

Reprise Joseph: 1. Broken
Genesis 27:2b-4
April 30, 2017
Pastor Steve Richards

The story of Joseph takes us back to a period in history 1700 years before the birth of Jesus. It was a time before books – when stories from history were not written but told over and over again at night around campfires, passed from one generation to the next. The story of Joseph was meant to amuse and entertain and also teach lessons about morals. It was a way of remembering who they were and how they got to where they were. And as I hope we discover, this story is our story too.

The story begins with Joseph's father, named Jacob and later known as Israel. Jacob's story was every bit as messy as any reality show that catches people's attention today. When they were children, Jacob and his twin brother, Esau, competed for their father's affections. Jacob, whose name means "trickster" tricks Esau out of his inheritance and is forced to run to a distant land when Esau threatens to kill him because of what Jacob has done. Jacob ends up working for his uncle Laban whose daughter, Rachel, catches his eye. He is given permission to marry Rachel but the morning after the wedding, Jacob realizes he has been tricked into marrying Rachel's older and less attractive sister, Leah. How is it possible that he didn't know who he was marrying? I suspect he had little too much to drink at the wedding. Jacob works for his father-in-law seven more years for the right to marry Rachel. So he is married to both Leah and Rachel. Leah can have children but Rachel can't. There is tension between the sisters as they compete to be Jacob's favorite at a time when a woman's ability to have children was an indication of her worth and value. Leah has babies, and Rachel feels like a failure. So Rachel comes up with a plan for Jacob to sleep with her servant named Bilhah, and she will give Jacob children through her servant. But when Leah sees that Bilhah is now having babies, she gets nervous because she has stopped having babies. So she gives her servant Zilpah to Jacob, and Zilpah starts having babies. Then finally, in Jacob's old age, Rachel has a son. This is Jacob's eleventh son, named Joseph. Later Rachel dies in childbirth giving birth to Jacob's final son, Benjamin.

Can you imagine growing up in this family? Jacob, four wives, and twelve sons.

The problem was not that Jacob loved one son more than the others but that he told his sons that Joseph was his favorite – showering Joseph with gifts that none of the others received. Clearly Jacob had not read any parenting books. Most parents learn that you tell your children: "I love you all the same." We know not to favor one above the others, otherwise your children get hurt – and like Jacob, most of us learn how to be parents from watching our own parents, and what we see in this story is how that hurt gets passed from one generation to the next. There are times when families gather for the reading of the will and in what they hear or don't hear, the family is broken apart – because even in death one child was favored. What are you doing so that the pain from your childhood is not passed to your children and grandchildren?

Not only is Joseph despised by his brother for the favoritism he receives, but Joseph has dreams in which he sees his other brothers bowing down to him. If you ever have dreams like that, do not tell your other siblings. But Joseph does. He says, "The dreams are so real, and you all bowed down to me. Isn't that a great dream?!" No. In fact their resentment turns to hate, and one day Jacob tells Joseph to go check up on his brothers. When they see Joseph coming to check up on them one more time, can you sense their comments? "I hate him. I hate the way he gets special treatment. I hate how he keeps telling Dad about us. I hate the coat. I hate how he

thinks he will rule over us. I want him dead. Let's kill him." Does that ever happen? One sibling wanting to hurt another – wanting him or her out of the family.

I think this story is meant to teach us about the damage that can be done when sibling rivalry gets out of control. I am the oldest of four siblings. My oldest sister was two years behind me in school, and when she reached high school, she was in the school band with me. I remember one evening at the dinner table, she said, "You weren't in band today. Where were you?" I had skipped school with my friends Dale and Glenn but I wasn't going to tell her that. Thinking I didn't hear her she asked again. And both parents stopped eating and waited for my answer, and all I wanted in that moment was to be an only child. Or I remember times when one of our daughters would get something or have some opportunity and the other would say, "That's not fair. Why don't I get that." Parents do you ever hear that – she got a phone, what about me? She got to stay up late, what about me. You gave her a car, what about me. And sometimes this rivalry and bitterness continues throughout our lives. It's not fair.

