

Week 9, Sunday: Jacob, Esau, and Reconciliation
Genesis 32 and 33

For Journaling or Discussing with Another:

Read Genesis 32:1-8

- Why might God have sent angels to appear to Jacob at this point in the story?
- Do you think Jacob has the option to flee? If so, why do you think he chooses not to?

Read Genesis 32:9-12

- Jacob prays a heartfelt prayer, reminding God of God's promises and pleading for deliverance. Recall a time that you were led to pray fervently for something. What was the result?

Read Genesis 32:13-31

- Jacob continues to demonstrate shrewdness. How do you expect Esau will respond?
- Recall a time when you tried to appease someone. What was the result?

Read Genesis 32:22-32

- Three times the story tells us that it is "a man" wrestling with Jacob; however, after the experience Jacob interprets that he has wrestled with God. Whom do you think Jacob wrestled with? What might be the significance of the ambiguity?
- Can you recall a time when you wrestled with God?
- Jacob leaves this experience blessed, changed, and with a new name; he also ends up wounded and will carry a limp with him thereafter. How might this wound/limp be important in Jacob's future?
- Do you find any parallels in the story of your own faith journey? Any metaphorical limp?

Read Genesis 33:1-11

- To what do you attribute the change in Esau and his gracious reception of Jacob?
- When have you experienced reconciliation?
- How is the experience of reconciliation "like seeing the face of God?"

Read Genesis 33:12-20

- The story ends with Jacob purchasing a small plot of land, a small plot of the promised land. Think of all that it has cost Jacob to possess this one small piece of the promise. In what ways has your journey with God, and your being an heir of God's promise through Christ, cost you something?

Continued blessings engaging Genesis, Tom Maehl, First Lutheran Church, Waltham, MA

Week 9, Monday: Inhumanity

Scripture: Genesis 34

Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the region. When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the region, saw her, he seized her and lay with her by force. And his soul was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob; he loved the girl, and spoke tenderly to her. So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, 'Get me this girl to be my wife.'

Now Jacob heard that Shechem had defiled his daughter Dinah; but his sons were with his cattle in the field, so Jacob held his peace until they came. And Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him, just as the sons of Jacob came in from the field. When they heard of it, the men were indignant and very angry, because he had committed an outrage in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done.

But Hamor spoke with them, saying, 'The heart of my son Shechem longs for your daughter; please give her to him in marriage. Make marriages with us; give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves. You shall live with us; and the land shall be open to you; live and trade in it, and get property in it.' Shechem also said to her father and to her brothers, 'Let me find favor with you, and whatever you say to me I will give. Put the marriage present and gift as high as you like, and I will give whatever you ask me; only give me the girl to be my wife.'

The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully, because he had defiled their sister Dinah. They said to them, 'We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us. Only on this condition will we consent to you: that you will become as we are and every male among you be circumcised. Then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters for ourselves, and we will live among you and become one people. But if you will not listen to us and be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and be gone.'

Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor's son Shechem. And the young man did not delay to do the thing, because he was delighted with Jacob's daughter. Now he was the most honored of all his family. So Hamor and his son Shechem came to the gate of their city and spoke to the men of their city, saying, 'These people are friendly with us; let them live in the land and trade in it, for the land is large enough for them; let us take their daughters in marriage, and let us give them our daughters. Only on this condition will they agree to live among us, to become one people: that every male among us be circumcised as they are circumcised. Will not their livestock, their property, and all their animals be ours? Only let us agree with them, and they will live among us.' And all who went out of the city gate heeded Hamor and his son Shechem; and every male was circumcised, all who went out of the gate of his city.

On the third day, when they were still in pain, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city unawares, and killed all the males. They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword, and took Dinah out of Shechem's house, and went away. And the other sons of Jacob came upon the slain, and plundered the city, because their sister had been defiled. They took their flocks and their herds, their donkeys, and whatever was in the city and in the field. All their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and made their prey. Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, 'You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household.' But they said, 'Should our sister be treated like a whore?'

Reflection: This is a brutal story. Dinah is raped and then left silent. Although the brothers in the story will speak passionately about their own disgrace and will exact revenge, we hear nothing from Dinah, and she is not consulted in the brother's scheme. It is as if she was a prop of sorts, an object in the story rather than a subject.

There is a lot of objectifying going on. It starts with Shechem, a powerful man who is likely used to beautiful things and taking what he wants. When he first lays eyes upon Dinah, what he sees is yet another beautiful object and he seizes her and forces himself upon her. The pattern continues with the brothers who objectify their sister as the symbol of family purity and shame. Then, in their revenge, the brothers objectify Shechem's whole tribe as being 'The Enemy,' so as to justify wiping them out; (this, before the other tribe had a chance to do the same to them). In some important way, the men in these stories reveal that human beings are losing their sense of common humanity.

We all know the old Alexander Pope quote, "To err is human;" and certainly to be human includes failure. But consider, what does it mean to be human in the best sense of the word? Perhaps we are most human when we treat others as subjects rather than objects, when all are valued and have opportunity to speak.

