandkids, I know it wasn't! How can three wonderfully sweet, well behaved children start world war three just before bedtime? How can they turn watching a movie into a disaster? I guess that it is all part of "brotherly love". So is our story from the writer of Genesis this morning as we continue to look at the characters who were instrumental in the forming the faith we now call Christianity.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer! Amen

Over the past few weeks we have been bringing to life the stories of the very first of God's chosen people, the family of Abraham and Sarah. You remember them; God called Abraham to move from the security of the family home to an unknown land. Not only did God call them to move, he promised them that the land they were moving to, a land called Canaan, would be theirs forever. God promised that he would be their God and they would be his people; they and their descendants who God promised would be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

They finally had a son, named Isaac, and the chosen people were on the way. Abraham sent a servant back to the homeland to find a wife for Isaac, and he returned with a young woman named Rebekah. Isaac immediately fell in love with her, they were married, and the Chosen People's journey through life continued.

Since children were essential to the continuation of the family line, Rebekah had two, Jacob and Esau. Actually, they were twins, with Esau being born first, and Jacob, holding on to Esau's heel, born second. They turned out to be anything but model children! Jacob, the younger one, took advantage of Esau, talking him out of his birthright, and tricking him out of receiving his father Isaac's blessing! Contrary to all reason, and totally unexpected, Jacob, the younger of the two, became the one to carry on God's mission and God's plan for God's chosen people. We are only in the third generation or so, and the story of the Chosen People is becoming complicated, isn't it?

And, the complications are not over. The story becomes even more fascinating when Jacob goes looking for a wife and is tricked himself into marrying two women, Leah and Rachel.

I guess we have to remember that this story, as it continues, will give us King David who essentially murders his rival, the prophets who tell stories of gloom and doom, the poets who write beautiful psalms, and a messiah, a savior sent by God into a troubled world, born in a stable, who is killed by the very people he is sent to help out. Then, in the most complicated and fascinating twist of all, the messiah is brought back to life by God and continues to offer salvation to all who believe in him.

But, back to Jacob and his family. God supports Jacob, and the promise made to his father, Isaac, is passed on to him. One day God appears to him and we find out how the Chosen People became known as the nation of Israel: God says to him: "Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel." And God said to him, "I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body. The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you."¹

Between his two wives and their two maids, Jacob, now named Israel, fathers twelve children, who eventually will become the twelve tribes of Israel and lead to the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham of descendants a numerous as the stars. Some of their names are familiar to us, others are not. The children were named: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Benjamin, and Joseph.

¹ **Genesis 35:10-12 (My paraphrase)**

It would make the story of the Chosen People, our ancestors, much more positive if I could tell you that there was peace in the family. But I can't.

Born when Jacob, or Israel, was well up in years, Joseph is Israel's favorite son. It appears that Joseph is a man of destiny. His father makes him a richly ornamented robe unlike anything his brother's have. Sometimes Joseph tattles on his brothers to his father, undoubtedly getting them in trouble for whatever they were not supposed to be doing. When his brothers have to leave the comforts of home and take the flocks to pasture for months at a time, Joseph stays behind.

There is some family jealousy, as you can imagine.

As we hear about two dreams Joseph has, we discover that Joseph is either very innocent, or he has an extremely large ego.

In one dream the brothers were all binding up sheaves of wheat in the field, when suddenly his sheaf stood upright and those of his brothers bowed down to his.

In another, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to him.

He proudly told his parents and his brother about his dreams. They were nowhere near as excited about them as he was. Israel said to him: "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?"

Nothing like a good dream to build family unity!

Sometime later, when the Joseph's eleven brothers are in the fields with the sheep, Jacob sends him to see how his brothers are doing. Maybe he is being sent to see if they need any help; maybe he is being sent to spy on them. Anyway, he goes off to find them.

From a long way off they see him coming; how could they miss the Technicolor dream coat, the ornately decorated robe that he always wore. Their brotherly love gets the best of them; they plot to get Joseph out of the way for once and for all. Their first thought is to kill him, but as they think about it, as he gets closer, they decide to just kidnap him, and put him in an empty water holding tank, a dry cistern, dug into the ground.

Of course now they have to do something with him. Even for them leaving him in the ground to die of thirst or starvation was too cruel. So, they sell him as a slave to a band of traders who are passing by on their way to Egypt. Joseph is an energetic, handsome, strong young man, and, it turns out, was worth twenty shekels of silver, that's about sixty to eighty dollars in today's money.

We last see Joseph as he is bound on the back of a camel heading off on the dusty road to Egypt. The brothers are finally through with him, at least they think they are.

But what to tell their father? He sent Joseph to check on them, and he will expect Joseph back pretty soon.

What a better way to convince dad that his favorite son is gone forever, than to show him Joseph's beautiful robe torn to pieces and covered with blood. They slaughter one of the sheep, rip up the robe, and dip it in sheep blood, and head back to their father with the evidence of Joseph's demise.

It would be too simple to just go and tell Jacob that they found Joseph's robe all ripped up and blood covered. No, they have to add just a little suspense. They take the robe to him and ask him to identify it. "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe," they said to their father. Were they smirking? Laughing? How did they feel at this moment when their "brotherly love" was so evident. Of course they never expected to see Joseph again; and they certainly never expected that their father would find out what they did. But, as we'll find out next week, never say never when you are dealing with God!

Jacob identifies the robe as Joseph's, and, without the benefit of a CSI analysis of the DNA in the blood, concludes that the blood is Joseph's, and that Joseph must have been mauled by a large animal. Jacob is crushed. He feels as if his life is over.

The brothers have created a nightmare for their family. What a mess!

But God is with this family, and God has a way of taking the negative messes we create and bringing them to a positive conclusion. God never gives up on us, and God never gave up on Joseph either. But, that's next week's message.

The important thing to get out of this story is that God is always at work in our world and in our families. There is nothing so bad that God can't make some good come out of it.

In a few minutes we will gather at the Communion Table to share with Christians of all times and all places this sacrament that was first instituted by Jesus. We will celebrate God's love and grace as well as Jesus' sacrifice as we become refreshed and renewed.

God's love and grace are never out of reach for us. I think the psalmist put it best in the 23rd Psalm. The Lord is our shepherd, watching out for us, caring for us, guiding us, keeping us on the right path, and God is always with us.

AMEN.