I think the story of Joseph is teaching us that if this rivalry continues, it turns to bitterness – and the things we do to hurt each other must stop. If you don't forgive but hold on to resentment, horrible things can happen. I wonder: Do any of us need to reach out to a sibling or to a child and say, "I'm sorry for the ways I hurt you in the past." Or, "I've held onto resentment because of the way mom or dad seemed to favor you and yet you are the only brother I have – can we try again?"

Life is not turning out the way that Joseph thought it would, but he decides to trust God. He is taken to Egypt and sold as a slave to a man name Potiphar. He's been the favored son of an important family in Canaan and now he's a slave in a foreign land. How would you respond to this kind of change? You had a job at this level, and now you have one at this level. Some people get angry at God. Why didn't God prevent this or fix this? But Joseph trusts God and decides to be the very best slave in Potiphar's house. "I don't want to be here but here I am." And Genesis tells us God blessed Joseph and when Potiphar saw how Joseph was doing what he told to do, he is given more responsibilities. He's moving up. But then the story takes an unexpected turn. [slide] **Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph...** (Genesis 39:7) [camera] Joseph rejects her advances, but she is persistent. He says "No. This would displease God." But she becomes so angry that one day she takes Joseph's cloak and when Potiphar comes home she hands him the cloak and says "your servant tried to force himself on me and when I screamed, he ran but I held on to his cloak." And Potiphar took Joseph and put him in prison. Sometimes you can do all the right things and still get hurt. You do something for all the right reasons and end up in a prison cell.

Have you ever been in your own prison cell? You did all the right things. You went to church, gave money, helped others, read your Bible, prayed and the divorce papers came anyway or the layoff notice came or you receive a diagnosis of cancer or someone lied about you and you were the one to get hurt. All of us will find ourselves in a dark place at some point, but does Joseph turn his back on God? I did my best – I did the right thing – God where are you? Sad, hurt, and broken – but still Joseph trusts. [slide] **While Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him** (Genesis 39:20b-21) [camera]

It's not that God sold him into slavery. His brothers did that. It's not that God put him in prison. Potiphar's wife did that. God didn't want this to happen, but God also did not prevent it from happening. God's way in this world is not to stop bad people from doing bad things. Storms come. The economy slows down. A car runs a stop sign and hits your car. Cells in the body go

haywire. That's the world we live in. God doesn't make these things happen, but God walks with us. God was with Joseph, and God remains with us. We are not ever alone.

We all walk into some sort of prison cell and what do we do if we don't have God to hold on to? We pray for miracles, and once in a while there is a miracle but not very often. That's why they are called miracles. Mostly God works through people. Fourteen months ago when Amanda and I faced her diagnosis of cancer, it felt like everything we had worked for was being ripped away from us – that even God had let go of us – but you showed us otherwise. You didn't let us go. You didn't let us forget that we are loved and there would be a better day. You became the physical presence of God in our lives. No matter the darkness, God will be with you – and God will use you to be a strength and help in someone's life.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of April 30, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Lord God, thank you for your steadfast love. Thank you that when I am faithful to you, and even when I wander away, you are always loyal to me and waiting to direct my life's path. Amen.

Monday, May 1

(Joseph's story is one of the most entertaining and moving stories in the Bible. Read the first part quickly today, the way you'd read a short story. The rest of the week, we will look at parts of the story in more detail.)

Scripture: Genesis 30:22-24, 37:1-36, 39:1-23

Then God remembered Rachel, responded to her, and let her conceive. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, "God has taken away my shame." She named him Joseph, saying to herself, May the LORD give me another son.

