

## The End of Innocence – The Era of Engagement

Genesis 37:1-28

Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b

Romans 5:12-21

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### I

A Doctor, an Engineer and a Politician were having a friendly discussion once about which profession came first. The Doctor said, “Well according to the Bible, Eve was created out of Adam’s rib. That obviously involved surgery. So it is clear the medical profession was the first around.” “Not so fast,” said the engineer, “don’t forget that the world was created out of chaos. That transformation was certainly a job done by an engineer.” The Politician chimed in, “Hey wait a minute! The Chaos, who do you think was responsible for that?”

Hits a bit too close to home in these chaotic days! Does it not? Chaos, in a dark empty waterless pit is where precocious 17 year old Joseph finds himself after eagerly coming out to check on his big brothers. Their anger has grown to hatred over his uppitness in his bragging about these big dreams of his where he sees the whole family bowing down in homage to Joseph as he reigns over them, and their frustration with their father Jacob’s favoritism toward this little Lord Fauntleroy. Seeing him from a distance they conspire to kill the little snitch. Brother Reuben, feeling sorry for the boy, but by no means standing up publically in his behalf, instead suggests they throw him into a pit where he will be left to be eaten by wild animals. Reuben meanwhile plans to slip back later in secret and release him.

“So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.” What a welcome by the family! Down in a deep dark hole, is where young Joseph finds himself. What a shock rolled over him, as his older brothers up above sit down to eat the food he brought along for them while he suffers. How could this have happened? Why are they so upset? Why is Joseph so mistreated? What, in the larger flow of God’s sacred history is going on, as once again God’s promise of a future and a hope seem to be dashed?

There he is down in a dark pit, like those Chilean minors trapped miles beneath the earth’s surface awaiting a seemingly certain death. There he is, like in Dante’s “Divine Comedy”, where Virgil takes the poet down, down, down on a tour of the underworld, with the welcome sign, “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.”

A few years ago some of us from South Highland, on a tour of the Holy Land, visited a church over a deep cave near the walls of Jerusalem. It was thought to be the cell where Jesus was held overnight on that Thursday after his arrest, following his interrogation by the high priest and the other priests, before the dawn of Friday when they took Jesus before the full Jewish Council. We descended down, down, down stone steps into that cavern, over 100 feet deep, really like the shaft of a well. At the bottom an empty dark space with only a stone lectern, and attached to the lectern a copy of Psalm 88 written in many different languages. Our own voice of pioneering television, Keith Williams, stepped up to the podium and solemnly read the most somber dark hopeless Psalm of the Bible, the only one to end in utter darkness.

“O Lord, God of my salvation, when at night, I cry out in your presence,  
 Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.  
 For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.  
 I am counted among those who go down to the Pit, I am like those who have no hope, like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand.  
 You have put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep.  
 O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?  
 Wretched and close to death from my youth up,  
 I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.  
 You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me; my companions are in darkness.”<sup>i</sup>

I think Joseph felt like that. Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever felt such darkness, such depression, such abandonment? You had great dreams. You dreamed of making a significant difference with your life. You were going to change things. But life has not turned out like that for you, and you find yourself alone in a dark hole. Life maybe seems like an utter dead end for you, as it seemed for young Joseph. All hope of life and future gone. “Abandon hope all ye who enter here.” It has come to this, stripped of his many colored coat, abandoned in a pit, betrayed not by enemies but by his own brothers, his family.

Amid the chaos of our times, stock market swoons, debt ceiling debates, credit downgrading, unending wars in the Middle East, mean spirited unjust laws, by Alabama’s legislature, it is tempting to wish longingly for a time of innocence again. To get back to the Garden of Eden, to a state of bliss, that perfect state of which we read of our origins we were created. We wish we could go back there, yet never quite can, because of this thing called sin. “Where sin increased.”

We long, like Paul Baumer, the fresh young schoolboy in Eric Remarque’s All Quiet On the Western Front, to go back to that golden Eden, some good old simple greatest generation times from which we have departed and which, to our selective memory, always seem better than they were. By the end of the book, the schoolboy, becomes the weathered World War I soldier stuck in the trenches between France and Germany. He has seen too much. He is too broken. Returning home on leave and longing for lost innocence, he has a meaningless conversation with his mother, his heart crying out,

“Ah Mother! Mother! You still think that I am a child. Why can I not put my head in your lap and weep? Why have I always to be so strong and self-controlled?... Let us rise up and go out, back through the years where the burden of this misery lies on us no more...”<sup>ii</sup>

But then looking back through the years we remember a quite different history for this strange family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A family of younger brothers, father of these 12 boys, Jacob especially. He had been kicking to get ahead since before his birth. Kicking in his mother's womb at his older twin brother Esau from whom he stole the birthright. Kicking at his father, Isaac from whom he stole the blessing. Kicking at his father-in-law, Laban, to get his daughters and his property. Now Jacob, who has this predisposition of favoritism toward the younger brother, has showered his love upon his own younger son of 17 with a richly colored coat, something that causes all the other brothers to envy. A coat given with love. But a coat that comes to symbolize the multi layered of hurt and pain and division in the family.

Arie Mendeviv, a 55 year old Jewish scholar from Scarsdale, New York, who moved to Israel and became Orthodox, told our minister's travel-study group when we met with him in Jerusalem last month, "Living in Israel is like being at a perpetual family reunion of a dysfunctional family." That's Jacob's family.

His well-intended but misunderstood act of love, this coat given to younger son Joseph, has in fact precipitated the violent break-up of the family. For when we try to hold family together with material things, coats, jewelry, cars, boats, it is never enough.

