

Sermon: “Sibling Rivalry, Brotherly Love”

[Genesis 37:1–28]

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And Israel [that is: Jacob] said to Joseph: ‘Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.’ He answered, ‘Here I am.’

When I was in seminary, my pastoral studies professor divided up a reading on sibling birth order among the students. She invited those students who were themselves oldest siblings to read and present to the class the section on oldest siblings; youngest siblings would present on youngest siblings; and middle children — well, we stayed in the middle, as always. Birth order affects social orientation ever after, or so the theory goes; the idea was to help us to understand both ourselves and our future congregants better.

When it came time to present, the professor slyly asked the middle “children” to present first, which we did, dragging ourselves reluctantly to the front of the classroom as the older siblings heckled from the sidelines. The youngest siblings presented next, and it was astonishing to witness the aw-shucks, everyone-loves-us attitude written all over them. Finally — and again slyly — the professor said: “That’s good then! I think we can just leave it there!” And the older siblings, in danger for once of being overlooked, simply erupted.

Of course, the professor was kidding — in order to make a point that instantly became clear. The first-born *did* get to present, and when they did they made visible and real everything that we had read about the effect of birth order. They were confident and organized, forceful, smart, and responsible, like a stage full of operatic tenors. On that day, I finally conceded that there might actually be something to this birth-order thing.

All of us know something about brothers and sisters and how they get along, either through our own experience or through observation or simply through reflection. We have our own stories, varied as they might be, of older and younger and middle children, of only children and twins also. But the Bible was there before us: birth-order dynamics, often involving sibling rivalry, play out again and again in stories from the Bible: stories with older siblings, especially older brothers, who are typically (or stereotypically) responsible, organized, and hard-working; stories with younger siblings who are easy-going, or who

get away with things that others do not. (Middle children, as usual, are simply ignored.)

There's Jacob pulling on his twin Esau's heel as they emerge from the womb, and then stealing his brother's birthright. There are the older sons of Jesse, passed over in favour of the youngest, David (although to be fair, they don't seem to mind!). There's the Prodigal Son, received with joy and undeserved grace while his hardworking and responsible brother looks on resentfully. And yes, there are sisterly examples too: Leah, the older sister, whom Jacob is tricked into marrying, before he is allowed to marry the younger one, Rachel, — the chosen one, the wife of grace and love. And what about Mary and Martha, one of them hard-working and responsible, the other sitting idly at Jesus' feet? The gospels do not tell us which one is older, but can there really be any doubt?

Sibling rivalry is an undercurrent in all of these stories. It emerges especially when there is competition for preference or position, or when there is a scarcity of cherished resources, like blessing, or grace. But sibling rivalry is also balanced by the strong bonds of kinship, shared values, trust, and love. Which is stronger, sibling rivalry or sisterly love, brotherly love? Where does one learn compassion, loyalty, and truth if not among one's kinfolk?

Compassion, loyalty, and truth are not the strong suits of the brothers of Joseph, however, who have been bitten pretty deeply by the sharp tooth of sibling rivalry. They aren't merely frustrated, annoyed, or angry with their kid brother Joseph; they positively hate him.

Joseph is their father Jacob's pet, and because he loves him so much, he keeps him close, enlists him to report on his brothers' doings, and adorns him with a magnificent coat — the coat with long sleeves, and perhaps many colours too. Jacob's tenderness toward Joseph is exactly counterbalanced by the brothers' resentment: the more Jacob loves, the more the brothers hate. They can't even bring themselves to greet Joseph "peaceably," withholding from him the traditional greeting of *shalom*.¹

On top of all of this are the dreams, which Joseph seems quite happy to tell. The dreams themselves are misunderstood, of course, and it is a special irony of this story that they *have* to be told in order to be fulfilled. Their vision of the older brothers bowing down to the younger provokes the brothers to white-hot wrath; this anger, this hatred, catapults Joseph into Egypt, which is where he

¹ As noted by Stan Duncan, "The Favoured Child."

has to be if he is to save these brothers and all of their people years and years into the future, in the time of famine. But no one knows that now.

'Come,' said [Jacob]. 'I will send you to them.' He answered, 'Here I am.'

So he said to him, 'Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring word back to me.'

So he sent him

So when Joseph comes along — Joseph the shepherd boy and the helper; Joseph the dreamer and the one who is loved; Joseph the wanderer and Joseph the seeker; Joseph the naïve and callow younger brother — when Joseph comes seeking out his brothers to find out if *they* are all right, they fall on him. Their purpose is to extinguish Joseph altogether, to cancel him, piece by piece. They cast him down, down below them, into the empty pit — and *really* put him in his place. They peel away his beautiful coat, and with it his unique, cherished identity.

And they sell him, like a cow or an ox, like a measure of “gum, balm, or resin,” to traders who will enslave him, and thus repudiate his humanity, his personhood. They send him into a strange land, and they wrest him for all time from father, kinfolk, people, and home. The pit for Joseph is hell, as the African-American preacher and scholar Luke Powery points out. Joseph’s dreams for his brothers are nightmares, and so they cast him into hell.

Alone and terrified in the stony pit, Joseph cowers. The wilderness that surrounds him presses into the very core of his being. And he waits to find out what will become of him. He waits for the change that is overshadowing his life to take shape.

Waiting is hard, says Luke Powery. He connects the story of Joseph and his brothers to a tradition in many African American churches known as “Watch Night,” a New Year’s Eve service that “look[s] back over the past year and look[s] forward to a new year.” Through their Watch Night worship, Powery says, “African Americans declare God is good all the time and all the time God is good: despite the burdens of the old year, there is hope for divine blessings in the New Year, while holding to God’s unchanging hand.” As they watch and wait “for the midnight hour,” they honour their enslaved forbears, who on New Year’s Eve in 1862 — “Freedom’s Eve” — “watched and waited . . . for President Lincoln’s official enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation.”

“Waiting and watching the night is critical for Christians,” Powery goes on to say, “because it implies that we are waiting and watching for what God will do

next But this does not mean that waiting was or is easy." Waiting would not have been easy at all for Joseph, desperate in his pit. But "[p]its do not necessarily destroy us or our dreams," says Powery. "Waiting does not kill us. We are still alive." The story of Joseph, who one day will save the very brothers who deny him, tells us that ours is a God who intends, no matter what, to care for his people.

God is a minister, insists theologian Andrew Root, by which he means that it is in God's nature to tend to God's people. God comes to Sarah in her barrenness, to Hagar in the wilderness, to Israel in Egypt, and, silently, to Joseph in his pit.² God is a minister who prepares others to minister to his people, to his flock, as he prepares Joseph, through love, through dreams, through hardship, and through times of waiting. Although God's people may resist and obstruct the ministry that God intends for them, God's tender care remains, working quietly even where it cannot be seen.

All of us are waiting, waiting for the bitter world to be transformed into a world of justice, of compassion, of truth and grace. While we are waiting, we tend to one another, giving ministry where we can and also receiving it when we need. When we do this we are participating in the life of God, whose grace extends far and wide. Brothers and sisters may jockey for position, for the scarce resource of parental love, but there is no scarcity in the economy of God's kingdom; there is blessing enough for all.

So [Jacob] said to him, 'Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring word back to me.'

So he sent him from the valley of Hebron

And his brothers . . . they sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt—

— to Egypt, where God through Joseph ministered to them, and from great evil brought forth even greater good.

God is good all the time and all the time God is good.

Let us lift up our hearts.

Amen.

² Root's *The Pastor in a Secular Age* was the subject of a recent PCC on-line study.