Jacob lived in the land of Canaan where his father was an immigrant. This is the account of Jacob's descendants. Joseph was 17 years old and tended the flock with his brothers. While he was helping the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives, Joseph told their father unflattering things about them. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he was born when Jacob was old. Jacob had made for him a long robe. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him and couldn't even talk nicely to him. Joseph had a dream and told it to his brothers, which made them hate him even more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had. When we were binding stalks of grain in the field, my stalk got up and stood upright, while your stalks gathered around it and bowed down to my stalk." His brothers said to him, "Will you really be our king and rule over us?" So they hated him even more because of the dreams he told them. Then Joseph had another dream and described it to his brothers: "I've just dreamed again, and this time the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." When he described it to his father and brothers, his father scolded him and said to him, "What kind of dreams have you dreamed? Am I and your mother and your brothers supposed to come and bow down to the ground in front of you?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father took careful note of the matter. Joseph's brothers went to tend their father's flocks near Shechem. Israel said to Joseph, "Aren't your brothers tending the sheep near Shechem? Come, I'll send you to them." And he said, "I'm ready." Jacob said to him, "Go! Find out how your brothers are and how the flock is, and report back to me." So Jacob sent him from the Hebron Valley. When he approached Shechem, a man found him wandering in the field and asked him, "What are you looking for?" Joseph said, "I'm looking for my brothers. Tell me, where are they tending the sheep?" The man said, "They left

here. I heard them saying, 'Let's go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them in Dothan. They saw Joseph in the distance before he got close to them, and they plotted to kill him. The brothers said to each other, "Here comes the big dreamer. Come on now, let's kill him and throw him into one of the cisterns, and we'll say a wild animal devoured him. Then we will see what becomes of his dreams!" When Reuben heard what they said, he saved him from them, telling them, "Let's not take his life." Reuben said to them, "Don't spill his blood! Throw him into this desert cistern, but don't lay a hand on him." He intended to save Joseph from them and take him back to his father. When Joseph reached his brothers, they stripped off Joseph's long robe, took him, and threw him into the cistern, an empty cistern with no water in it. When they sat down to eat, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with camels carrying sweet resin, medicinal resin, and fragrant resin on their way down to Egypt. Judah said to his brothers, "What do we gain if we kill our brother and hide his blood? Come on, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites. Let's not harm him because he's our brother; he's family." His brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the cistern. They sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver, and they brought Joseph to Egypt. When Reuben returned to the cistern and found that Joseph wasn't in it, he tore his clothes. Then he returned to his brothers and said, "The boy's gone! And I—where can I go now?" His brothers took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a male goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the long robe, brought it to their father, and said, "We found this. See if it's your son's robe or not." He recognized it and said, "It's my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him. Joseph must have been torn to pieces!" Then Jacob tore his clothes, put a simple mourning cloth around his waist, and mourned for his son for many days. All of his sons and daughters got up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted, telling them, "I'll go to my grave mourning for my son." And Joseph's father wept for him. Meanwhile the Midianites had sold Joseph to the Egyptians, to Potiphar, Pharaoh's chief officer, commander of the royal guard.

When Joseph had been taken down to Egypt, Potiphar, Pharaoh's chief officer, the commander of the royal guard and an Egyptian, purchased him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man and served in his Egyptian master's household. His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made everything he did successful. Potiphar thought highly of Joseph, and Joseph became his assistant; he appointed Joseph head of his household and put everything he had under Joseph's supervision. From the time he appointed Joseph head of his household and of everything he had, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's household because of Joseph. The LORD blessed everything he had, both in the household and in the field. So he handed over everything he had to Joseph and didn't pay attention to anything except the food he ate. Now Joseph was well-built and handsome. Some time later, his master's wife became attracted to Joseph and said, "Sleep with me." He refused and said to his master's wife, "With me here, my master doesn't pay attention to anything in his household; he's put everything he has under my supervision. No one is greater than I am in this household, and he hasn't denied me anything except you, since you are his wife. How could I do this terrible thing and sin against God?" Every single day she tried to convince him, but he wouldn't agree to sleep with her or even to be with her. One day when Joseph arrived at the house to do his work, none of the household's men were there. She grabbed his garment, saying, "Lie down with me." But he left his garment in her hands and ran outside. When she realized that he had left his garment in her hands and run outside, she summoned the men of her house and said to them, "Look, my husband brought us a Hebrew to ridicule us. He came to me to lie down with me, but I screamed. When he heard me raise my voice and scream, he left his garment with me and ran outside." She kept his garment with her until Joseph's master came home, and she told him the same thing: "The Hebrew slave whom you brought to us, to ridicule me, came to me; but when I

raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment with me and ran outside." When Joseph's master heard the thing that his wife told him, "This is what your servant did to me," he was incensed. Joseph's master took him and threw him in jail, the place where the king's prisoners were held. While he was in jail, the LORD was with Joseph and remained loyal to him. He caused the jail's commander to think highly of Joseph. The jail's commander put all of the prisoners in the jail under Joseph's supervision, and he was the one who determined everything that happened there. The jail's commander paid no attention to anything under Joseph's supervision, because the LORD was with him and made everything he did successful.

Observation: Joseph's story came very early in Israel's history. Abraham was Joseph's great-grandfather, so he arrived only four generations into Genesis' epic story. Jacob made some serious mistakes as a father, and relations between Joseph and his brothers were far more strained than any family would wish. But after a rocky start, we also see that Joseph showed strong character and resilience.

Application: In Genesis 37 and 39, we see that Joseph moved from being a rather spoiled, arrogant kid to a slave who rose above his tragic circumstances and won the trust of his Egyptian masters. How might Joseph have been tempted to spend his days in Egypt sulking and feeling depressed? What do you believe kept him from doing that?

Prayer: Lord God, you call me to be part of this epic story you are writing in human history. Please work in my life, leading me beyond my flaws, as you did in the life of Joseph so long ago. Amen.

Tuesday, May 2

Scripture: Genesis 37:2-11

This is the account of Jacob's descendants. Joseph was 17 years old and tended the flock with his brothers. While he was helping the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives, Joseph told their father unflattering things about them. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he was born when Jacob was old. Jacob had made for him a long robe. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him and couldn't even talk nicely to him. Joseph had a dream and told it to his brothers, which made them hate him even more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had. When we were binding stalks of grain in the field, my stalk got up and stood upright, while your stalks gathered around it and bowed down to my stalk." His brothers said to him, "Will you really be our king and rule over us?" So they hated him even more because of the dreams he told them. Then Joseph had another dream and described it to his brothers: "I've just dreamed again, and this time the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." When he described it to his father and brothers, his father scolded him and said to him, "What kind of dreams have you dreamed? Am I and your mother and your brothers supposed to come and bow down to the ground in front of you?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father took careful note of the matter.

Observation: Rachel was Jacob's favorite wife (Genesis 29:16-30) which is why he favored Joseph, Rachel's first son. The "dreamcoat" showed Joseph's favored status. Family therapists today know that being a "chosen child" like Joseph often skews emotional growth and relationships. Joseph's strutting misuse of his ability to receive and interpret dreams eventually upset even Jacob.

Application: It's so easy (and at times fun!) to feel superior to others, as Joseph did. But our faith teaches us that all lives have value and dignity, and calls us to honor that. Are you able to

see clearly the value in your own gifts and temperament, and in those of others? Choose one thing you will do this week to show respect to a person to whom you are tempted to feel superior.

Prayer: Lord God, whether as a parent, a sibling, a grandparent or in any other capacity, help me to honor and value each one of your children I have a chance to influence. Help me find healing in you for any wounds I carry from earlier life experiences. Amen.

