

Last week we left Abraham and Sarah still waiting for a child. This week we read the story of their great-grandson, Joseph. Joseph's story takes up a large portion of the end of Genesis. It's a story about how the promises of God play out in a family... with some dysfunction. My experience of families is that it is not a matter of whether your family has dysfunction or not, but rather the current level of dysfunction within your particular family system. We think families should be the close and comforting but sometimes or maybe often we experience the opposite.

Joseph's story starts with what must be at the top of the "Don't do this as a parent" list. The Bible says, "Jacob loved Joseph more than his other children," and to prove it Jacob gives Joseph a coat of many colors. Clothing is different now. If I see you have a nice shirt, I could ask you where you got it and go to Target or the internet and within a matter of hours or days and with not that much work or money I can have one just like it. And that shirt becomes one of my twenty shirts. That's not the way it has been for most of history. For most of history fabric wasn't something you could just go buy. You needed to get the sheep, dye and weave the wool and then make the shirt. A shirt might take a season to make and you would likely have one shirt. Jacob's gift of a multi-colored coat was a really big deal and a very visual reminder to all, especially the other brothers, that Joseph was loved more by Jacob.

Showing favoritism to one of your children is almost guaranteed to inject toxicity into the family system. It is easy to criticize Jacob but as with much parenting our

default is what we saw modeled for us by our parents and Jacob was no different. Jacob's parenting screw ups are the continuation of family dysfunction. Rebecca, Jacob's mother, loved him more than his brother Esau and Isaac, Jacob's father, loved Esau more. You might think the two would balance each other out, but it turns out it doesn't work that way. You get the sense that without a conscious decision and hard work what we experience in our families of origin have an amazingly strong ability to determine our reactions and emotions. In the field of psychology this is referred to as Multi-generational transmission, the idea that our "self" is shaped by the nature and nurture of previous generations; everything from conscious teaching and learning to the unconscious programming of our emotional reactions.

The brothers say, "here comes Joseph, let's kill him." The brothers are filled with toxicity, consumed by envy and hatred. They are so hurt, that they not only sell Joseph into slavery, but they take the coat, which Jacob had given and say, "Dad you can have this back, Joseph won't be needing this anymore." The brothers take this physical sign of favoritism that had pumped toxin into the family system and give it back—this is a sadistic act of revenge; compounding the dysfunction of the system.

We look at this story saying, "Wow that is one messed up family, my family might be a bit dysfunctional but at least we're not killing each other." The actions and the people in Joseph's story are bold, bordering on extreme leading us to wonder, "What can God do?" "How is God at work?"

Joseph says, “What you intended for evil God has used for good.” Some interpret this as everything happens for a reason. God had this plan all along; that the brothers would sell Joseph in to slavery and in the end Joseph would rise to power and save them all. But this is a bad interpretation because the God I meet in scripture does not cause people to suffer. God doesn’t make people sin.

There is a line that comes up over and over again in Joseph’s story, “And the Lord was with Joseph.” This is the line spoken when Joseph’s life seems like it couldn’t get any worse: when he is sold into slavery or thrown into prison the words come “but the Lord was with Joseph.” Early in my life I interpreted that to mean, everything was ok for Joseph because God was there. It’s like in my mind I thought when in prison Joseph was in a clean comfortable cell with a good wifi signal and a gym. But the more I’ve lived life, the less I think that is the case. It’s more like in the deep darkness of prison or clinical depression “God with Joseph and us” looks like a hope that can’t be explained. Not an optimism or willing our selves to be happy but God showing up. God is with us in the midst of our hard times—the diagnosis, the death, the job loss—God is right there with us, scared, unsure, nervous, embarrassed.

Also in Joseph’s story and in our stories, people are hurting each other on purpose and on accident. We hurt people, we sin. Look at Joseph in the beginning of the story, he is arrogant and full of himself and clueless with no social skills? He is a jerk, he isn’t someone you would want to hang out with. Then look at Joseph later in the story. He forgives the brothers that handed him over to

death. He uses his skills to save a foreign nation and his own people. He tells his brothers the wisely and tenderly, “What you intended for evil God has used for good, you are free from the sins. You are my family.” In this story we see the truth about us. We are more than the worst things we have done and more than the worst things that have been done to us. We are capable of change. And that that change often comes as we emerge from hard times or uncomfortable experiences.

Jesus working in our lives opens up the possibility of new way of living. In Jesus we believe that eternal life is ours that there is life after death. That is a wonderful, amazing and comforting promise, and the joy doesn’t end there. In Jesus’ forgiveness we are set free from our past to live in our abundant present and future. God worked good in the horrible life that Joseph experienced, and God works for good in our lives. God is alive and moving in and through us in the midst of our daily lives. Amen.