

Uncle Jack and the Oranges. A sermon preached at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC July 2, 2017 by Rev. Herb Hilder. The first in a series on the life of Joseph.

Lesson: GENESIS 37

Previously in Genesis – the Jacob cycle of stories
The mess of pottage exchanged for a birthright –
Esau duped by Brother Jacob

The trickery around the blessing from father Isaac –
again Esau duped by Brother Jacob

Aided and abetted by mother Rebekah.

The necessity of escape from Esau's rage at being
duped twice brings Jacob into contact with his uncle
Laban – a master trickster.

Two wives, several children by not only wives Leah
and Rachel, but their maids Bilhah and Zilpah –
who says the Bible is dull!!

Jacob returns to his homeland to resolve and try to
make peace with Brother Esau

Though, not before that powerful nighttime
drama on the banks of the Jabbok river where Jacob
wrestles with –an angel, a man, himself until dawn.

Reconciliation happens between brothers
Esau and Jacob – though they never do live as
neighbours

We never hear about Esau again – but we will certainly hear about Jacob’s sons – for it is their treatment of favoured step Brother Joseph that propels Joseph into Egypt.

So that is the story we will be retelling this summer – the story of Joseph – summarized so well by yet another of California artist John Swanson’s lithographs.

The Joseph story is a great story
Every time we go back to these Genesis stories I believe something new is revealed – something you have never seen about yourself
Something you have never realized or have forgotten about God
And something new about the relationship between you and God.

Some things to circle in this first chapter of the Joseph story

- Joseph’s favoured child status. Joseph is the oldest of the children born by Jacob’s beloved Rachel. By the time the writer of chapter 37 begins the Joseph story, Rachel has died many years before. So Joseph has become very special, very favoured, very spoiled.
- Joseph’s dreams. In chapter 37 the dreams fuel the brothers’ fury. For Joseph has not yet learned the proper handling and timing of this divine power. At other times in the story, they will provide Joseph’s salvation and a

country's salvation, as he begins to speak of and interpret his dreams in a timelier manner.

- Jacob's disengagement to obvious tensions between his sons. Is this disengagement a result of latent and unresolved grief over Rachel's death? We are not told. We are only told of Jacob's obtuseness in dealing with the dynamics among his sons.

WE shall see these things running through the Joseph story.

And it is one of the most finely crafted stories in the Bible.

We are reading a story from a master story teller.

There is drama, twists, turns, suspense, sex, reconciliation and depth

There is jealousy, rage, lust, fear and sadness.

If your memories and knowledge of the story rests exclusively on what you heard in Sunday school,

Be prepared to be surprised and shocked.

For the Sunday school curricula do not include – and probably for good and sufficient reasons – stories like next week's – Joseph in the house of Potiphar.

Will you do something with me? Will you re-read the story of Joseph – 13 chapters -37-50 for there is something about reading and hearing and thinking about Bible stories in a community of faith

Certainly you can read it in the version it was read this morning – the NRSV

But perhaps to see the story in a different way – secure if you do not have one,
Or go online to biblegateway.com and read the story as retold by Eugene Peterson in the Message.

I have made some old school paper copies for you and put them on the lobby or narthex table,
If more are needed – I will make more copies.

To the opening of Joseph the dreamer's story.

My vocation as a parish minister calls me to among other things listen and tell stories – specifically how the Bible's story intersects in our lives and how our lives intersect with the Bible's story.

I do this in formal settings like worship or in informal settings like Second Cup, Starbucks or Denny's
I listen, hopefully in a non-judgmental way, as I hear life stories and experiences that are joyous and happy and uplifting,
And stories that are upsetting, unnerving and just plain sad.

After many years of listening, I have come to many conclusions – one being that ALL families experience tension and sibling rivalry
ALL families often handle things and react to things from generational experiences and memories

No family is without its issues and problems are they?

Look at this family to which we are introduced in chapter 37 of Genesis – inheritors of God’s promise to Abraham – no less

There is a disengaged Dad,

A set of brothers whose jealousy over one of their step brothers – Joseph – has been left uncorrected and undisciplined

There is the favored son Joseph who truly is a real little piece of work at this point!

It is not a case if something nasty should happen – it is when!

Over and over again, the Biblical story consistently portrays the family not as a Norman Rockwell group beaming in gratitude around a Thanksgiving turkey,
But as *series of broken relationships in need of redemption.*

From the get go in the Bible there are no exemplary families

Adam and Eve are no sooner out of the garden than their children get into a fight.

Jacob and Esau’s bitter rivalry continues into generations.

Jesse’s sons, brave and loyal in the service of their country, but are cruel to their youngest brother, David.

David is unfortunate in both wives and children – he is a man after God’s own heart and Israel’s greatest king – but he cannot manage his own household.

Even in the family of Jesus, where we might expect something different,

It is the same story.

In Mark’s Gospel-the 3rd chapter – Jesus is active, healing the sick, comforting the distressed and fulfilling his calling as Messiah.

Outside, his mother and his brothers are trying to get him to come home, quite sure Jesus is crazy!

In the scriptures then, while there are many references to family life,

Good counsel given to family living,

That guides the growth of families.

However, there is not a single model family for anyone to look up to in either awe or envy!

Is this discouraging? No.

Actually I find this quite hopeful

For it reminds me that as I look at this family in Genesis 37 and how God’s purposes prevail even in a train wreck of a family,

I am reminded and heartened to know that there is no pit where the love of God is not deeper still.