Wednesday, May 3

Scripture: Genesis 37:12-20

Joseph's brothers went to tend their father's flocks near Shechem. Israel said to Joseph, "Aren't your brothers tending the sheep near Shechem? Come, I'll send you to them." And he said, "I'm ready." Jacob said to him, "Go! Find out how your brothers are and how the flock is, and report back to me." So Jacob sent him from the Hebron Valley. When he approached Shechem, a man found him wandering in the field and asked him, "What are you looking for?" Joseph said, "I'm looking for my brothers. Tell me, where are they tending the sheep?" The man said, "They left here. I heard them saying, 'Let's go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them in Dothan. They saw Joseph in the distance before he got close to them, and they plotted to kill him. The brothers said to each other, "Here comes the big dreamer. Come on now, let's kill him and throw him into one of the cisterns, and we'll say a wild animal devoured him. Then we will see what becomes of his dreams!"

Observation: As the lyrics in *Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat* say, "Jacob could not see the danger." He naively sent Joseph to visit his brothers, far from home. They acted on their outrage at the way their brother lorded it over them and their father undervalued them. In a reflection of the primitive, violent ethics they saw in the cultures around them, they wanted to kill Joseph.

Application: Put yourself in Joseph's shoes. Life has been easy. There are stresses between you and your brothers, but they're still your brothers and you can trust them, right? Wrong. Those closest to him betrayed Joseph terribly. Have you ever felt the pain of betrayal? Did that experience tend to weaken or strengthen your faith? In what ways has surviving that painful time helped you grow stronger?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, people betrayed you, but you did not allow that to knock you off course. Help me find in your love the source of strength to move beyond any pain I experience from others. Amen.

Thursday, May 4

Scripture: Genesis 37:21-36

When Reuben heard what they said, he saved him from them, telling them, "Let's not take his life." Reuben said to them, "Don't spill his blood! Throw him into this desert cistern, but don't lay a hand on him." He intended to save Joseph from them and take him back to his father. When Joseph reached his brothers, they stripped off Joseph's long robe, took him, and threw him into the cistern, an empty cistern with no water in it. When they sat down to eat, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with camels carrying sweet resin, medicinal resin, and fragrant resin on their way down to Egypt. Judah said to his brothers, "What do we gain if we kill our brother and hide his blood? Come on, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites. Let's not harm him because he's our brother; he's family." His brothers agreed. When some Midianite

traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the cistern. They sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver, and they brought Joseph to Egypt. When Reuben returned to the cistern and found that Joseph wasn't in it, he tore his clothes. Then he returned to his brothers and said, "The boy's gone! And I—where can I go now?" His brothers took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a male goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the long robe, brought it to their father, and said, "We found this. See if it's your son's robe or not." He recognized it and said, "It's my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him. Joseph must have been torn to pieces!" Then Jacob tore his clothes, put a simple mourning cloth around his waist, and mourned for his son for many days. All of his sons and daughters got up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted, telling them, "I'll go to my grave mourning for my son." And Joseph's father wept for him. Meanwhile the Midianites had sold Joseph to the Egyptians, to Potiphar, Pharaoh's chief officer, commander of the royal guard.

Observation: Older brothers Reuben and Judah talked the brothers out of killing Joseph outright. Instead, they sold Joseph to traders going to Egypt. Their choice was only slightly better—as the traders took Joseph away, the brothers pretty clearly assumed they would never see him again. They dipped Joseph's distinctive coat in animal blood, and tricked Jacob (something he'd often done to others). He believed his favorite was dead, and mourned the loss bitterly.

Application: Reuben and Judah had enough moral courage to stand up to their brothers and say, "No, don't kill Joseph. We don't want blood on our hands." On the other hand, they didn't have the courage to say, "Dad, Joseph isn't dead. We sold him to traders going to Egypt." How morally courageous are you? In what areas do you want to become braver?

Prayer: O God, free me from the desire for revenge on others. Instead, give me the moral courage to stand for what is right, especially on behalf of those who are powerless. Amen.

