

Title: Pattern Recognition-Family Edition

Date: 8/13/2023 (Proper 14, Year A)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28](#); [Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b](#); [Romans 10:5-15](#); [Matthew 14:22-33](#)

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/CMWW197nYPM?t=1149>

O God, we give you thanks, and we glory in your holy Name.

Help us remember the marvels you have done,

the wonders and judgments of your mouth,

as we search for you and your strength and seek your face. (paraphrased from Ps 105 1b, 3-4)¹

Amen.

We began reading the book of Genesis right after Pentecost, from the very beginning of this long season of Ordinary Time. Sunday after Sunday, we've been treated to drama-filled episodes of "As the Old Testament Turns." But now we've come to the end of this Ancient Near Eastern soap opera with the most telenovela-like story yet, the story of Joseph.

And what an end this is!

There are family drama and sibling rivalry,

politics and sex,

deception and redemption,

and somewhere within ALL of that,

the promise of salvation.

It's kind of sad that all we get is a tiny slice of it this week and next before we move on to the book of Exodus. But we aren't meant to binge watch the Bible. We don't read the Holy Scriptures to be entertained by the spectacle of humans being incredibly...human. If that's what we're looking for, there are so many other books we could read, so many other shows we could watch.

So, why do we read the Holy Scriptures? Why come back to it Sunday after Sunday?

Given that there are two accounts of Creation, we probably shouldn't read it for scientific facts. Given the stories we've heard these last couple of months, it's also not the place for parenting advice.

The writer of Psalm 105 might tell us that we read them in search of God. Psalms like this one encourage us to search for the strength of God in the Old and New Testaments, to seek the face of God in the Word of God.

Speaking of God, God is surprisingly silent in the passage we heard today, compared to the other stories from Genesis. Perhaps that's why Joseph's brothers get in so much trouble. They aren't so much searching for the strength of God as they are securing their own gains. Having turned away from the face of God, all they see is what they lack, not what they already have.

To be clear, their father's behavior isn't helping. Jacob, now known as Israel, has a favorite son, and it's not them. Even though picking favorites hasn't worked out so well for the men of his family, he so obviously loves Joseph more than all his other sons that they come to hate him. They hate him so much they can't even say "Shalom" to him.

It's as if Israel didn't learn anything from the way Abraham treated Ishmael and Isaac, or the way his own father Isaac treated him and his twin brother Esau.

Picking a favorite didn't just disrupt the relationship between father and son, it also upset the relationship between brothers, **and** between those brothers and *their* sons. It's a problematic cycle they keep perpetuating because no one has told them about therapy or family systems theory.

Ok, so neither therapy nor family systems theory was a thing way back then. That's the challenge of reading ancient stories with modern eyes. Modern eyes come with modern understandings. At the same time, the advantage of reading stories that feel so far away, in time and place, is that it helps us see things that we may resist seeing in our own lives and in the things that are happening today.

Now, in the time of the Old Testament, the oldest son was supposed to inherit everything. The birthright was theirs. So, God favoring the younger son is actually an example of God turning social convention on its head.

It foreshadows the kind of reversal that Mary would sing about—You have cast down the mighty from their thrones, and have lifted up the lowly. You have filled the hungry with good things, and the rich you have sent away empty.

It forecasts the kind of reversal Jesus would preach about in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7). In the Beatitudes, he surprised them by saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit...blessed are those who mourn...blessed are the meek." Then in another part of the same sermon, he declares, "You have heard it said...but I tell you..."

Family systems theory tells us that "patterns of relationships get played out and repeated from generation to generation, unless or until someone seeks to change those patterns, largely through self-differentiation and a willingness to resist succumbing to anxiety while the family system resists this change and seeks to return to its status quo."²

The Holy Scriptures show us how this pattern plays out for this family, this clan, descended from Abraham.

This is a mirror we can hold up in our own families because the first step toward changing any kind of pattern is to see that there is a pattern and then recognize it.

In my meetings with couples preparing for marriage, I talk to them about their family of origin, specifically their ideas about marriage and money, and the picture they have of power and partnership. It's important to identify the virtuous cycles they want to

continue and the punishing cycles they want to leave behind. Then we can identify and deal with the internal and external resistance that come up.