We serve a God who takes messes and turns them into miracles.

We each need redemption desperately.

We all need God to intervene in our lives.

A long time before we had children of our own, a wise preacher said that he and his wife had raised 6 children.

Children he said are given to us not only so we can teach them.

No children are given by God so that we can learn more about ourselves and learn to lean on God more! How so very true – yes?

Another truth that emerges from chapter 37 is *the danger of showing continual favoritism toward one of the children to the almost exclusion of every other child in the family.*

As you know, I do not have brothers or sisters,

So the truth of sibling rivalry I have no firsthand experience.

Though as parent of 2 children I have over the years witnessed firsthand Ruth and Jane express differing views and opinions in high volume and great conviction that the other is wrong and they are right!!

Here in the Joseph story there are frightening examples of how unattended and undisciplined family life can be corrosive not only to the immediate family structure,
But of life itself.

'Uncle Jack and the Oranges' remains part of my family's history.

It is sad story ...for behavior like this poisoned the relationships my Dad might have had with his two brothers.

It is a story that first came to my attention the night before my Dad's funeral in 1984.

A small number of family had gathered at my family home and over glasses of ice tea, those gathered did what all such gatherings invite one to do.

We shared stories about my Dad and how we would remember him.

They were for the most part funny stories, endearing stories, stories of how my Dad had touched the lives of so many

My Dad would have loved the occasion, for he himself was a great story teller.

In a moment of quiet after uproarious laughter, mixed with tears of grief, Uncle Jack,--now the surviving brother the 3 Hilder boys, said," Ed (my Dad) always got the oranges – I HATED him for that.

Those sorts of sentences have the power of stopping the flow of conversation.

None of us gathered had a clue about what he was speaking.

In fact, we realized in milliseconds that the last time he had been in our home was over a decade before.

There had been porch and quick visits, for he lived
 in a neighbouring city,
 But for over 10 years, he had never spent any length
 of time with his brother.

Watching my uncle's body language with its
 pulsating neck veins and tightly gripping hands,
 And listening to his inflections as he told the story,
*It was evident that he was reliving a very painful
 memory.*

We were not in June 1984 – we were back in a
 Welland summer in the late 1920's

Uncle Jack was not a 65 year old dressed in a
 tailored seersucker suit, silk tie and bespoke shoes
 For all intent and purposes he has a 10 year old in
 shorts, argyle socks, checked short sleeve shirt and
 buster brown shoes!

He told us how many times Mother (my
 grandmother Hilder) told him to drop or stop
 whatever he was doing,
 Bike down to the local green grocer and get an
 orange for Edwin (my Dad)
 One nickel was then placed in Uncle Jack's hand.

When Jack returned,
 He gave the orange to his Mother who in turn gave
 it to my Dad adding words "This is Edwin's orange
 Jack – go back to what it was that you were doing"
 "I hated Ed for that", Jack continued. He always got
 the oranges!

Wow, more than half a century of churning
and jealousy,
Of sheer hate!

Uncle Jack left our house shortly after,
but I remember when he did, the conversation
turned from memories about my Dad to beginning
to process the story we had just heard.

My grandmother was not a malicious woman
who was single-mindedly determined to
emotionally cripple three sons or feed natural
sibling rivalry.

In fact, my standing memories of her are that she
made great ginger snaps and raisin cookies,
Treated us many times to Sunday dinner in Niagara
Falls,
And could hit a mean baseball,

Like each of us though, she had
unhealed childhood hurts and pain that she carried
all her life

She bought those old and unresolved hurts and
memories into her marriage,
As did my grandfather.

My Dad's early childhood bronchial
issues as well as being the first born set him up to
be a possible most favored child
Yet, it need not have been automatic.
Sadly though it came to be the case – Dad was the
favoured child, young adult, etc...

My grandparents did little or nothing to mitigate or emphasize fairness in raising “the boys”.

The result – sibling rivalry between the boys lasted a lifetime – with one consequence that I only really knew 1 of my first cousins on my Dad’s side

And nothing of Uncle Jack’s death 6 years ago until I heard about it last year.

What a family!!

It is easy in hindsight to point fingers isn’t it?

Grandmother Hilder could have said

- Edwin, here is an orange for you and Jack to share OR
- Jack, please go to the grocery store and get two oranges – one for Edwin and one for yourself.

But she did not. And not once but every time...

And that action worked on my Uncle Jack over 50 years – *he HATED his brother, because he always got the oranges*

Left on its own, to seek its own level, unattended, undisciplined and uncorrected sibling rivalry is corrosive to family structures and peoples’ lives in the present and often into succeeding generations.

A final reminder for this morning is that we must *never equate God’s silence to mean he is absent.*

God is not formally named in chapter 37

But as you come to the end of the Joseph story and look backward in the story, clearly God's hand is very much present from the beginning.

The road ahead for Joseph is long and winding
There will be life in the pits days (some literally)
But there will also be days when Joseph knows he is doing the right thing for the right reason.
There are days when he feels God particularly close.

Though the specifics are different, Joseph's story is much like ours is it not?

Sometimes, life is the pits

Yet are not such times balanced by moments of heightened awareness of the nearness and presence of God

Thin places where we are particularly aware of God's guiding and supporting presence?

It's a great story, and we have only just begun...

AMEN