Here is a supremely dysfunctional family, envious of each other, jealous of each other, a family who do not share thoughts or feelings with each other. No doubt Joseph's big "bow down to me dreams" had a chilling effect on the rest of the family. But then don't we all long for our 17 year olds to dream big, to set high goals, to shoot for things that may well be beyond full attainment? Here is a family that does not celebrate each other, does not listen to each other, does not make space for each other, does not engage with each other. And yet, here is the very family through whom the promises of God's covenant are to be secured. That promise God gave to Jacob all those years ago when he was alone out in the desert at Bethel; to be his God, and make his children as numerous as the dust of earth and to bring him back to this land. God chooses unpromising characters through whom to carry out his future, does he not? Is this the best that God can do? And now the best of them lies bruised and bleeding in a waterless pit awaiting seemingly certain death.

### III

Only because a traveling caravan of gypsies conveniently happen by from Gilead, carrying gum, balm, and resin to trade with the Egyptians, is Joseph pulled out of that dark pit and sold for 20 pieces of silver into slavery in Egypt. Might as well make a little money on this break-up, the brothers reason. Where is any hint of innocence? And then such deceit they practice upon their father Jacob – soaking that precious robe in blood and saying a wild animal killed him, then the years of grief of a father for his lost son.

We long for innocence, but God offers us engagement. That is the point. The blight of sin that resides in the sinews and soul of every one of us will not allow us to return to a state of innocence, "where sin increased." Nor should we. Oh, sometimes we treat conversion like that. We think, living as a real Christian brings innocence. We think if we become a genuine follower

of Jesus, we then will return to a state of innocence, absolute purity and that is a pure delusion. I had a seminary professor, Dr. Beeners, who asked us – “What is a jerk who becomes a Christian?” Answer, “A Christian jerk!”

Living vibrantly and authentically with faith in God is not about innocence. It is about engagement. It is about grace. It is about waking up to and engaging with a God who engages with us. A God who took the leap into our messy earthly existence from the heights of heaven. It is about this incarnate God’s desire to so relate with us, so engage with us, that he becomes fully human and lives among us. It is about this God who is here with us even now, as he was with Joseph, unseen, unknown, but at work through betrayal, abandonment, disappointment, slavery, years in a dark prison cell, and then ultimately restoration.

#### IV

The beautiful many colored robe that was a sign first of love, then of torn broken family relations and finally, dipped in animal blood a sign of death and deceit, still yet has another function. It is also a robe of promise. It is a robe of prophecy to be fulfilled. Joseph so clothed as a lad by his father Jacob will, through the plans and purposes of God, and in spite of every human attempt to thwart it - including a lie by the wife of the Egyptian captain of the guard who says that Joseph tried to sexually assault her, (when actually it was she who tried to seduce him and in her humiliation made up a lie), in spite of all the human roadblocks, God’s will will prevail. God’s will will become historical reality through this younger son, who is God’s chosen vessel. Joseph will in fact be clothed in the finest robes of Egypt.

The dreamer will continue to dream. God’s dreams will lead him out of prison and interpreting Pharaoh’s dreams he will guide Egypt through seven years of abundance, storing up food for the coming seven years of famine. When things get so bad that Jacob sends his sons from Canaan to Egypt in search of food lest they starve, who shall they find themselves bowing before, but (unknown to them), that cast out, good as dead, younger brother Joseph, now the Prime Minister of Egypt, fulfilling the uppity dream of his youth. By God’s plan and providential will, Joseph rises to become Prime Minister of Egypt to preserve his family and all the earth in a time of great worldwide disaster.

There comes that dramatic moment years later in Egypt when Prime Minister Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers. He tell them,

“I am your brother, Joseph. Now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay.’ ”<sup>iii</sup>

Joseph engaged. Joseph engaged with the slaves and gypsies, captains and Pharaoh and people. Joseph engaged his cowardly deceitful covetous brothers. The power of engagement. Healing, justice, forgiveness, peace, reside in whether and how we engage each other. We live in a hard, harsh, sinful world. Good and evil are locked in great battle, and each of them is real. The question is which of them will you feed? Adam the sinner and Jesus Christ the sinless both have laid claim on you.

“But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”<sup>iv</sup>

What this good news called Gospel tells us is you are not alone. You are not being left in a dark hole. God is at work and God is with you. God is bringing you life and hope and purpose and peace through the gracious gift of his son Jesus Christ.

Reinhold Niebuhr, esteemed theologian and preacher of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, was anything but naïve, known as a great realist and spokesman for Christian realism. He said late in his life,

“I have come to the realization that is possible to look at the human situation without illusion and without despair, only from the standpoint of the Christian revelation. I have come to know that only in the simplicity of the gospel is it possible to measure the full ‘dignity’ and ‘misery’ of human beings.”

Friends God is real and God is at work. God has engaged with us for good. The God who delivered Joseph will deliver you. Engage with him. Let him work through you. Let him use you to make the connection with someone else. Engage. See others, listen to them, learn from them. Come to love them as maybe you never have before. As Ted Loder said,

“Listen to your deepest longing, for meaning, for relationships that are deep, trusting, satisfying, challenging and joyful, for a world of justice and peace and beauty. In a haunting way, our dreams call us to engagement, to move from the outskirts to the center of our lives.”<sup>v</sup>

Life is not about innocence but engagement. Take the risk! Dream! Engage! “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” You can count on it! Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Psalm 88, selected

<sup>ii</sup> Eric Maria Remarque, All Quiet On The Western Front, p.185-186

<sup>iii</sup> Gen. 45:1-9 selected

<sup>iv</sup> Romans 5:20b,21

<sup>v</sup> Ted Loder, New Rules of Engagement, P.143