

## A STORY-SHAPED GOD: READING GENESIS

### *Dreamer: Joseph and His Brothers*

Genesis 37:21-28

February 2, 2025

I wonder if you have ever noticed that some questions sound more like dares. Here's an example. *Do you really believe that God is in control? If so, why this mess?*

I confess I wasn't prepared for that one. Not before 8 AM, in Starbucks, from a stranger, when my air pods were giving a clear signal that I was not available for any conversation, much less a theological debate. And yet, I probably should have anticipated it. After all, there was a Bible on the table in front of me, right next to it Marilynne Robinson's book *Reading Genesis*.

The very first line of her book reads, "The Bible is a theodicy, a meditation on the problem of evil. This being true, it must take account of things as they are. It must acknowledge in a meaningful way the darkest aspects of the reality we experience, and it must reconcile them with the goodness of God." In other words, the question of God's control is crucial to the subject of our sermon series.

And that same question runs like a vein through the story of Joseph. It's the longest and most dramatic narrative in Genesis. Its arc stretches across fourteen long chapters and more than a century of elapsed time. From birth to betrayal. From slavery to sovereignty. From Promised Land to Egyptian Empire, we track the life of this complex man and the complicated family to which he belongs.

*Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children.* Uh oh. Here we go again. Parental favoritism is nothing new to the stories of Genesis. Remember, Jacob himself was a favorite. And so, he proudly parades his preference for Joseph right in front of his brothers.

When we meet Joseph, 17 years old, he is, in Robinson's words, "young, bright, and self-infatuated, blind or indifferent to the resentment that is already stirring around him..." With pride, Joseph recounts a pair of dreams he had in which his brothers (we assume) symbolically bow down to him. Friends, this is not a

method for endearing yourself to your older siblings. It is, however, a very good way to stoke the flames of their resentment.

This is exactly what happens, of course. They conspire against him. They first plan to kill him and finally settle on a deep pit, where they toss him in with no water. It is the desert after all. Then they sit to enjoy their lunch, presumably in full sight of their brother, now deep in a pit. Ultimately, Joseph's life is spared by the value he holds to some traveling traders. For twenty pieces of silver, they are rid of their brother for good. No more parades. Those dreams will never become reality. Or so they assume. But Genesis gives us a tasty bit of foreshadowing when the brothers say to one another, "We shall see what will become of his dreams." And so, they shall.

Joseph and his brothers belong to one human family whose story is the story of the whole human family. This family is chosen by God, not for its particular holiness, but as representatives of universal themes that play out differently in each context. Perhaps you remember the opening line of Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." So it is with the family whose narrative fills the pages of Genesis. And I think we can take some comfort in their selection. Despite the filtered pictures and carefully curated posts that fill our social media feeds, we know the truth. Families are messy. Families are complicated. Relationships are difficult and often painful. We are most capable of wounding and receiving wounds from those who are closest to us.

We know it by experience and by intuition—human beings tend to make a mess of everything, especially the relationships that are most meant to sustain and nourish us. How often we find ourselves immediately regretting a harsh word spoken to one we love. How many opportunities for deeper connection we forfeit by choosing selfish pride, or cold detachment, or grudges delicately nursed, sometimes for decades. The gift of

Genesis is that it is not disconnected from this reality. Quite the contrary. And so, we in the Church should be very careful not to turn scripture into a kind of sacred, sanitized story of saints unsullied by sin. The Bible will not permit this kind of reading. Marilynne Robinson described it as the "special genius" of scripture that it sees no one as simple. This is certainly true of Joseph and his brothers. We are meant to see in them a kind of mirror, a mirror of our own brokenness and our capacities for good. More on that next Sunday.

It may have occurred to some of you careful listeners that there is one notable absence from this morning's scripture readings, from the whole of Genesis 37. God. The God whose voice and presence have been ubiquitous in the stories of Joseph's ancestors. We find God all over the stories of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. But God is absent from Genesis 37.