To Ponder: Consider the people whom you encounter in a typical day. How do you keep mindful of our shared humanity?

Prayer: O God, deepen my humanity. Help me to recognize the people I meet this day as subjects of your love, and then equip me to treat others with respect.

Week 9, Tuesday: Suffering

Scripture: Genesis 35

God said to Jacob, 'Arise, go up to Bethel, and settle there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.' So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, 'Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your clothes; then come, let us go up to Bethel, that I may make an altar there to the God who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.' So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak that was near Shechem.

As they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities all around them, so that no one pursued them. Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, and there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because it was there that God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother. And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried under an oak below Bethel. So it was called Allon-bacuth.

God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and he blessed him. God said to him, 'Your name is Jacob; no longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.' So he was called Israel. God said to him, 'I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.' Then God went up from him at the place where he had spoken with him. Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured out a drink-offering on it, and poured oil on it. So Jacob called the place where God had spoken with him Bethel.

Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had a difficult labor. When she was in her difficult labor, the midwife said to her, 'Do not be afraid; for now you will have another son.' As her soul was departing (for she died), she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), and Jacob set up a pillar at her grave; it is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. Israel journeyed on, and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder.

While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard of it.

Now the sons of Jacob were twelve. The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob's firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid: Dan and Naphtali. The sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.

Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had resided as aliens. Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. And Isaac breathed his last; he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

Reflection: Jacob demonstrates faithfulness; still he suffers. As this episode begins, God asks Jacob to travel to a place that will be named Bethel and build an altar there. Jacob dutifully responds; and as they leave, he and his clan dispose of the idols, or foreign gods, in their possession. This is a faithful demonstration of their allegiance to Yahweh alone. God then reappears, blesses Jacob again, and repeats the promise of land and descendants. Jacob responds by faithfully marking the place with a pillar of remembrance, pouring oil on it as a sign of his devotion. Then we read that Jacob's beloved wife Rachel suffers terribly in delivering her second son Benjamin, and then she dies in childbirth. This breaks Jacob's heart. Clearly faithfulness does not insulate one from suffering.

The early Christians knew this; in fact, in some places where Christianity was new and deemed threatening by the predominant Greco-Roman culture, Christians ended up suffering not simply in spite of their faithfulness, but because of their faithfulness to Christ. It was to such Christians that the author of 1 Peter wrote these words,

*Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself **restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.** To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 5:6-11)*

To Ponder: Recall a time when you experienced suffering. How was God at work *restoring, supporting, strengthening, and establishing you?*

Prayer:

Oh God, our help in ages past
Our hope for years to come
Our shelter from the stormy blast
And our eternal home

Under the shadow of thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure
Sufficient is thine arm alone
And our defense is sure

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Soon bears us all away;
We fly forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

Oh God, our help in ages past
Our hope for years to come
Be thou' our guide while troubles last
And our eternal home

(Isaac Watts)

Week 9, Wednesday: Family Strife

Scripture: Genesis 37:1-11 (you may also read Genesis 36 on your own, a long genealogy)

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, 'Listen to this dream that I dreamed. 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.' 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.

He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, 'Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.' But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, 'What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?' So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

Reflection: The story is now shifting to the next generation, from Jacob to Joseph. Once again, the transition is marked by parental favoritism and sibling rivalry. The saga began with Abraham and Sarah, with rivalry between Abraham's sons Ishmael and Isaac. Isaac was favored by Sarah and chosen. The story then continued with the parents Isaac (who favored Esau) and Rebekah (who favored Jacob). Scheming Jacob was chosen. The story now continues with the choosing of Joseph who, as the story begins, is described as being spoiled by his father's overt favoritism.

This is a complicated family. There are 12 sons born to four different women. Two of those women are wives, and two are maids or concubines. Joseph is the 11th born son, but the first of Jacob's favored wife Rachel. Rachel has died, and Joseph bears some resemblance to her. We may imagine that often when Jacob sees Joseph he is reminded of Rachel. Jacob's favoritism brings family strife.

To Ponder: Consider your own family of origin. Where are you in the birth order: only, youngest, middle, eldest? How has your unique position blessed you and/or wounded you?

Prayer: Thank you, O God, for the love shown me in my upbringing, even if imperfect. Thank you, Jesus, for claiming me as your own, promising me your unconditional love. Help me, gracious Spirit, to reflect that love to others. Amen.

Week 9, Thursday: A Measure of Mercy

Scripture: Genesis 37:12-36

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, 'Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, 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 from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, 'What are you seeking?' 'I am seeking my brothers,' he said; 'tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.' The man said, 'They have gone away, for I heard them say, "Let us go to Dothan." ' So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.' But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, 'Let us not take his life.' Reuben said to them, 'Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him'—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, 'What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.' And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. He returned to his brothers, and said, 'The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?' Then they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, 'This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not.' He recognized it, and said, 'It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.' Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son for many days. All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, 'No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.' Thus his father bewailed him. Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

Reflection: If we are somewhat familiar with the Joseph story, we may tend to think of the other brothers as rather ‘flat’ characters; all with a similar measure of resentment over Joseph’s favoritism, all ready to kill him off. However, here we learn that this is not the case. Reuben and Judah are of a different mind and heart.

