

“God puts the ‘promise’ in ‘compromise’”

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

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Stories like these are why I find Genesis confusing. Not just confusing in a “where are we, what generation are we on and what are these people doing?” kind of way. That’s relatively easy to sort out, after a while. What’s harder is what Genesis confuses in me.

There are no neat dichotomies in Genesis. I prefer my stories with a hero and a villain, thank you very much – bad guys on the side of chaos and evil, good guys on the side of order, peace, and whole-grain goodness. If they can be color-coded by hats, even better.

But there are few, if any, heroes in Genesis, and no pure villains. What we have in Genesis instead are people, who are each, in turn, brave, cowardly, faithful, deceitful. Is Jacob the lying second-born son who tricked his blind and dying father into giving him the family blessing, or the faithful one to whom the Lord appears and promises land and a great nation of offspring? Yes. It’s confusing when people keep shifting categories like that.

But that might not be so bad if I found, waiting, in all of this, a God I recognized. But God gets confusing in Genesis, too. God picks the wrong people to do weird things. God picks the elderly to have babies. God blesses connivers and deceivers with divine promises. God bets it all on the most dysfunctional family that side of The Simpsons.

And then we have this story, today, where God isn’t even, really, kinda . . . there. In fact, God doesn’t show up much in the whole saga of Joseph. In Genesis I had really gotten used to a “hands-on” God, and now, with things among the chosen people getting violent, God seems to be conspicuously absent.

And even that wouldn’t be all that bad if it weren’t for the tiny closets that keep getting opened inside me. The pieces of me that seldom see the light of day see their reflections in these stories. Genesis holds up a mirror and asks: “Aren’t you a little like this?” “Do you think you could do that?” Genesis gets personal.

We find all that in our story today. It starts out by introducing us to Joseph, the favorite son of the favorite wife of Jacob. He’s an obnoxious tattletale of a teenager, the spoiled brat of the family. He is doted upon by his father, which doesn’t seem to bother either of them. As a sign of his blatant favoritism, Jacob gives Joseph “a long robe with sleeves.” “Coat of many colors” is the traditional rendering (scholars debate whether or not it was, in fact, Technicolor), but however you translate it, the coat was given as a sign, a rather indelicate sign of special love, special standing.

And his brothers hated him for it. What was cut out of our reading today was a section that could have been titled “Joseph Makes it Worse.” He has a dream, we are told, about a single golden stalk of wheat, and how eleven other stalks of wheat come and bow down

to it. He tells his eleven brothers about this dream, and wonders, with some mixture of ignorance and arrogance, what it could possibly mean? And then he does it again, with another dream, with the Sun, Moon and eleven stars all bowing down to him. Its, like, just so *hard* to figure out, he has to ask them again.

The next time the brothers get him alone is when they're out pasturing the sheep, about 50 miles away in Shechem. Joseph has been asked by his father to go check on his brothers and to "bring back word." Asking a younger sibling to go check in on his brothers and report back – truly inspired parenting. Anyone ever had a sibling sent by Mom or Dad to check on you? It generally goes well, yes?

And so the brothers conspire to kill him, which seems a bit overboard to me. Joseph's obnoxious, but he's obnoxious like a 16-year old with a Corvette with the stereo turned up to 11 – he's annoying, but you wouldn't kill him. But the brothers throw themselves a testosterone-fueled pity party and start figuring out ways to make sure Joseph's dreams never come true.

So what you get a lot of in Genesis, and we have in spades with this story, are all the complexities and confusion of real life. There are no clear winners, as everyone seems to lose at one point or another. God makes no pronouncements from On High; no one is absolutely right or absolutely wrong. Each person contains a mix of good and evil, each of which rise up at different times.

In other words, they are a lot like us. They lived in the same mess and mix that we do every day. We live in a mix of health and dysfunction, honesty and deceit, struggles between living selfishly and selflessly, and most of that before breakfast. We inherit legacies of bad behavior and try to break out of them. We try, at our best, to live lives that are pleasing to God and one another, and we inevitably come up short. In short, we live in a sinful world.

