The Messy Life of Joseph

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 37:1-11

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I assume you’re here today because you want to know God or at least want to know something about God. But here’s the problem as I see it. We want our lives to go according to plan, our plan, that is! We have really strong opinions about the way we want our lives to play out.

We want God to bless our plans. And, when life doesn’t go according to plan, we become a little testy with God; even annoyed, perhaps. There may even become times when we are tempted to “unfriend” God.

Allow me to illustrate with a simple diagram. Your plan and mine is portrayed at the top of this drawing. We want a straight line progression toward achieving our life’s goals. God’s plan at the bottom resembles an obstacle course. There are all sorts of detours and surprises in store for us as we make our way toward the finish line.

God’s plan doesn’t exactly mirror our plan. God’s ways are not our ways. This shouldn’t come as any surprise to us. I spent considerable time this summer visiting family. I love my extended family but some of them don’t make sense to me. I don’t understand the way they think or what they do. If I don’t understand my own family, why should I expect God’s ways and thoughts to always make sense to me?

Evelyn Underhill wrote, “If God were small enough to be understood, he wouldn’t be large enough to be worshipped.” Can we learn to trust God when the circumstances of our lives don’t make sense to us?

Why am I telling you these things? It’s because Joseph’s life doesn’t go as planned. He must come to the place where he is willing to trust God when the circumstances of his life don’t make sense to him.

Joseph is the 11th of Jacob’s 12 sons, born to four different women. Why Jacob has 12 sons with four different women is a story for another day. Suffice it to say that he was duped by his Uncle Laban to marry his two cousins, Rachel and her less desirable sister, Leah.

Leah conceives children with Jacob and bears six sons in quick succession. Rachel’s infertility causes her to take desperate measures. She arranges for her maid, Bilhah, to act as her surrogate to bear two more sons for Joseph. Leah, not to be outdone, puts forward her own servant, Zilpah (don’t you love the names!) for the same purpose. Two additional sons are born to Jacob. Finally, God answers Rachel’s heartfelt prayer. She gives birth to two sons, Joseph and Benjamin.
Joseph is the eldest son born to Jacob’s true love, Rachel. Our narrator tells us unapologetically, “Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other sons” (37:3). Jacob fashions for Joseph an elaborate robe to signify his family preference.

Doesn’t Jacob know parents are not supposed to play favorites! This is elemental, my dear Watson, Parenting 101. Every time Joseph sports his amazing technicolored dream coat, it’s like waving a red flag before a bull. It sends his brothers into a jealous rage. “They hated him and could not speak a kind word to him” (37:4). Three times in a span of 11 verses we’re told they hate Joseph (37:4, 5, 8). Hate is a really severe word. It ought to tip us off that this hostility isn’t going to end well.

Joseph has two vivid dreams in our story. First, he dreams about bundles of grain called sheaves. These 11 sheaves representing his 11 brothers, bow before Joseph’s larger sheaf (37:5-8). In the second dream, the sun, moon and 11 stars genuflect before Joseph (37:9-11).

Why Joseph tells these ominous dreams to his brothers, I don’t know. Let me tell you, it doesn’t ingratiate him to his brothers, one little bit. Doesn’t he recognize that they’re not going to sit well with his already jealous brothers?

To be fair about it, Joseph is all of 17 years old. The toxic effects of his father’s favoritism have undoubtedly fueled his immaturity.

Nobody wears a white hat in this story. The father plays favorites, the 11 brothers are consumed with jealousy and Joseph is intoxicated with hubris. Come back next Sunday to see what happens. Don’t you hate it when you’re left hanging this way!

We’re not told by our narrator where these dreams originate. Do they come from God? God often uses dreams in Scripture to speak into people’s lives. Yet, dreams also originate in our subconscious. Dreams can bring to awareness secret thoughts and desires we have been unconsciously harboring. We’re not told whether these dreams originate with God or Joseph’s subconscious. We must be careful not to ascribe to Scripture more than we are told.

God is never mentioned in the first 11 verses of this story. This may seem like an omission since God is the chief protagonist in Scripture. We’re not told at this stage of the story what God is doing, if anything.
You could surmise that God is missing in action. But hold the phone! Things aren’t always what they seem, are they?

God sometimes works behind the scenes. God does some of his best work off stage and away from the center of the action. God doesn’t speak until 20 years into this story. God’s will is not disclosed until our story reaches a conclusion (45:5-8; 50:19-20). Sometimes it’s only as I look back that I see God working in my present circumstances.

At the outset of this story, Joseph is a brat, something of a tattletale. But he has one thing going for him. He’s a devout follower of God. You’ll see this faith dimension come to the surface later in our story. Joseph learns to trust God when the circumstances of his life don’t make sense.

Where exactly does faith originate in Joseph’s life? As near as I can tell, he learns faith from his parents. Jacob and Rachel, for all their flaws, are devoted to God. They are able to influence Joseph for faith even when they don’t have it all together.

You don’t have to have it all together to influence family or friends to follow Christ. Yet, it only stands to reason that if we want other people to go in the way of the Lord, we’ve got to be willing to go that way ourselves. If we don’t have faith and exercise it, it’s unlikely our children or other special people in our lives will embrace faith.

We’ve been promoting Worship+2 this past month in our church. Let’s be clear about why we have adopted this language. Newcomers and long-timers alike give us feedback that there is no clear roadmap to following Christ in this church. Worship+2 is our way of simplifying what we consider important.

First, worship—we want you to arrange your life to give worship higher priority this fall. Some of us are rather casual and haphazard about worship. Decide now to make worship a priority. Don’t wait until Saturday night or Sunday morning to decide to come to worship.

We’ve been doing our homework as church leaders about the value of people of all ages coming together for worship and Sunday school. If children only go to Sunday school and youth to Underground, the research shows that faith is less likely to stick into adulthood. That’s why we have arranged our Sunday morning schedule this fall so that adults and children/youth will be together in worship.
Second, +2—we want you to invest in one opportunity for spiritual growth and service in this church. To narrow the field, we’ve identified six possibilities for growth and six opportunities for service on cards in the pew racks. You want faith to take hold? Identify a place of growth and service in this church.

I talk often about the value of establishing a spiritual growth plan for your life. What do you need to do daily and weekly to become a better Christ-follower? We talk often about the importance of regular Scripture reading and prayer. Our daily devotional is designed to help you connect with God. Worship, small groups, classes and other gatherings with spiritual friends are ways to attend weekly to your growth in faith. A spiritual growth plan is no different than a business plan in your job or an exercise regimen for your health or budgeting time to manage homework at school.

Let me talk to men for a moment. Men are reluctant to join a group, class or anything that might be perceived as “touchy-feely.” Men are so cautious about engaging in any activity that will make them uncomfortable that they write off every opportunity for spiritual growth. When we started our men’s group four years ago, we emailed guys that we would not ask them to hold hands or pray out loud. The reaction was overwhelmingly positive. There are ways to grow in faith that fit our personalities and genders.

Joseph is about to enter a phase of his life where life will not go as planned. He’ll be traveling “off road” for the next 22 years. He will need to stay connected to God during this confusing season of his life. God will be leading him to learn trust even when the circumstances of life don’t make sense.

Maybe the circumstances of your life don’t make sense right now. This story can help us learn to trust God when the circumstances of our lives don’t make sense.

Life for Joseph is about to become messy, really messy. We’re only 11 verses into the story and we already have the makings of a colossal family conflict. But in the end, just you wait, God will prevail. God can prevail in your life also. So, do your part.