

Message: "Fighting Moral Blindness"

Scripture: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

37 Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. ²This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. ³Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. ⁴But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

⁵Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. ⁶He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. ⁷There we were, binding sheaves in the field.

Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf." ⁸His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. ⁹He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." ¹⁰But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, "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?" ¹¹So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

¹²Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. ¹³And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." ¹⁴So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. He came to Shechem, ¹⁵and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" ¹⁶"I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." ¹⁷The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. ¹⁸They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. ¹⁹They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. ²⁰Come 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." ²¹But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." ²²Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him" —that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father.

²³So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; ²⁴and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. ²⁵Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. ²⁶Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed. ²⁸When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

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Most sermons - at least, most sermons I have preached on this scripture - tend to focus on Joseph and his mistreatment, leading to his ultimate vindication through highs and lows that seem divinely orchestrated. As his traumas progressed, his reliance upon God grew, somehow giving him a steadiness of soul that carried him from slave to national leader; he prevailed because of his favored

status before God as well as his growing trust in God's plan. Now all of this is indeed a central message in this passage, but it is by no means the only message that the narrative reveals. There is another message here that's worth our attention, and it has to do with when humans repeatedly fail morally.

In order to get into this part of the story, let me ask you a question -- Have you ever ridden the lie train? At least that's what I call it - you get on board the lie train when you tell a lie, and then, in order to cover up that lie, you tell another lie, which leads you to lie about something else related, and then you lie to cover that lie, and so on and so on and so on? It's kind of like adding railroad cars to an already moving train, making travel more difficult, carrying more weight, slowing down and making less progress on the track of life. Now, you're all good Methodists, so I'm sure you have no idea of what I'm talking about - except, you are all human as well, and the lie train is something almost all human beings have ridden on sometime in the past, maybe even ridden on many different times - and there may be some who are on that train right now. And even though our scripture passage was written in a time way before trains of any sort existed, we have before us a family who begins riding their own lie train with a gusto that can only come from great family disfunction.

This is, of course, Jacob's family, which is a mess, filled with jealousies and favoritism and slander and rivalry and arrogance and deceit drawing everyone into a downward spiral heading towards great deception and even murder - it's as if the lie train they are riding will jump the tracks at any time.

Riding the lie train is worth our attention because even though most of our families are not like this, much of human behavior follows this pattern. Humans have proven again and again that they are prone to do bad things that build upon each other and seem to take on a life of their own; more and more effort is given to maintain the lie or coverup the transgression or silence the witnesses.....it's a vicious circle which dishonors the past, cheapens the present, and distorts the future for all involved. We can feel this effect at the end of this passage, where we have the overwhelming sensation that all is lost - Joseph is exiled into slavery, Jacob is inconsolable, and the brothers (two of whom displayed evidence of conscience) have to live with what they had done while keeping the deceit in place.

What I have called a downward spiral or taking a ride on the lie train has a name which I did not make up - it's called the practice of compounding deceptions. I found this description on a Facebook post called "The Real Fam" which is a site that talks about family disfunctions: "When a falsehood compounds, one untruth

requires subsequent fabrications to maintain coherence, creating an unstable web of self-deception or systemic distortion that grows increasingly exhausting to sustain and difficult to untangle."

This explains the struggles of many families; it also explains much of the chaos we see going on in the leadership circles of our world, especially in our country these days. Deceptions are being compounded by national leaders in order to make people believe in what serves their political agenda; convenient lies replace hard truths; files remain hidden, the news media becomes more silenced, votes are bought and sold, science is ignored, and the general confusion sowed by it all encourages people towards an apathetic response that serves well the normalization of such behaviors.

We can see this tendency in the brothers of Joseph as they work so very hard to move on from their dastardly deed. Cover-ups always take a lot of effort; one can never know when a slip of the tongue or a rogue witness might just spill the beans and bring the whole thing tumbling down. Time tends to work against the success of lying, for time has a habit of producing evidences and effects that hadn't been planned for; that Jacob, when told his favorite son was dead, would idolize Joseph even more was something perhaps the brothers hadn't considered; they lost even more of their father's attention than before. It is much later in the account of Joseph's redemption that we read of the brother's being scarred with regret over many long years - again, this is another cost of deception that is often overlooked until one is deep in the throes of its effects.