Now, I'm careful with that term, "sin," as it is often misused or abused or ignored. But I take that word seriously and I use very intentionally here. What I mean by "we live in a sinful world" is that we live in a world full of forces and behaviors that destroy or prevent relationship. Sin is anything that destroys or prevents loving relationships – between us and ourselves, one another, or God. That's why sin is the opposite of what God wants from us; God created us to be in loving relationship. Sin runs the gamut from seemingly benign to unbelievably evil, but, in any form, the heart of sin is that it keeps us from having loving relationships.

The insidiousness of sin is that it is all around us. It's not just that these forces are in us, and we inevitably do things that make relationship difficult, although that's true, it's that sin is active in the world in a way that acts on us, that we participate in sin without knowing it. We buy a banana and we participate in an inequitable economic market that exploits people in poverty for cheap labor. (For the record, I don't know if that's true, I was just eating a banana while I was writing this. I don't want to make you paranoid about bananas).

But the point holds: much of the focus on sin tends to be the bad things we initiate, but the irony is that most sin is not original at all. It's just a response to sin we encounter. We find ourselves treated badly by a rude driver, we begin to lose patience at work and send off a terse email. A bump become a push becomes a punch. Cycles of sin and violence feed off one another, perpetuate themselves, and spin off one another. On a very serious and very real level, the abused often becomes and abuser. Physical violence and retribution escalate.

This is the kind of web of sin, the cycles of dysfunction we see in Joseph and his family. Each is responding to their own perspective, and each feels a certain "rightness," even as they make life and loving relationships hard for one another. Jacob finally gets the son he's dreamed of, a son from the wife he loved, and tries to give him everything he can. Joseph has been given a privileged status, and knows how to use it. The brothers are jealous, angry and violent. You can see the webs of sin at work in this story, as you see the different people reacting to them and acting out against one another in response to what they feel has been done to them.

So what do we do? In a word, compromise. What I mean by compromise is someone doing the complicated, confusing work of being relatively wise and approximately just. Someone who, in the midst of dysfunction and hatred and all the forces that are trying to destroy relationship, takes a step toward reconciliation. A compromise won't get you all the way there, but a compromise may break the cycle and leave the door open for reconciliation, and therefore relationship.

Reuben is the first to compromise in this story. Reuben is the oldest of the brothers, the one who would ultimately be held responsible for the death of Joseph. But whatever his motive, he is the one who offers the compromise, which is, essentially: "Let's not kill him, let's just throw him in a pit." As compromises go, I suppose it's relatively uninspiring, although the narrator tells us he intends to save Joseph later. Either way, it is a step away from destruction toward reconciliation, a reconciliation that will be realized decades later, in Egypt. But he doesn't know that now; all Reuben knows is that reconciliation is still possible, because Joseph is alive. It is this small moment of compromise that I'd like to focus on in this story; if you want to find God in this story, this is where I'd start.

As Christians we are called to live into the complexity and confusion of this life. We are called to keep the whole human being in mind, the saint and sinner in each of us, and to work toward reconciliation. To do the difficult work of step-by-step justice. Of mercy that breaks the cycles of retribution. Of peacemaking that changes the focus from getting even to getting beyond.

As Christians we must take two things very seriously. The first is sin, and its inevitability. The second is the unstoppable desire God has to be with us, and the power God has to work through us. The good news is not that God works even through imperfect people

like us, it is that God, every day for all time, has worked with imperfect people. God doesn't work *even* with imperfect people. God works *inevitably* with imperfect people.

Because life, like this story, is not an old Western movie, and it's not an Aesop's Fable. We are always in the midst of a mix of things, good and bad, healthy and unhealthy, sinful and full of grace. Compromise, in this story, as in most of life, is the triumph of relative wisdom and approximate justice. And while it doesn't, in and of itself, solve the whole problem, it is a step toward reconciliation, a step toward relationship. It is a beginning, and it is a beginning that God blesses. The promise for the future lies in dedicated, thoughtful people taking small, productive and concrete steps toward God's vision for a world of loving relationships.

Hence the cheesy title, if you've read it. The "promise" in "compromise," if you will, is that God is with us. God remains with the families of Jacob and Joseph and Reuben and all the brothers. God remains with us as we work to live out our callings in the midst of things. Even when the best we can offer is a simple compromise, a single step, if we are doing it with relationship in mind, we are doing God's work, and God is with us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.