Foundational Stories #10 of 24:

"The Coat of Many Colors"

Rev. Bill Pinches

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

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Jealousy. Sibling rivalry. Favoritism. Hatred. Murder. Deception. And a very dysfunctional family. That's what we are dealing with in today's foundational story from the book of Genesis!

If you are just joining us, we are working through our way through a series of pivotal stories in the early chapters in the Bible, stories about the founding mothers and fathers of Israel. We have heard about three generations of biblical patriarchs and matriarchs – Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and his two wives and two mistresses – and now we come to the fourth generation: the children of Jacob, twelves sons and one daughter. Those twelve sons will give rise to the twelve tribes of Israel.

We have seen in previous weeks how dysfunctional this family was. Abraham had two sons by two different women – his wife, and his wife's slave – and then Abraham banished his elder son at his wife's request, even though it had been *her* idea that he sleep with her slave woman in the first place. Jacob swindled his twin brother out of the family inheritance and then, with the help of his mother, stole his father's sacred blessing. Jacob fled for his life when his brother was threatening to kill him and spent twenty years living far from home, where he was tricked by his uncle into marrying the wrong woman, and ultimately ended up married to both of his cousins. Both of those woman had Jacob sleep with their maidservants in a ridiculous contest of jealousy and will. Note, by the way, that makes *three* slave women who were forced to sleep with their master, in this founding family of the people of Israel.

What is so striking to me in all of this – I've said this before – is just how *brutally honest* these stories are about the raw realities of all this family drama. The biblical writer makes no effort to present these people in a good light. These people are filled with jealousy, insecurity, bitterness, envy, hatred, rage, and so much more. There's also *faith*, a remarkable trust in God in the midst of and in spite of all these all-too-human emotions and actions, but honestly that faith feels more like a *subplot* in the story than the main theme. These people are not presented as either heroes or saints. It is such a contrast to what we might *expect*. Often, we dress up our founding stories to make the main characters seem like larger-than-life heroes. Take, for example, the story about George Washington and the cherry tree. A six-year-old Washington damages his father's cherry tree with a hatchet. His dad gets angry, and the boy bravely confesses, "I cannot tell a lie, Pa, you know I can't tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet." That story is completely made up; it is a work of pure fiction, created by an Episcopal priest named Mason Locke Weems. We have this tendency to idealize our founding fathers, to dress them up in ways that present them as larger-than-life, that cover up their flaws, that make them seem perfect. But the Bible doesn't do that. The flaws of these founding mothers and fathers of Israel are right in plain sight!

So, today's story is about that fourth generation, the twelve sons of Jacob, a collection of brothers and half-brothers. Joseph is the second-youngest of them all, and he is the eldest son of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel. That makes him extra special in Jacob's eyes. The story begins when Joseph is 17 years old. He and four of his older half-brothers are responsible for shepherding Jacob's extremely large flock. Evidently, Joseph's half-brothers weren't being very responsible with it, and Joseph "brought a bad report of them to their father." That, of course, did not go over well. Joseph was a tattletale. It also did not go over well when Joseph received, as a gift from his father, a very special coat that Jacob had made for him. This is another case where there's a Hebrew word whose meaning is rather unclear. The coat has traditionally been called a "coat of many colors," but some biblical scholars think it might have been a "long tunic with sleeves" or a "long-sleeved robe." Some translations simply call it a "special robe" or "an ornamented robe" or "an ornate robe." Some of you may be familiar with the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical that is based on this story, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. My mother informed me two days ago that there's also a Dolly Parton song called "Coat of Many Colors" in which Dolly remembers a coat that her mom had made for her out of rags. "As she sewed," the lyrics go, "she told a story / From the Bible she had read / About a coat of many colors / Joseph wore." This fancy coat that Jacob had made for Joseph was, in the eyes of his half-brothers, the second strike against him.

