

## *Winning at Family*

3<sup>rd</sup> Weekend after the Epiphany – January 21/22, 2006

### Sermon Background Study

Genesis 50:15-26 (NRSV)

<sup>15</sup>Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" <sup>16</sup>So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, <sup>17</sup>'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. <sup>18</sup>Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." <sup>19</sup>But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup>Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. <sup>21</sup>So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

<sup>22</sup>So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's household; and Joseph lived one hundred ten years.

<sup>23</sup>Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation; the children of Machir son of Manasseh were also born on Joseph's knees.

<sup>24</sup>Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." <sup>25</sup>So Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying, "When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here." <sup>26</sup>And Joseph died, being one hundred ten years old; he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

*Families are messy. Extended families are messier. Sometimes we are tempted to think that the problems and issues in our own family are unique, that we are the only family with skeletons in the closet. But the truth is that all families are beset by problems. Genesis tells the story of Abraham's family over five generations. Even a casual reading reveals a family marked by treachery and love, jealousy and commitment, deceit and faith.*

*"Messy" is hardly the word*

How could things have gotten so bad between Joseph and his brothers? Is it really all about a dream and a father's favoritism? The story of Abraham's family helps us understand that there is much more to this. So let's try to imagine some of the family dynamics among the twelve brothers.

Their grandmother, Rebekah, who had waited twenty years to have a child, conspired with their father, Jacob, to steal from their grandfather, Isaac, the birthright and blessing of their uncle, Esau. When Esau threatens to kill his brother for the theft, their father flees to Haran. I can imagine the stories that were told about that sordid episode. What were things really like between Isaac and Rebekah after the theft, or between Rebekah and her son, Esau? What were the grandchildren told about this? By whom?

#### Reading Genesis 1-11

When we began reading *Thru the Bible*, I invited you to send me questions that we could address as we move through the year. Not surprisingly, I received a lot of very thoughtful questions about Genesis 1-11.

Many of the questions go back to how we understand these opening chapters. Are they a reporting of events that actually occurred in the lives of people who lived in the same way that you and I live? Or rather, as Agnes Norfleet puts it in the *Renovare* Spiritual Formation Bible (p. 14 -15), are these chapters a prehistory in which "the individuals in these early stories, such as Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel, and Noah, are larger-than life archetypes representing the complex relationship between humankind and God."

Let's make this more concrete. If we had a time machine, could we find Adam and Eve? My wife thinks she could find them. I think not. I agree with Agnes Norfleet. My wife does not. But it is important to realize that no matter which direction you go on this, you run into some problems.

For example, let's say you think that the time machine could find Adam and Eve. Questions begin to pop up like this perennial favorite: "Where did Cain's wife come from?"

Christians have proposed answers to these and many other questions that follow from a "literal"<sup>1</sup> understanding of Genesis 1-11.

Problems like Cain's wife don't really come up if you agree with Ms. Norfleet. But the big problem that comes up instead is this: when can we rely on the "facts" in the Bible and when can't we? In other words, when is it history and when is it not. Nobody reads the whole Bible literally. No one thinks that Jesus' parables relate actual events. No one thinks Jesus really means he is a vine (John 15). The first is an illustration, the second a metaphor. But David was the king of Israel. Jesus was crucified and resurrected. Those are historical events. So how do we go about this work of interpretation? How do we tell a metaphor from an historical event?

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1. I don't really like to use "literal," but I do because everyone does and I think I know what they mean.

When Jacob gets to Haran and meets his uncle, Laban, the tables are turned. This time, Jacob is the deceived rather than the deceiver. Though Jacob loves Laban's daughter, Rachel, he is tricked into first marrying her older sister, Leah, whom he does not love and never will. Jacob presses on in his quest to marry Rachel and ends up marrying both sisters, setting off a tragically hostile rivalry between them.

Because Leah was unloved, God blessed her with a child and then another . . . and another . . . and another. Four sons in all ~ while Rachel remained childless. Envious of her sister, Rachel sends in her maid to get pregnant by Jacob. Bilhah has two sons which Rachel can legally claim as her own. Fearing that she will fall behind in the baby race, Leah sends in her own maid, Zilpah, who has two sons. Leah

herself then gives birth to two more sons and a daughter named Dinah. After all this, God finally blesses Rachel with a child of her own, whom she names Joseph.<sup>1</sup>

It is pretty easy to imagine the family dynamics that swirled around those children as they grew up. The accusations that were made. The resentments that were harbored. None of the boys was Joseph's full brother. Only he was the product of Jacob and Rachel's love. Surely, Leah's sons knew that their father didn't love their mother. The cycle of deceit and envy that began with Esau and Jacob reaches its full fruit when the brothers sell Joseph into slavery, killing him so far as the family is concerned.

*God first . . . family second*

Once, when Mary and Jesus' brothers were waiting to speak with him, Jesus said "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? . . . whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and aunt" (Matthew 12:46-50). The disciples were Jesus' true family. As disciples of Jesus, our own true family is the family of disciples. But what does this mean for our kin, our brothers and aunts and in-laws and the rest?

When Joseph is reunited with his brothers, they fear him, as they should. They have every reason to expect that Joseph, the powerful chief administrator of Egypt, will exact revenge for their evil deed, that their family's cycle of treachery and hostility will roll ever forward.

But the brothers do not know what we, the readers, know. God has been with Joseph in all things and Joseph knows it. Upon the births of his own sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, Joseph says "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house<sup>2</sup> . . . For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortune" (41:51-52).

Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers is God's amazing grace at work in their lives and relationships. It is God who is able to break the cycle of deceit in their family. Winning at family, as with all things, must begin with God. It is God alone who can enable us to set aside our pride, to overlook the wrongs committed against us. It is God who empowers us to embrace and to forgive, time and again if need be, those in our family we love and those we must learn to love.