This brings us to two things that this passage identifies which can help us face the multiple examples where deception is being compounded - for one, the recognition that riding the lie train is exhausting; it takes a lot of effort to remain on board. No matter how many lies are told, the truth remains, perhaps covered up or distracted from for a long time, but truth is what is, not necessarily what we would want it to be. Truth has staying power whereas lies need constant reinforcement. We need to remember this for any approach to the future - that lies eventually lead to their own undoing.

Lyman Beecher was an American Presbyterian minister and abolitionist; he had some good advice on how to deal with deception. He said that we should "Never chase a lie. Let it alone, and it will run itself to death." There's a good deal of truth here; the upkeep of a lie often requires an enormous amount of energy - and sometimes our energy is better spent by not engaging directly in what will ultimately fail in and of itself.

This brings us to our second item in terms of what can help us face those who compound deceptions - the importance of playing an effective waiting game. It's something Joseph models as we move beyond this opening episode of his misadventures with his family. Joseph is cast into slavery and is exiled from his home - but he turns more and more to God as he faces his various traumas. I have no doubt that Joseph evolved in his trust in God, moving from the rather arrogant youth taunting his brothers with his superior standing, but then being plunged into slavery and desperation which left him in no doubt of his helplessness. It is often recognized that God favors the marginalized, those in prison or who hunger or who are cast aside by society, but perhaps it is just as true the other way around, that those who have lost the most in this world discover most clearly what is always left, which is God, and sometimes God alone. It is said that nothing brings what's real into better focus than profound suffering; it is the great clarifier of reality.

The story of Joseph might be thought of as an outline of how to play an effective waiting game in the midst of the cruelty of a world gone terribly wrong. When we cannot effect immediate change for the better, we have no choice but to wait; but how we wait can make all the difference. An effective waiting game does not mean becoming static or inactive; far from it. Effective waiting knows that even in the face of an unchangeable present, the future will always belong to those who hope for the right things, and hope for them actively in the present. In order to endure, we must live into our trust of those hopes especially when they seem so far away. This is always where God comes in, for God is in the business of effective waiting as well - waiting upon us, that is. God waits for us to live into worthwhile hopes - to perceive the importance of justice, the need for compassion, and the relevance of love to all worthwhile endeavors humans can undertake; God waits actively, prodding us on through the engagement of our consciences towards the ever-higher morality Jesus promoted, one where love is primary, forgiveness is standard, and justice cannot be ignored. Our waiting must be prepared to say no to anything that distracts us from this hope; our waiting must be prepared for the longer game of God's will over all.

I read something that I thought was a very helpful practice I intend to undertake as I continue to be discouraged and upset by the course of our world in so many situations. I would like to share this with you, but must warn you, it involves me swearing, which is something pastors ought not to do flippantly. This comes from Ally Henny's book "I Won't Shut Up" where she advocates regularly

taking the position she calls "Holy Hell No." A "Holy Hell No" refers to (and I quote) "a boundary we ardently assert and don't allow anyone to violate without experiencing our wrath." In other words, it is the practice of not remaining silent in the face of what is wrong with the world. One way of making our waiting effective is to practice our "Holy Hell No's" whenever we sense something is going against God's will. Joseph, for example, said "Holy Hell No" when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him; he also said "Holy Hell No" when he had the chance to exact his revenge upon his brothers desperate for his help. It is a helpful practice to keep our waiting effective, making sure we do not slip into the depravity of our days. It's saying "Holy Hell No" to ICE detention centers and wars of choice; it's saying "Holy Hell No" to hiding information and files to protect powerful figures involved in sexual exploitation crimes; it's saying "Holy Hell No" to anti-science, anti-education, and anti-inclusive ideologies that place political allegiance above human well-being and common sense; it's saying "Holy Hell No" to ballrooms and arches and gifted 747's meant to appease one person's ego; it's saying "Holy Hell No" to runaway technology like data centers and exploitative algorithm platforms that exploit users and communities for profit; it's saying "Holy Hell No" to anyone dying because they could not afford healthcare. In our waiting, to make it effective, we need to be ready and willing to say our "Holy Hell No's" to things that work against God's will, that take us off the path of Jesus.

To wrap things up, These are the three practices our passage invites us to employ as we endure these times:

Avoid riding the lie train; never get on board.

Play an effective waiting game by retaining the consistent hopes God places before us in Christ.

And practice your "Holy Hell No's" when anyone proposes anything as an alternative to God's will.

These are the kinds of things that helped Joseph endure a cold and cruel world; and these are the kinds of things that will help us endure the same.