

## Genesis 37: 5-8

p.

<sup>5</sup>Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. <sup>6</sup>He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. <sup>7</sup>There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf." <sup>8</sup>His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

## Genesis 48:8-16

<sup>8</sup>When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he said, "Who are these?" <sup>9</sup>Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God has given me here." And he said, "Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them." <sup>10</sup>Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, and he could not see well. So Joseph brought them near him; and he kissed them and embraced them. <sup>11</sup>Israel said to Joseph, "I did not expect to see your face; and here God has let me see your children also." <sup>12</sup>Then Joseph removed them from his father's knees,<sup>[c]</sup> and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. <sup>13</sup>Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel's right, and brought them near him. <sup>14</sup>But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands, for Manasseh was the firstborn. <sup>15</sup>He blessed Joseph, and said,

"The God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked,  
the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day,  
<sup>16</sup>the angel who has redeemed me from all harm, bless the boys;  
and in them let my name be perpetuated, and the name of my ancestors  
Abraham and Isaac;  
and let them grow into a multitude on the earth."

**Genesis 49:1-28**

**49** Then Jacob called his sons, and said: "Gather around, that I may tell you what will happen to you in days to come.

<sup>2</sup>Assemble and hear, O sons of Jacob;  
listen to Israel your father.

<sup>3</sup>Reuben, you are my firstborn,  
my might and the first fruits of my vigor,  
excelling in rank and excelling in power.

<sup>4</sup>Unstable as water, you shall no longer excel  
because you went up onto your father's bed;  
then you defiled it—you<sup>[a]</sup> went up onto my couch!

<sup>5</sup>Simeon and Levi are brothers;  
weapons of violence are their swords.

<sup>6</sup>May I never come into their council;  
may I not be joined to their company—  
for in their anger they killed men,  
and at their whim they hamstringed oxen.

<sup>7</sup>Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce,  
and their wrath, for it is cruel!

I will divide them in Jacob,  
and scatter them in Israel.

<sup>8</sup>Judah, your brothers shall praise you;  
your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;  
your father's sons shall bow down before you.

<sup>9</sup>Judah is a lion's whelp;  
from the prey, my son, you have gone up.  
He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion,  
like a lioness—who dares rouse him up?

<sup>10</sup>The scepter shall not depart from Judah,  
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,  
until tribute comes to him;<sup>[b]</sup>  
and the obedience of the peoples is his.

<sup>11</sup>Binding his foal to the vine  
and his donkey's colt to the choice vine,  
he washes his garments in wine

and his robe in the blood of grapes;  
12 his eyes are darker than wine,  
and his teeth whiter than milk.  
13 Zebulun shall settle at the shore of the sea;  
he shall be a haven for ships,  
and his border shall be at Sidon.  
14 Issachar is a strong donkey,  
lying down between the sheepfolds;  
15 he saw that a resting place was good,  
and that the land was pleasant;  
so he bowed his shoulder to the burden,  
and became a slave at forced labor.  
16 Dan shall judge his people  
as one of the tribes of Israel.  
17 Dan shall be a snake by the roadside,  
a viper along the path,  
that bites the horse's heels  
so that its rider falls backward.  
18 I wait for your salvation, O LORD.  
19 Gad shall be raided by raiders,  
but he shall raid at their heels.  
20 Asher's<sup>[c]</sup> food shall be rich,  
and he shall provide royal delicacies.  
21 Naphtali is a doe let loose  
that bears lovely fawns.<sup>[d]</sup>  
22 Joseph is a fruitful bough,  
a fruitful bough by a spring;  
his branches run over the wall.<sup>[e]</sup>  
23 The archers fiercely attacked him;  
they shot at him and pressed him hard.  
24 Yet his bow remained taut,  
and his arms<sup>[f]</sup> were made agile  
by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob,  
by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel,  
25 by the God of your father, who will help you,  
by the Almighty<sup>[g]</sup> who will bless you

with blessings of heaven above,  
blessings of the deep that lies beneath,  
blessings of the breasts and of the womb.

<sup>26</sup>The blessings of your father  
are stronger than the blessings of the eternal mountains,  
the bounties<sup>[b]</sup> of the everlasting hills;  
may they be on the head of Joseph,  
on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers.

<sup>27</sup>Benjamin is a ravenous wolf,  
in the morning devouring the prey,  
and at evening dividing the spoil.”

<sup>28</sup>All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them, blessing each one of them with a suitable blessing.