Then there was a third strike. We skipped over this in the reading earlier, but it's important. Joseph dreamed two unusual dreams, and he foolishly told his brothers about them. In the first, Joseph and his brothers were binding sheaves in the field, and then Joseph's sheaf "rose and stood upright," and his brothers' sheaves gathered around and started bowing down to it. In the second dream, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were all bowing down to him. It's not always wise to tell other people about your dreams! Joseph's brothers react very negatively; they think Joseph is being pompous and arrogant: "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" Joseph's father didn't like it either; Jacob rebuked him and said, "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 "they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words," and "his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind." Now it turns out that these were prophetic dreams; there's going to be a whole sequence of events over the next eight chapters that lead to exactly that: Joseph's family bowing down before him, because he will be in a position of power, and they will need his help – but of course none of them know that yet. These dreams are the one and only place where God *speaks* in this long story about Joseph. It's very subtle. *Nobody* realizes that Joseph's two special dreams are actually from *God*. What is happening is that God is helping to create a situation that will lead to whole lot of *bad things* happening to Joseph, which ultimately will result in a *good* outcome for Joseph and all the members of his family. But *none of them know that*. God is at work, but it's not obvious to *anybody*. Sometimes, we don't realize when God is doing something in our lives, until much, *much* later on.

So Joseph's half-brothers do not like him *at all*. They're jealous; they're resentful; they're angry. They're hurting, although none of them are mature enough to realize that. There are very unhealthy family dynamics going on here – unhealthy family dynamics that have been going on for several generations now, because unhealthy dynamics tend to pass on from one generation to the next, unless somebody in the family comes along who is willing to do a whole lot personal work to grow *out* of the family's bad habits. But nobody is that mature in this family. So one day when Joseph travels quite a ways in search of his half-brothers, they see him coming, and they decide to act on their collective jealousy, resentment, and anger. They start talking about *killing* him. Because that's the best way to

solve a family problem, right? Just *kill* the offending brother? Of course not! But that's what they decide. That's what far too many people decide. You may have heard this saying: "Hurt people hurt people." It's true. The worst bullies and thugs are people who are hurting deep, deep, *deep* inside.

"Here comes this dreamer," the half-brothers say to one another. "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." One of them – Reuben – doesn't like this plan. Reuben was one of the sons of Jacob's first wife Leah. He *alone* among Joseph's older half- brothers seems to have something of a conscience. He says: "Let us not take his life.... Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him." Secretly, he planned to come back later and rescue Joseph, but he didn't dare tell his brothers that. For all he knew, he might have wound up in that pit with Joseph too.

So Joseph comes to his half-brothers ... and they *assault* him. They rip that pretty robe right off his shoulders. They throw him in a deep, dry pit. If left there for days, he would surely die. Then what do they do? They sit down to eat! Sit down to eat, while their younger half-brother is either yelling for help, or unconscious from the fall. While they are eating, they see a group of traders coming along, "a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt." The Ishmaelites were these brothers' second-cousins – grandchildren of Ishmael, the elder son of their great-grandfather Abraham, the son whom Abraham had banished. It's all in the family! Judah, one of the half-brothers, has an idea: what if they *sell* Joseph, rather than *kill* him? "What profit is it 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." Don't kill him ... just sell him into slavery. Make a little *money* off of this hideous deed. Incidentally, it is *Judah's* line of descendants that Jesus will ultimately be born into, and Jesus also ends up getting sold for profit, so to speak, doesn't he? Remember the thirty pieces of silver that the chief priests paid Judas when he agreed to betray Jesus to them? Why is it that some people like to *profit* off of cruelty to other people?

Then some Midianites come along. Midianites were *also* part of the family; they were the grandchildren of yet *another* son of Joseph's great-grandfather Abraham, born to a woman Abraham married after his first wife Sarah died. The Midianites get Joseph out of the pit, and then Joseph is sold to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. He is taken to Egypt, where he is bought by the captain of the guard of the Egyptian Pharaoh. We'll pick up his story next week. Meanwhile, his half-brothers take his robe and dip it in the blood of a goat that they slaughter. They take the bloody robe to their father and lie to his face, so Jacob is led to believe that his beloved son has been slain by a wild animal. "Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days."

That's where we are going to leave it for today. Joseph is a slave; his half-brothers are guilty of a terrible sin; their father is grievously mourning ... and, behind the scenes, *God* is at work. God gave Joseph those dreams that his half-brothers hated. God also *allowed* all these things to happen to Joseph. God did not intervene; God did not stop them; just as God does not stop the evil things that we humans *continue* to do today. *God is up to something in Joseph's life that he has no knowledge of.* That does not in any way *excuse* what Joseph's half-brothers did to him. But it does mean that sometimes *more is going on* than what we can see with our eyes. We humans do the *worst possible things* to one another ... and sometimes God is at work behind the scenes, with a marvelous plan that we know *nothing* about.

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