
Living the Dream

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 19 – Year A

If you're thinking about having more than one child, or you know someone who is, I would not recommend reading the Book of Genesis. If you're thinking about getting married, or you know someone who is, I would not recommend reading the Book of Genesis. If you're thinking about going to visit some relatives you haven't seen in a long time, I would not recommend reading the Book of Genesis. Why? Because for all the hype about the Bible being a kind of guidebook on how to have a happy, wholesome and harmonious family life, it really isn't. It isn't this kind of book. Families don't come off that well in Holy Scripture, they don't come off well at all. There is enough fighting and cheating and lying and stealing and hair pulling and "he said-she said" to rival even the most graphic episode of *The Jerry Springer Show*.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Book of Genesis. This morning's reading from Genesis chapter 50 finds Joseph—you remember Joseph, the kid with the coat of many colors; the one with the brothers by another mother who hated Joseph so much that they threw him into a pit, rubbed animal blood on his clothes and went home fake crying to tell his father he was dead; the brothers who sold Joseph into slavery; the brothers who, years afterwards in the middle of a terrible famine, had to hightail it to Joseph to beg forgiveness so they wouldn't starve. This morning's reading from Genesis finds that same Joseph once again facing these same brothers, and it appears they may be making nice for some pretty self-serving purposes. Jacob, their old man, is dead now, and the brothers are worried about their future. So they tell Joseph, *Hey, man, no hard feelings, right? By the way, did you know that Dad's dying wish was that we would reconcile so you could pay off all our outstanding credit card debt?* Or something like that.

Honestly, my temptation here is just to tell Joseph to stick it to his siblings, to give them a taste of their own medicine. I suspect I'm not alone in this. Conventional wisdom says Joseph is crazy to keep forgiving these guys who have done him wrong again and again and again. What's that saying? *When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.*

Here's the thing about Joseph, though: He doesn't seem all that interested in conventional wisdom. He doesn't seem to subscribe to the usual assumptions about human nature, assumptions about enmity and recrimination and what you should do when someone betrays you. Remember what his brothers say about him earlier on in the Book of Genesis? "Here comes that dreamer!" They mean this as an insult, but, actually, they've gotten it just right. Joseph is a dreamer and in the best possible sense. It's not just that he has his own dreams or that he can interpret other people's dreams, it's that he's open to what the late theologian Verna Dozier called "The Dream of God." You've probably heard about this before from Bishop Curry. There is an alternative to the death spiral of violence and hate and recrimination that mar so much of what passes for life in our world, and that alternative is the Dream of God. That alternative is God's dream for our lives. That alternative is the story of God, and God longs for that story to become our story as well.

There is an alternative to the death spiral of violence and hate and recrimination in our world. So it is that in today's reading, despite the fact that his brothers have wronged him over and over and over again, Joseph can say to them, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good." Joseph can say things like this and mean it. It's kind of a miracle, really. It's kind of a miracle because here's this guy who's been let down so many times, and, in spite of it all, he is still willing to place his bets on the loving purposes of God rather than on the hateful schemes of humans. It's a miracle.

Several thousand years later, this same miracle pops up in the life of a young girl who is just minding her own

business when suddenly an angel of the Lord comes to her and announces that she is pregnant with the Son of God. You can already hear the neighbors starting to gossip over at the local hair salon, can't you? *Did you hear about Mary? Mary, who's engaged but not yet married?* You can already hear the neighborhood gossips getting started with their stories. Fortunately, these are not the stories into which Mary chooses to insert herself. These are not the stories she decides to be a part of. Instead, Mary enters the wondrous story told by the angel when she asks how on earth all these strange and magnificent things are going to happen. I mean, the whole thing just seems ludicrous. To which the angel replies, "Nothing will be impossible with God."

Nothing will be impossible with God. This is how Jesus enters into our sad, distrustful, and cynical world. A world that disappoints us again and again and again. Jesus comes to be born into this world and to invite his followers, despite all our pain and skepticism—*Can anything good come out of Nazareth? This man eats with tax collectors and sinners!*—Jesus invites us to trade our own worn out narratives of death and destruction, narratives that say that when somebody hurts us, the only thing to do is to hurt them back. Jesus invites us to swap out these tired old narratives for the narratives of people like his ancestor Joseph.

This is actually, I think, what is going on in this morning's gospel lesson. I know it doesn't look like it. I know much of this gospel reading looks like shame and judgment. It looks like a threat. But I suspect all of its dramatic language and imagery is simply a way of presenting us, its readers, with two stories, holding out for our consideration two ways of being in this world. One is the way of life; the other, the way of death.

Jesus invites us to walk with him along the path of life, to live into the dream of a world in which radical acts of love and mercy become possible again and again and again. Not in some pro forma kind of way— seven times—but in an outrageous, out of control, even ill advised way— seventy-seven times.

I once saw an interview with a woman whose son had been murdered. She was speaking with the man who had killed her child and talking about how it was that, over time, she became able to forgive him. The person conducting the interview, the guy who was facilitating this conversation between the bereaved mother and the person who took her child's life—the person conducting the interview at one point blurted out, "Well, I just couldn't do it, what you've done. I could never forgive someone who killed my child." To which the mother responded, "I can't do it, either, but God can." Friends, this is the sort of dream to which Jesus calls us. This is the sort of story inhabited by that dreamer Joseph. You and I can inhabit it, too. It is ours to enter, ours to live, ours to embrace. For nothing will be impossible with God. Amen.