

A lot has happened since last week’s reading about the call of Abraham and today’s reading about Abraham’s great-grandson Joseph being thrown into prison. Not only have three generations passed filled with enough family conflict and dysfunction to make a pretty entertaining HBO series, but there is also a change in how the ways by which the Lord God interacts with the world are described. It is this change that I hope to make the main point of this sermon, but I think it will be beneficial for all of us to do a quick recap of what has been happening with Abraham’s family and how covenant the Lord God made with Abraham is playing out.

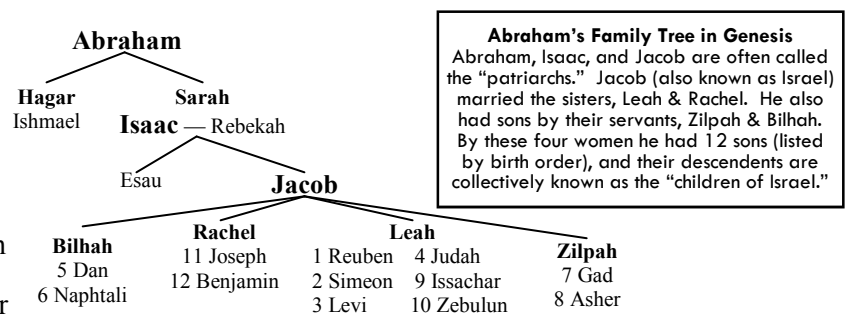
I invite you to refer to the high quality graphic I made of Abraham’s family tree further down the page. Last week we heard the 3-fold covenant (promise) of land, descendants, and blessing the LORD God made to Abraham. We talked about that being chosen by God is not about being chosen “because” but being chosen “for”. That is, God chose Abraham not because Abraham was more faithful, smarter, wealthier or because God loved Abraham more than the Canaanites or Egyptians, but that God chose Abraham and his family for the purpose of being the means by which God would bless all the peoples of the earth.

The first challenge to this promise was that Sarah and Abraham were childless, and it is kind of hard to have many descendants if you don’t have at least one to start with. Sarah thought that God maybe needed a little help with keeping this promise, so she suggested that Abraham have a child with her Egyptian servant, Hagar. Abraham agreed and Ishmael was born, but God in effect said, “Thank you very much but I don’t need any help keeping my promises.” Soon after, Sarah gave birth to Isaac.

The second challenge to the promise was that Isaac and his wife, Rebekah, had twin sons. Through which of them would the promise flow? In that culture, one would assume that it would be Esau, the first-born son, that God would choose. But surprise! it is Jacob, the younger son, through whom the promise flows. Not only that, but Jacob wrests the blessing from his brother by devious means, taking advantage of Esau when he was hungry and deceiving his elderly, nearly-blind father. In a vengeful rage, Esau threatens to kill Jacob, so Jacob flees back to Haran, where Abraham and Sarah lived when they heard God’s call. Jacob meets and falls in love with Rachel and strikes a deal with her father Laban for her hand in marriage – seven years of work to marry Rachel. But when the wedding night comes, the tables are turned on Jacob and he who had deceived his brother and father now fell prey to deceit himself. When Jacob awoke the morning after his wedding, he discovered he had been tricked and had married Rachel’s older sister, Leah. (There must have been alcohol involved!) When confronted with this deceit, Laban replied, “Oh, don’t you know our customs, that a younger sister cannot marry if her older sister is not married first? It was necessary that you marry Leah, but the good news is that you can still marry Rachel. You’ll just have to work for me for another seven years. So Jacob worked for 14 years and ended up with two wives, though Rachel was his true love and his favored wife.

Then begins a rather bizarre baby contest that you can follow in this Family Tree (the sons are numbered in birth order). Bearing children comes easily for Leah, and she gives birth to four sons in quick succession. As you might imagine, a little sisterly taunting ensues: “Nanny, nanny, boo-boo, I have four sons and you don’t have any. I guess Jacob must like me best.”

A frustrated Rachel goes to Jacob and, like Sarah had done two generations earlier, says, “Have children with my maid, Bilhah, and I’ll claim them as my own.” Jacob said, “Okay,” and Bilhah gives birth to two sons and Rachel is happy. Leah responds, “No fair, two against one!” She goes to Jacob and says, “Have children with my maid, Zilpah, and I’ll claim them as my own.” Jacob said, “Okay,” and Zilpah gives birth to two sons and Leah is happy. In fact, Leah herself then gives birth to two more sons and finally, Rachel becomes a mother and gives birth to first Joseph and then Benjamin. Tragically, Rachel dies in childbirth with Benjamin.