**August 13, 2017**  
**Genesis 37:5-8; 48:8-16; 49:1-28**  
**Joseph: Saving the Tribes of Israel**  
**Kerra Becker English**

We're finally reaching the end of this whirlwind tour through the genealogy of Genesis. In our specific Judeo-Christian tradition, it is the oldest telling that we have of the family stories, and this last story about Joseph, you might be interested to know, also appears with strikingly similar details in the Quran. We are fascinated with origin stories, how things came to be the way that they are, and for our early ancestors it was no different. As Theodore Hiebert writes in his commentary on Genesis in my study Bible, "People are incurably curious about beginnings." In Hebrew, the word for this book is the very first word of it, "Bereshit," literally meaning, "in the beginning."

So, in the beginning, creation. But also in the beginning, people... families...tribes... cultural expectations... and relational failures. This family history is as much an origin story as the cosmology we find in the opening chapters of Genesis outlining God's role in creation. But whereas the priestly editor of the version of Genesis we read today sought to bring order out of chaos in the narrative of earthly creation, the family stories retain their messiness. They are problematic, with flawed heroes and deceitful antagonists. They bind God and humanity in a personal covenant relationship – when other ancient stories about the relationship between the gods and humanity were far more adversarial, or at least distant. Relationships between gods and men didn't always go so well. But here we can read about the beginning of our relationship with YHWH, the God who is as close to us as our breath, whose very name is supposed to sound like

breathing and remind us of the power of life. This God engages humanity in a divine dance, a holy connection, by making promises to Abraham and to all his future descendants.

In reading Joseph's story, we get to that part where it seems like God is indeed coordinating events behind the scenes to make sure that the promise holds true. Joseph's story has been made into a musical, and if you know anything about how dilemmas are resolved in musical theater, or in any good storytelling really, you can see how one event that looks like it could create catastrophe works out for the good, and those things that seem to be a possible good can twist the plot in all directions. The Joseph story is a story of destiny, kismet, it's about being in the wrong place at just the right time for it to all work out for the best.

Since the Joseph story goes on for a few chapters that would be fun for you to read, but would take a long time for me to tell, I'll try to summarize as best I can. Joseph was the favored son, and because he knew he was the favorite, that made him an incredible jerk to his brothers. His arrogance was so bad that he told his brothers about the dream he had that one day they would all bow down to him. Perhaps that was a minor detail he should have thought to keep to himself, because it made them so mad that they wanted to kill him. A couple of the more rational brothers decided it would be better to just get him out of the way rather than find a place to hide the body, so they sold him to a caravan taking slaves to Egypt. This led Joseph down an incredible path toward his destiny as a dream interpreter for the Pharaoh of Egypt. What could have been the end of him – turned out – was only the beginning.

Fast forward through how Joseph gets known by the upper echelons of the Egyptian kingdom, and he has another dream, a dream that makes Egypt survive a famine with a surplus

available to sell to its neighbors. Joseph is still coming out a favorite – this time the Pharaoh’s trusted favorite. Well, those same brothers come to Egypt in search of food, and they don’t recognize him, certainly not right away. Joseph tricks them into bringing their father back in order to receive the blessing of food that would ultimately lead to their survival – and the story, the twisted story resolves with the family reunited and Jacob (known now as Israel) dishing out blessings for the sons who would father the 12 tribes of Israel.

That chapter, chapter 49, is an interesting one about birthright. Did Israel know his sons so well that he could predict their futures? Or was this chapter added later, with someone who knew the tribes of Israel so well as to look back and imagine how they had come from their respective founding fathers? Biblical scholars might be able to take a better guess than I can. But what I like about this chapter is that it seeks to talk about those innate traits, those things that make us truly who we are, for better or for worse. What is it at the core of our being?

Author Parker Palmer talks about this concept a lot in his book, “A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life.” He’s not the only one who has theorized that the journey toward truth is an inner journey as well as an outer one, and the inner journey has much to do with finding out about our “True Self.” Is there a wholeness within? A core of our being? A preciousness that unites us with the ground of all being in God? And if so, can we name it, can we recognize it as the blessing that may even carry forward something of our destiny across generations? Here’s where we get apart from the family story and start meddling in God’s story. How does God continue the blessing in individual people?

Now in this chapter, the “blessings” as they are given don’t all sound quite like blessings. Some of them sound like fate, or bad mojo. Reuben is praised for his rank and power, and yet is called “unstable as water” because of his infidelity – the one mentioned in chapter 35 where he “goes into his father’s bed” with his father’s concubine Bilhah. Simon and Levi are reminded of their violent revenge unleashed on Shechem after he raped their sister Dinah. Neither of them will be able to inherit land – though the later priestly class will descend from brother Levi. Judah is mentioned as the lion, the wielder of the scepter, and his later descendants will be both King David and later the Messiah, Jesus. Zebulun will be drawn to the sea. Issachar will be a slave as strong as a donkey. Dan will be judge over his people, but his bite will be like that of a snake. Gad is a raider who will be raided. Asher is the foodie living in the fertile land of Galilee. Naphtali is the doe like brother who is good with words. Joseph’s sons, Ephriam and Manassah are blessed with the fertility and heaven’s favor that originated with Abraham. And Benjamin will be known as a warrior. Were these their god-given qualities, or is this just how they turned out? And for the philanderer and violent brothers – maybe they brought curses upon themselves rather than blessing.