Why is the voice of God never heard in this troubling story of human interactions? How can there be no divine intervention on Joseph's behalf? Where is God in this story? *Do you believe that God is in control? If so, then why this mess?*

Perhaps you have asked that very question as you navigate the choppy waters of relationships. Maybe you have lamented the absence of God in a moment of profound suffering or a season of deep grief. Or you've questioned how God could possibly allow evil to endure and the innocent to bear the brunt of abuse at the hands of the powerful. You may feel that way today.

In the story of Joseph, and in our own stories as well, we must occasionally read between the lines if we are to find God. In Genesis, as we've seen time and again, humankind is never without agency or choice. Humans have freedom. We have autonomy. And the effects of this autonomy often take the form of destruction and demonization. We are capable of such catastrophe.

Brothers, plotting to kill their own kin. And yet, this is not the whole story. We shall see what will become of Joseph's dreams, because the dreams of brothers bowing down are not the only ones Joseph will have. Dreams are the constant of Joseph's life. Though hidden and invisible, the dream is the work of God on which all will depend. You could say the dream sets its own course. And in the end, the dream prevails.

Through his brothers' deplorable and deceitful action, Joseph finds himself quite unexpectedly in Egypt, where the dream lives on. And many years later, as second in command to Pharaoh himself, Joseph's dreams save this family from starvation in the land of promise.

Like Jacob in his sackcloth of grief for a lost son, like brothers blinded by jealousy and driven first by rage and then regret, like Joseph whose journey takes him from depths to heights by fantastic means, we may think we know how our story ends. We may be convinced that all is lost, that we've fallen too far, that the forces of light and goodness are defeated. And if you are tempted to believe this—please hear me now. This is not the end. Growing seeds do not make much noise. I remember my mentor's words to me in a time of deep fear and doubt in my own life. "Chris, you cannot prove the promises of God in advance, but if you live them, they're true every time."

The dream. The dream sets its own course. The dream lives on.

The choice available to us, every day in countless ways, is this: where will we place our attention, and where will we devote our energy? Will we be captive, victim to the endless cycle of rage and retribution? Or will we look for signs of light and life and use our agency, our energy, to extend and expand them?

Early this week, I had the opportunity to spend about 72 hours at Ghost Ranch, a Presbyterian retreat center in northern New Mexico. I was there with a group of twelve pastors from all over the country for a time of reflection and prayer. We stepped away from the rushing current of our lives, and we did it together because it's easier that way. Ghost Ranch is the perfect place to retreat. For some reason, it felt natural in that place to go hours without checking the news or reading messages. (Apologies for all your emails still waiting for my replies!)

The high desert is a testament to the grandeur and beauty of God, as well as the astounding resilience of creation. That place is part of a long story. Mesas that were home to dinosaurs in the late Triassic Period over 200 million years ago. Trees whose sturdy roots have held through hundreds of years of wind and unrelenting sun. Every direction I turned, there was testimony to a God who plays the long game. Witness to the truth that even the desert is home to growing things.

Of course, while we were gone, the world kept turning. Horrific acts of violence continued unabated. The most vulnerable among us—sick babies, hungry children, impoverished elders, those without home or homeland—were caught in the crosshairs. Yes, we stepped away, but the endless cycle of chaos and wrath, rage and reaction, rolled on. On the plane ride home, I read the words of grief-stricken family members whose loved ones did not make it home.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, a wise teacher said, “Our purpose here is to transform people so that they can transform their communities when they return.” It was a mission statement, a reminder that there is work. There is work that is ours to do. Right in front of us. Friends, the providence of God does not absolve us—it emboldens us. The God who fills the arroyos with lifegiving water and rescues Joseph from the waterless pit will surely make a way for us in the wilderness.

And so, we come finally to the answer I wish I'd given in Starbucks last week, though I imagine my interlocutor would have been unsatisfied.

The answer is yes. Yes, I believe that God is in control. Not as a puppeteer, but as author of a story still unfolding. Yes. Yes, I believe that God's ultimate vision is one of mercy and grace, of compassion and justice. Yes, I believe that the promised day will come. And I also believe that God's mercy manifests in restraint that makes space for human beauty and compassion but does not conceal our brokenness.

God leaves work for us to do.

As it is in Joseph's story, so it is in ours as well. God's dream sets the course. Despite detour, delay, and even despair, we must find the courage to trust and the faith to follow this dream. Amen.