Friday, May 5

Scripture: Genesis 39:1-6

When Joseph had been taken down to Egypt, Potiphar, Pharaoh's chief officer, the commander of the royal guard and an Egyptian, purchased him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man and served in his Egyptian master's household. His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made everything he did successful. Potiphar thought highly of Joseph, and Joseph became his assistant; he appointed Joseph head of his household and put everything he had under Joseph's supervision. From the time he appointed Joseph head of his household and of everything he had, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's household because of Joseph. The LORD blessed everything he had, both in the household and in the field. So he handed over everything he had to Joseph and didn't pay attention to anything except the food he ate. Now Joseph was well-built and handsome.

Observation: A spoiled son of privilege became a slave in a foreign land. How would a story like that play out? Somewhat surprisingly, instead of sinking into depression and bitterness, Joseph became a man of such capable integrity that Potiphar, his Egyptian master, "put everything he had under Joseph's supervision." But Genesis didn't just say, "Joseph was amazing." Instead, the historian said, "The Lord was with Joseph."

Application: When Joseph became a slave in Egypt, all hope for a productive life must have seemed lost. Instead, as he rose to trust and influence in Potiphar's household, Genesis said

God's power was at work. The apostle Paul exclaimed: "God's riches, wisdom, and knowledge are so deep! They are as mysterious as his judgments, and they are as hard to track as his paths!" (Romans 11:33) When has God carried you through a painful or challenging time? When have you seen God work in ways mysterious to human wisdom?

Prayer: Lord God, in whatever I do, at work, in school, in my household, I ask for your presence to be with me and to guide me in making my efforts effective in serving and blessing others. Amen.

Saturday, May 6

Scripture: Genesis 39:7-23

Some time later, his master's wife became attracted to Joseph and said, "Sleep with me." He refused and said to his master's wife, "With me here, my master doesn't pay attention to anything in his household; he's put everything he has under my supervision. No one is greater than I am in this household, and he hasn't denied me anything except you, since you are his wife. How could I do this terrible thing and sin against God?" Every single day she tried to convince him, but he wouldn't agree to sleep with her or even to be with her. One day when Joseph arrived at the house to do his work, none of the household's men were there. She grabbed his garment, saying, "Lie down with me." But he left his garment in her hands and ran outside. When she realized that he had left his garment in her hands and run outside, she summoned the men of her house and said to them, "Look, my husband brought us a Hebrew to ridicule us. He came to me to lie down with me, but I screamed. When he heard me raise my voice and scream, he left his garment with me and ran outside." She kept his garment with her until Joseph's master came home, and she told him the same thing: "The Hebrew slave whom you brought to us, to ridicule me, came to me; but when I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment with me and ran outside." When Joseph's master heard the thing that his wife told him, "This is what your servant did to me," he was incensed. Joseph's master took him and threw him in jail, the place where the king's prisoners were held. While he was in jail, the LORD was with Joseph and remained loyal to him. He caused the jail's commander to think highly of Joseph. The jail's commander put all of the prisoners in the jail under Joseph's supervision, and he was the one who determined everything that happened there. The jail's commander paid no attention to anything under Joseph's supervision, because the LORD was with him and made everything he did successful.

Observation: Joseph greatly impressed Potiphar, his Egyptian master. Unfortunately, he also greatly impressed Potiphar's wife. It must have been clear to Joseph, a Hebrew slave, that this woman could cause him problems. Nevertheless, he refused to betray his master's trust, and rebuffed her advances. Doing the right thing left her holding the garment he abandoned to escape her. She created a "she said-he said" situation, Potiphar had little choice but to believe his wife (even if he didn't believe her), and sent Joseph to prison. Despite the bad turn of events, Joseph also greatly impressed the jail's commander.

Application: Joseph, knowing how much Potiphar trusted him, might well have gotten some sensual pleasure and kept his position at the head of the household. But he refused to betray Potiphar's trust, and it cost him—outwardly, at least. Have you ever chosen not to do something wrong, even though you could "get away with it"? As you look back, are you glad you preserved your integrity or not? How much do you trust that the Lord remains loyal to you in all circumstances?

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for your steadfast love. Thank you that when I am faithful, and even when I wander away, you are always loyal to me and waiting to direct my life's path. Amen.