The saying goes, the sins of the father fall on the sons up to the third and fourth generation. We have this mess or perhaps merely a confluence, again, of heredity, destiny, and blessing. Is this who God is, and is this who God wants me to be? We ask these questions continually – that is if we stick with that curiosity about origins, about beginnings, about what started us down this path and what has the power to save us. Joseph literally saved his brothers from death, and you can argue whether or not they really deserved it. Some would say that inner truth has the power to save us. It is acting within that “True Self,” operating from the soul’s core

truth that puts us in touch with God. I wonder. The church tends to teach what puts us OUTSIDE God's favor, but rarely tells us how we receive God's blessing and genuinely walk in God's ways.

I've had that struggle. I think I have experienced that switch from trying to tell my life what it has to be, to letting my life show me what it wants to be. I'm not always good at that – but when I am able to do so, even the rough places seem like they have purpose and meaning. I don't want to say that it was a good thing for Joseph's brothers to sell him into slavery. It certainly wasn't. And yet, it really seems like that event was used by God anyway. How did God use the other brothers? Is it how Israel describes – or how later history tells it? Maybe some combination of it all is the real truth.

Some days I draw hope from these kind of stories, the ones that remind us that just when things seem to be looking their worst – God does something with our terrible mess. I can tell you that watching the news out of Charlottesville yesterday made me wonder. When hate and love stand looking at each other – we're never completely sure how it's all going to turn out. Can I even begin to imagine that God used Reuben's infidelity, Simon's viciousness, Issachar's slavery to be a blessing? Is it any different from saying that God used Judah to birth a Kingdom, or Joseph to be a savior of the promise? Those are hard questions – but they are THE questions that come out of our own family history, our ancestry.com profile of these texts. How does God work through people, through families, through our own worst behaviors and our own misguided loyalties? Take a guess. I can understand why Genesis begins with light and dark, swimming things and flying things, and land and water rather than starting right here. There's some order to

creation, physical laws that dare not be broken. With people, we start breaking stuff from the very, very beginning. Jesus was right. Like a parent, God loves us anyway, and tries to start where we are and move us from there.

There are few words of comfort to be said about yesterday's events just right down the road. Three people were killed. 32 year old Heather Heyer was the young peaceful protester killed by a car being rammed into the crowd, multiple others were injured in that incident. And two police officers, Lt. H. Jay Cullen and trooper-pilot Berke Bates died after their helicopter went down – and that incident is also being linked to the Unite the Right rally and the related violence. This brand of terrorism must be labeled as such. If we are looking back at our ancestry, we need to look with open eyes on what has been created as a result of our sin and a result of our apathy. Will God even use this uncovering of evil to wake us up and make us take notice? My belief is that God was standing in Charlottesville yesterday on the side of love. Many clergy took to the streets to pray for an end to such hate, to pray for peace, to show up and let love be seen. That takes courage. It will take all of us being courageous to claim that the God we know, the God of our ancestors, loves us through our mess, but doesn't let us get away with our violence and hatred. Those blessings remind us to keep choosing a better way. Amen.

Prayer for Charlottesville:

Sweet Jesus, what has happened to your beloved world? What darkness is on the loose when those who hate their neighbors pray in your name and ask for your blessing?

You have told us, O Lord, what is good: to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with you, and yet there are those among us who wield machine guns to intimidate and chant vitriolic rhetoric to terrorize, and ram cars intentionally into crowds to kill.

Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

We have no hope save in you. We have no hope to stop the violence and stem the racism and cease the destruction, save in you. Save us now.

Prince of peace, you tell us to pray for those who persecute us and love our enemies, but right now, in this moment, those prayers are not readily on our lips. Help us. Intercede for us.

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you even if, in this moment, they are colored with anger and weariness and questions about your presence during the storm.

What next, Alpha and Omega, Beginning and End, when we are right in the middle of the chaos and the killing and the carnage? We know that justice will roll down like water and that crying and death will be no more someday, but we need to know what to do this very day.

This very day you have made. Creator God, Living God, God of the new thing, the very good thing, show us where to be and what do to and how to be the light and the salt and the leaven and the love you call us to be.

Precious Lord, take our hands, lead us home to the place you prepared for us and give us rest. Put us beside still waters and overflow our cups with grace upon grace until it spills into the streets and washes away the evil in our land. Wash us and we will be clean. Made new. Clothed and in our right minds. Together.