The reason this is important is that there is now a third challenge to God’s promise to Abraham. Instead of the challenges of having no children or choosing between two children, now the challenge is through whom does the promise flow when there are multiple children? In this case, it is going to be Joseph, who by our count is the 11th-born son, but more importantly in that culture, Joseph is the first-born son of the favored wife, Rachel. So Joseph becomes his father’s favorite, as evidenced by the special coat he gives to Joseph which had long sleeves indicating that he wasn’t expected to do manual labor. (The old King James version translated it as “coat of many colors” which Donny Osmond made famous in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat*.) Joseph knows he’s the favorite and his brothers know it, which as you can imagine generates a lot of jealousy and conflict.

Young Joseph shares two dreams with his older brothers, both of which clearly infer that he will rule over his brothers and they will serve him. That doesn't go over so well with his brothers, so when the opportunity presents itself, they beat Joseph up, sell him to some traders headed for Egypt, and they put some blood on Joseph's coat and take it to Jacob, allowing him to think that his favorite son has been killed by a wild animal.

There is now a new challenge to God's promise to Abraham. Joseph is no longer in the land of Canaan, the land promised to Abraham. He is in Egypt, a foreign land with foreign gods. Back in the time of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were not monotheists. They worshiped the LORD God, whom we sometimes call Yahweh, but they did not understand this Yahweh to be the one, universal God. In their limited understanding, Yahweh was the God of their family in Canaan. They assumed that if they went to other lands, the people of those lands had their own gods. So this is indeed a crisis for Joseph to go to Egypt. What will happen to him there, outside the reach of Yahweh?

Our reading today begins "Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, bought him from the Ishmaelites." This next line is very important: "The LORD was with Joseph!" That was a huge insight, that Yahweh, the LORD, was not limited to the land of Canaan. Furthermore, the LORD's promise that the all the families of the earth will be blessed through Abraham's descendents starts happening right away. "Potiphar (an Egyptian) saw that the LORD was with Joseph, and that the LORD caused all the Joseph did to prosper in his hands...From the time that Potiphar made Joseph overseer, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the LORD was on all that Potiphar had, in house and field."

Okay, now it's time for me to attempt to get at that main point of the sermon that I alluded to earlier. In the first three generations, the LORD God acts directly. Whether by dreams or some type of sacred experience of God's presence, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all experience God addressing the covenant to them. They hear God's voice, or sense God's call, and they respond in trust and faith.

Not so with Joseph. The writer affirms that the LORD is with Joseph, but nowhere in this long story does Joseph have a theophany nor does it say that he somehow responded in faith. It is not claimed that because of the LORD being with him everything will work out for Joseph. It is not promised that Joseph will easily be saved from trouble. What the writers describe is that the LORD is at work in inscrutable ways, ways that are impossible to understand. In the face of the power of empire, in this case Egyptian power, there is a hidden, life-giving power of God at work to ultimately bring about God's promises. At the very end of the story, after the family has been reconciled and all have moved to Egypt, Joseph reflects on what has happened to him and says to his brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today." I doubt that Joseph would have said "God intended it for good" at the time he was beat up by his brothers or sitting in prison on false charges by Potiphar's wife. But looking back over the years, he could see that God was able to somehow bring about good out of evil. That's what we see through the eyes of faith, that God is working his purposes out in our lives, sometimes without our awareness, and that is what instills hope in us in spite of the challenges and tragedies of life.

At the same time, this story of Potiphar's wife reminds us that life is lived at great risk. We humans are fragile beings, subject to illness, old age, and tragic accidents. We humans are capable of doing terrible things to one another, whether it is brothers beating up their brother, a parent abusing a child, a woman falsely accusing a man so that he ends up in prison, or a terrorist beheading a journalist. We humans are also capable of great good. As the story of Joseph continues, we see that he uses his leadership and management skills to put together a plan that spares not only his family but also the Egyptians from the dire consequences of a famine. It was his expertise that kept people from being hungry.

There is a struggle between real life (life is difficult) and real faith (God can be trusted to fulfill God's promises). There is a tendency for us to emphasize one or the other – that God ultimately has everything under control and that what happens in life it totally up to us. The story of Joseph reminds us that this is another dialectic, one of those "either/or" questions that is answered with a "yes." In the life of faith, we both fully rely on God and we fully engage human experience. Or, as someone once put it, "Pray as if everything depends on God, then act as if everything depends on you."