

Genesis 37: Ninth Sunday after Pentecost Proper 14

By way of introduction, I want to explain that in Year A of the Lectionary, in which we read the Gospel of Matthew has alternate tracks for the OT reading. This year we are using the track that takes the readings from the first five books of the OT. You probably will not hear these readings again for 6 years.

...for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, 10 but showing loving kindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

I heard these words along with the Ten Commandments every Sunday we attended church with my grandparents. I would wonder which group our family fell into, the unfaithful group or the loving, faithful group. Jacob's family would seem to be part of the first category. And yet...

For the last several Sundays we have heard the story of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The latter, Jacob, was a the conniving of trickster, as Diane aptly called him. Today we hear of Jacob and his 12 sons, from which the twelve tribes of Israel are descended, and the outfall of Jacob's unseemly behavior. The question I want to address is why these events were included in the Hebrew Scripture, given they were put in writing 1000 years or more after the events described.

To review a bit, we've heard about Jacob's stealing of his older brother's Essau's birthright and his trickery in

deceiving his father Isaac, using goat skins on his arms, into giving Jacob rather than the older brother Essau his blessing. Then we heard of Jacob wanting his uncle Laben's younger daughter Rachel as his wife, rather than the older daughter Leah, as was the custom. Although Leah had attractive eyes, Jacob thought Rachel was more comely. We have read of the uncle's deception of Jacob by putting Leah in the wedding bed in place of Rachel, knowing Jacob, who had been dreaming of Rachel for 14 years, would not notice. [In a note of irony, in Hebron, in the West Bank, Jacob is buried next to Leah. His favorite wife, Rachel, is buried alone in Bethlehem, surrounded by Israel's obscene 40 foot concrete walls, and a 100,000 Palestinians.]

So Jacob had two wives, Leah and Rachel, but that was not enough for the old goat. He had children with Rachel and Leah's slaves, Bilhah and Zilpah, 13 children with four wives. To complicate domestic life even more, Jacob made known to all that his youngest son Joseph, born to his favorite wife, Rachel, was his favorite son. Jacob gives Joseph a long sleeved coat, which makes him look like a young prince. Joseph, who has a habit of telling his father of his older brother's bad behavior, is also obnoxious in other ways. He tells tell his brothers of his dreams in which his 12 older brothers were bowing down to him. The 12 older brothers detested him.

Then Jacob does something seemingly even more stupid. The older brothers are some 60 miles distant,

tending their father's flocks in the area where Jacob's sister Dinah had been raped, and in revenge for which Jacob's brothers had slaughtered all of the men

Joseph's brothers grab Joseph, throw him in a pit and sell him to slave traders headed for Egypt, slave traders identified as Ishmaelites, descendants of the son resulting from their great, great grandfather Abraham's coupling with his wife's servant Hagar. After selling Joseph into slavery, the brothers tear up the obnoxious coat, sprinkling it with goat blood to deceive Jacob about Joseph's fate. Another ironic twist since Jacob had deceived his father Isaac by putting goat skins on his arms.

Oh the family values of the patriarchs. This story has to be true; no one would make it up.

But why is this sordid tale included in scripture? Why did those who selected the texts for our lectionary readings include all these details? The later question is the easier. For better or worse this is part of our faith story, our scripture. Joseph played a crucial role in the survival of the offspring of Jacob, as we shall hear in the weeks to come. Ironically, it is Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but not Joseph, who are known in both Judaism and Islam as the Patriarchs. After Joseph's efforts in saving the Hebrew people in Egypt, nothing more is heard of him.

But back to the first question: Why did the writers of Genesis, 400 years or so before the birth of Jesus, include the sordid details of the life of Jacob, which were believed to have occurred a thousand years earlier?

There is the straightforward moral lesson, that good can come out of evil,

of the village. Nevertheless, Jacob sends Joseph to check up on the brothers who detested him.

but our reading from Psalm 105 hints at another, more profound reason:

*Remember the marvels he has done, **

his wonders and the judgments of his mouth,

*O offspring of Abraham his servant, **

O children of Jacob his chosen.

*Then he called for a famine in the land **

and destroyed the supply of bread.

*He sent a man before them, **

Joseph, who was sold as a slave.

Jacob was God's chosen one? Surely, if God chose Jacob, we would expect God to have made a better choice. In his ethics and values, Jacob fell way below average. And Joseph, though he finished strong, what an annoying twerp, parading around in his King costume. Could he shape the course of history?

The Hebrew faith tradition, which we claim as part of our tradition, was that God did chose Jacob, that God saved Joseph from his brothers and then, as we shall hear next week, God found a critical role for Joseph in Egypt with the Pharaoh. In other words, what to us seem to be random or trivial events involving people with questionable morals and judgment, can be understood as part of God's overarching plan to rescue humankind.

The Hebrew tradition is a religion

of historical events and real people, flawed like all of us, and a God who acts in history. The Christian faith follows that tradition, not only by claiming the Tanak, the five books of Moses, as part of our tradition, but also in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, a real, historical person, through whom God has acted in history.

The science-ism of our age tells us there is no cosmic planner of events, no over-arching story, no God who shapes history, but rather random events, and that even our belief about our own free will is misplaced. But our faith tradition says something very different: there is God who created all things, who seeks to restore all human kind to a right relationship with the creator God, and who will one day gather human kind into the Kingdom of God. The events of history and our own day seem random and evil. What good can come of them? And yet, our faith story says these events have a profound meaning.

At the Memorial Service for Martin

*Dale Ramerman,
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August 10, 2014

Luther King, Jr. At the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, the service of worship began with these words from our OT reading: "Behold, this dreamer cometh. Come now therefore, and let us slay him...and we shall see what will become of his dreams."

Something will come from the Creator-God, whose loving faithfulness will prevail.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Lutheran theologian and martyr, five years before his death at the hands of the Nazi's, wrote these words on Christmas day, 1942, shortly before he was imprisoned and when the future looked very bleak indeed:

I believe that God can and will let good come out over everything, even the greatest evil.... I believe that even our mistakes and shortcomings are not in vain and that it is no more difficult for God to deal with them than with our supposedly good deeds."

Amen.