Reuben is the firstborn son, the one most likely to be the primary heir if it were not for his father’s clear devotion to Joseph. Therefore, from a power and wealth standpoint, Reuben has the most reason to hate Joseph and desire him dead. Yet, Reuben seeks to protect Joseph, not wanting to break his father’s heart. It is Reuben who resists the other brother’s initial murderous plan and suggests throwing Joseph in a pit, with the intent that he could later be rescued. There is mercy in his actions.

Then Judah intervenes. Fearing that his brother Joseph might die in the pit, unaware of Reuben’s intent to later rescue him, Judah notes to the others that Joseph is their own brother, their own flesh, and suggest selling Joseph into slavery as an alternative. This is still cruel, yet there is a measure of restraint, perhaps even mercy here too. The measures of mercy shown by Reuben and Judah are enough for God, who is always at work behind the scenes, enough to further God’s plans which are beyond what any of the brothers could dream or imagine.

To Ponder: For whom, if anyone, do you hold in some degree a measure of resentment. Why do you think that is? What is it that they stir up in you? How might you demonstrate to them a measure of mercy?

Prayer:

There's a wideness in God's mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in God's justice
Which is more than liberty.

But we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness
With a zeal He will not own.

Make our love, O God, more faithful;
Let us take you at your word,
And our lives will be thanksgiving
For the goodness of the Lord.

(Frederick W. Faber)

Week 9, Friday: Tamar

Scripture: Genesis 38

It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and settled near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; he married her and went in to her. She conceived and bore a son; and he named him Er. Again she conceived and bore a son whom she named Onan. Yet again she bore a son, and she named him Shelah. She was in Chezib when she bore him. Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn; her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD put him to death. Then Judah said to Onan, 'Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother.' But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother. What he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also. Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, 'Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up'—for he feared that he too would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went to live in her father's house.

In course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died; when Judah's time of mourning was over, he went up to Timnah to his sheep-shearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. When Tamar was told, 'Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep', she put off her widow's garments, put on a veil, wrapped herself up, and sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. She saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him in marriage. When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a prostitute, for she had covered her face. He went over to her at the roadside, and said, 'Come, let me come in to you', for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, 'What will you give me, that you may come in to me?' He answered, 'I will send you a kid from the flock.' And she said, 'Only if you give me a pledge, until you send it.' He said, 'What pledge shall I give you?' She replied, 'Your signet and your cord, and the staff that is in your hand.' So he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him. Then she got up and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.

When Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to recover the pledge from the woman, he could not find her. He asked the townspeople, 'Where is the temple prostitute who was at Enaim by the wayside?' But they said, 'No prostitute has been here.' So he returned to Judah, and said, 'I have not found her; moreover, the townspeople said, "No prostitute has been here."' Judah replied, 'Let her keep the things as her own, otherwise we will be laughed at; you see, I sent this kid, and you could not find her.'

About three months later Judah was told, 'Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore; moreover she is pregnant as a result of whoredom.' And Judah said, 'Bring her out, and let her be burned.' As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, 'It was the owner of these who made me pregnant.' And she said, 'Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff.' Then Judah acknowledged them and said, 'She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.' And he did not lie with her again.

When the time of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb. While she was in labor, one put out a hand; and the midwife took and bound on his hand a crimson thread, saying, 'This one came out first.' But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, 'What a breach you have made for yourself!' Therefore he was named Perez. Afterwards his brother came out with the crimson thread on his hand; and he was named Zerah.

Reflection: A personal reflection

Several years ago, I was seeking to write a reflection on this story. For several days I read and re-read this chapter wondering what I might say about the injustice toward women in general and Tamar specifically, and how I might address Tamar's shrewd, cunning resistance to her oppressive culture. One night, I read the story, yet again, and then went to sleep. Early in the morning, as I was waking, still half in and half out of sleep, I experienced receiving this one clear realization, "Tamar just wanted to be a mother."

In that moment of half-light, all the male characters and cultural issues faded into the background, and there was only Tamar and this one simple thought, "She just wanted to be a mother." Of course, the oppressive culture that devalued non child producing women may have been a factor in the intensity of her desire. But then too, maybe like women of other times and cultures, Tamar simply wanted the experience of giving birth to a child, nursing that child at her breast, and helping to shape that child's life.

Parenthood in general, and motherhood in particular, are still powerful issues lying below the surface in our culture too. Some people wish for a partner and children, but do not have them. Others have an expected pregnancy. Others fear being judged. Seldom do we have honest conversations about these deep desires, feelings, and experiences.

To Ponder:

- Where does the story of Tamar speak to your own hopes, disappointments, experiences?
- Where have you, or might you, have opportunity for deep conversation?

Prayer: Mothering God, we thank you for Tamar; for her boldness, her risk taking, her mothering of Perez and Zerah. We lift before you in prayer all those who struggle with issues of parenthood; *especially* Make our congregation to be a community where adults and children of all life situations are welcomed, where meaningful conversations bring healing and hope, and where the life of your risen son flows through us to others. Amen.