This is also a mirror we can hold up to society, to our collective history. This gets tricky because nowadays we see that our shared history is in fact made up of many **strands** of history. Some strands have been held up as truth and fact, while others have been covered up or shouted over.

Surfacing the strands we haven't seen or the strands we haven't paid much attention to can also cause internal and external resistance, the kind of resistance that pressures us to justify the way things have been and turn back to the status quo.

God is all about breaking through these well-worn cycles. Yet over time, some of the reversals that God has enacted have come to be the new status quo. When we forget that, we spend all our energy maintaining the status quo when God is calling on us to bring about the next reversal.

So, we no longer marvel that God chose the youngest son, that God protects the strangers in a foreign land. Instead, people debate what's "fair." People talk about coming to this country the "right way," ignoring a long history of slavery and conquest and genocide. The next thing we know, our state government is putting razor wire along the Texas-Mexico border and razor wire buoys along the Rio Grande.^{3,4}

We no longer marvel that God has poured out the Spirit on all people so that our children will prophesy, so that our young people will see visions and old people will dream dreams (Acts 2:17). Instead, dreamers are silenced and their dreams erased because some people feel threatened by their vision of the kingdom of heaven, by their assessment of who we actually are and their vision for who we have not yet become.

At the memorial service for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., worship began with a quote from today's passage of Genesis, "Behold, this dreamer cometh. Come now therefore, and let us slay him... and we shall see what will become of his dreams" ([vv. 19-20](#) KJV).⁵

This is how dangerous dreams can be. This is how threatening dreamers can seem. Just as prophets are unpopular because they speak truth about the present, dreamers can be unpopular because they point out the gap between who we are and who we say we are, who we have yet to become.

Joseph brought a bad report about his brothers to his father. They didn't like what he said, but that doesn't mean that his report was untrue. Joseph dreamed that his brothers and his parents would bow down to him. If they didn't think there was even a kernel of truth in those dreams, they wouldn't have hated him or grown jealous of him. Instead, they would have laughed at him or mocked him. Because they saw him as a threat to their status and what they saw as their rightful inheritance, they plotted his murder, they sold him into slavery.

But they were looking in the wrong direction. The threat was famine. The threat was starvation.

Last night, we marched together in the Pride Parade. This after a year in which more than 400 anti-trans bills have been introduced in state legislatures, 48 of them in Texas.⁶ These bills cover everything from gender-affirming care for minors to participation in sports to pronouns and bathrooms. In legislation like these, anything that doesn't fit the old status quo of gender or sexuality or race is seen as such a threat that people are trying to remove their stories from library bookshelves, and erase their realities from AP classes on psychology and history.

They too are looking in the wrong direction. The threat is the record-setting temperatures we are experiencing this summer. The threat is the existential anxiety parents feel about whether or not it is safe to send their children to school. The threat is the rising rates of depression and anxiety in children, youth, and young adults, particularly those who are trans. The threat is losing our humanity and our capacity for loving-kindness and compassion. The threat is that we will stop searching for the strength of God when we are afraid and stop seeking the face of God in every person we encounter.

As we celebrate the beginning of a new school year, as we reflect on last night's Pride parade, I want to know, what are your dreams for this coming year?

What are you dreaming for yourself?
What are you dreaming for our church?
What are you dreaming for our world?

¹ The Saint Helena Psalter

² Hoare, G. M. (2011). [Theological Perspective \(Genesis 37:1–4, 12–28\)](#). In *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Additional Essays* (Vol. 8, p. 5). Westminster John Knox Press.

³ <https://www.epicenter.org/texas-border-texas-bishop-statement/>

⁴ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2023/08/03/two-dead-in-rio-grande-where-texas-installed-razor-wire-and-buoys/70522492007/>

⁵ Willson, P. J. (2011). [Homiletical Perspective \(Genesis 37:1–4, 12–28\)](#). In *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Additional Essays* (Vol. 8, p. 4). Westminster John Knox Press.

⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/04/17/anti-trans-bills-map/>