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All the Bible is literature, incredibly diverse literature at that. There is history, poetry, prophets' oracles, gospel proclamations of Jesus, correspondence, apocalyptic writing, and so on. Each has to be met on its own terms. Some of it is history. Some of it is not. It is all theological. When we profess that the Bible is inspired (a subject for another day), we are claiming that these books are the ones God intends us to have. Not that God dictated it, but that he used the authors, editors, and the rest to give us the writings that we need so that we might learn to know God and how to live out our life with God.

I hold that Genesis 1-11 is narrative theology that tells us a great deal about God, his creation, and ourselves but does not report to us about actual people and actual events that I might come across with my time machine. To me, these first eleven chapters simply read very differently from the story of Abraham that picks up in chapter 12. They are a different sort of literature from what follows. When we come to Abraham we find detail about local customs, history, and geography that are absent from Gen. 1-11.

Consider this. What sort of leaves would be on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Did it really rain for 40 days and nights? That seems like a long time, but it would have to rain at the rate of 30 feet per hour to cover Mt. Everest in 40 days and nights. I guess the underground springs could help but, still, is every 40 in the Bible (and they abound) to be taken literally? What about the sons of God, the daughters of men, and the giants in Genesis 6?

To me, such questions get in the way of the theology . . . what God is seeking to say to us about himself and his creation. My wife and I will someday know who's right about this, but, in truth, I haven't found that it matters all that much. What really matters in these eleven chapters is the theology -- and they are packed with it.

You'll have to decide for yourself what sense you'll make of these chapters. But I sure can't help anyone with the origins of Cain's wife!

<sup>1</sup>Much later, Rachel will die giving birth to a second son, Benjamin (Genesis 35).

<sup>2</sup>Does Joseph really mean that he has forgotten he has brothers and a family? Or does he mean that he has forgotten the cycles of deceit and envy in which he was raised?

## *Thru the Bible* Daily Bible Readings

January 22 - 28

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1 Mark 7-9; Psalm 18:25-50</b> The chapters are a turning point. Jesus heals a blind man (in two stages!) and the disciples will now begin to see the truth themselves.</p>	<p><b>Day 2 Mark 10-12; Psalm 19</b> Jesus foretells his death and resurrection a third time and then comes to Jerusalem for the last week.</p>
<p><b>Day 3 Mark 13-16; Psalm 20</b> The ending of Mark has likely been lost, with neither of the two endings in your Bible, shorter or longer, being original.</p>	<p><b>Day 4 Exodus 1-4; Psalm 21</b> After the Israelites have been seemingly abandoned by God, Moses encounters God at the burning bush and is given a mission, a name, and a promise.</p>
<p><b>Day 5 Exodus 5-8; Psalm 22:1-11</b> Jesus quotes the first verse of Psalm 22 on the cross. How might this psalm help us when we feel cut off from God?</p>	<p><b>Day 6 Exodus 9-11; Psalm 22:12-31</b> The plagues roll on, leading up to the final plague and the Passover.</p>
<p><b>Day 7 - Exodus 12-14; Psalm 23</b></p>	

## Sermon Notes

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### **Reading *Thru the Bible* with us? Got Questions? Want to go deeper?**

When we begin to read the Bible regularly, questions pile up. A good study Bible can help. And our library has some excellent commentaries. But it is very helpful, even essential, to explore these questions with other Christians. In Scott Engle's Sunday morning class we'll be talking each week about the Bible readings from the week before. We'll seek to get a better understanding of the readings and what they mean for us.

We hope you'll join us as we journey through the entire Bible this year.

**Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.**

### **January Book Recommendation**

*Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*, by Anne Rice

Anne Rice is brave if nothing else. This is the story of Jesus at eight – as told by Jesus! I enjoy Anne Rice's writing, but I came to the novel pretty skeptical. To my surprise, I very much enjoyed it. She makes no bones about being a devout Christian and lays out her approach to the historical research in an appendix. She found her way to some reliable New Testament scholars, notably N.T. Wright. She does a good job of giving you a sense of what it was like in Judea and Galilee in Jesus' day. But the parts I liked best were the interiors – what was going on in Jesus' mind as a young boy. Ms. Rice is Catholic so she has to account for the Catholic belief in Mary's perpetual virginity. She also moves a few events and dates around to suit her purposes. But don't let all that put you off. This novel will certainly give you much to ponder and discuss.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

Genesis is filled with stories of family. Not only is it the story of God forming a people, his people ~ his family, it is the sprawling story of Abraham's family, spanning generations and geography. It is a bit like one of those epic family novels that makes it to the bestseller lists from time to time. And like all families, Abraham's is beset by problems in the midst of their joys. Though Abraham has been chosen by God to receive God's covenant, he and his family are not spared jealousies, treacheries, and manipulation. When we read these stories, we quickly see that not every Bible story has a moral, that not every Bible character is a role model for us. Indeed, it can be hard to understand what God might want us to get from some of these stories. Nonetheless, these are our stories. We too are children of Abraham.

You might begin by sharing some of your own family stories. Do you find in the Genesis stories echoes of your own family? How so? Perhaps you have stories of envy or favoritism, even backroom plotting. Where do we find God in the midst of family joys and family concerns? How often do families truly place God first – before all, before anyone? How might we put God back at the center of our families – not just our immediate family but our extended family also. We proclaim to the world that Jesus is Lord, but is he really the Lord of our families? How do we love and live with family members who deny Christ? It is probably helpful to recall the stories from Genesis where God blesses and protects the "outsider," as with Cain and Ishmael.