

A Sermon by Alex Evans, Pastor
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA from Sunday, June 29, 2008
Selections from Genesis 37-50
“From Mess to Message”

I have been reading in these recent weeks Annie Dillard’s classic book, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek. This book was first published in 1974 and Annie Dillard won the Pulitzer Prize for it. It is a book of wonder, a book of meditation, a book of thoughtful reflections from her cabin in the woods, along Tinker Creek, which is just outside of Roanoke. She comments on nature and science, on grasshoppers and snakes and muskrats, on weather and the changing seasons, on beauty and grace, on life and death. She says this about herself – “I am no scientist – I am just a wanderer with a background in theology and a penchant for quirky facts.”

Here is a quote from Annie Dillard – “Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery ... We must somehow take the wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what is going on there. Then we can at least wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness, or, if it comes to that, choir the proper praise” (p.9)

I love that phrase – “our life is but a faint tracing on the surface of mystery.” On many days, most of us pretend that is NOT true. We live as if we are in charge and there is no mystery involved about anything. We assume we can do what we want to do. We set our schedules, we raise our kids, we make choices, we get and go and give here and there. Our culture even feeds this thinking.

But then there are other days when we know it is very true – our lives ARE but a faint tracing on the surface of mystery. We get a fresh sense, from any number of places, that life is short and fleeting. We find ourselves in some challenging mess, and we are not sure which way to turn. We find ourselves perplexed and confused, sad and beaten down. It may be decisions we are facing, or depression we are struggling with, or discouragement about life, or even the death of a loved one. It may be any number of issues that remind us life can be a mess, and we are not sure about many things – indeed our lives are a faint trace on the surface of mystery.

How do we live by faith and talk about faith in these messier moments? How do we discover God’s grace and presence and hope in the mess? Do words like “just trust God more” help? Do exhortations like “just serve God more,” or “just pray more,” or advice about what we should “do,” help? Maybe that works for some of us sometimes. There are those exhortations in Scripture.

But there is also something else – there is story. In stories, we discover new insights, maybe new faith, even real glimpses of God.

We have a story today from the last part of Genesis. It is the story of Joseph. Joseph comes in that important line of descendants from Abraham and Sarah. That lineage comes in the chapters preceding chapter 37 when we encounter Joseph. And up until the Joseph story, God is very involved – God talks, God tells Abraham and Sarah where to go, what to do. God expects faithful obedience. God is an active participant in their lives.

But when we get to chapter 37, and Joseph, it all shifts. It is mostly a narrative story. God is not talking, not demanding, not even actively present. Listen with me to portions of this story:

Genesis 37: 2-8; 19-28;

This is the story of Jacob. The story continues with Joseph, seventeen years old at the time, helping out his brothers in herding the flocks. These were his half brothers actually, the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought his father bad reports on them.

3-4 Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he was the child of his old age. And he made him an elaborately embroidered coat. When his brothers realized that their father loved him more than them, they grew to hate him—they wouldn't even speak to him.

5-7 Joseph had a dream. When he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said, "Listen to this dream I had. We were all out in the field gathering bundles of wheat. All of a sudden my bundle stood straight up and your bundles circled around it and bowed down to mine."

8 His brothers said, "So! You're going to rule us? You're going to boss us around?" And they hated him more than ever because of his dreams and the way he talked. (Some time later)

18-20 They spotted Joseph off in the distance. By the time he got to them they had cooked up a plot to kill him. The brothers were saying, "Here comes that dreamer. Let's kill him and throw him into one of these old cisterns; we can say that a vicious animal ate him up. We'll see what his dreams amount to."

21-22 Reuben heard the brothers talking and intervened to save him, "We're not going to kill him. No murder. Go ahead and throw him in this cistern out here in the wild, but don't hurt him." Reuben planned to go back later and get him out and take him back to his father.

23-24 When Joseph reached his brothers, they ripped off the fancy coat he was wearing, grabbed him, and threw him into a cistern. The cistern was dry; there wasn't any water in it.

25-27 Then they sat down to eat their supper. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites on their way from Gilead, their camels loaded with spices, ointments, and perfumes to sell in Egypt. Judah said, "Brothers, what are we going to get out of killing our brother and concealing the evidence? Let's sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let's not kill him—he is, after all, our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed.

28 By that time the Midianite traders were passing by. His brothers pulled Joseph out of the cistern and sold him for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites who took Joseph with them down to Egypt.

This story is about God's faithful people – the family of Abraham and Sarah, the family of the promise – through whom the world will find blessing. It is the story of Joseph the beloved son of Jacob – through whom the line of promise would go. There is no mention of God in this story. It is a story about love. In fact, it is about a love triangle – there is Jacob the father loving one son more than the others; there is Joseph the son who maybe has been loved too much – he is spoiled, he is detested by his brothers because their father loves him more, he has been given a beautiful coat; and there are the brothers – who have not been loved enough, jealous and angry, even able to kill their own brother.

Love triangles are always dangerous. Where do you see yourself in this story? Maybe you can identify with Joseph – you have been showered with love and blessings, maybe you have been spoiled and had so much given to you on a platter, and others are jealous and angry at your very being. Maybe you can identify with Jacob – the doting father or mother just trying to love, and you see your love and labor spinning out of control because the child aggravates others, and cannot seem to sort life out. Or maybe you feel like the brothers – so jealous of what another has that you overlook all you have, so full of jealousy that everything loses perspective and it drives you to do regrettable things.

Love triangles are very complicated and they are only broken by honesty, and generosity, and forgiveness, andfinally God. So we will see what happens.

This story is also about a dream. And with the dream there is the dreamer, Joseph, and the killer of dreams, the brothers. There is the dream and the dream's results on others – more jealousy, more anger, more tension. And there is the dream and the dream emerging into reality, but not in the way anyone thought. The story of Joseph is actually the unfolding of this dream toward reality.

So let's jump a few chapters and get back into the story. At the end of chapter 37, there is this image of Joseph being carried off by gypsies toward Egypt. Is the promise of God done, finished? Joseph was the one to carry the promise. This is part of what makes the brothers mad – he is the youngest brother! Shall the first be last? We do not like that kind of arrangement – we think it is not fair. This is what makes the brothers mad enough to kill Joseph, mad enough to take his coat and throw him into the pit, and sell him into slavery, and tell his father he is no more. So at the end of 37, there goes Joseph off to Egypt, ostensibly forever, no more part of the story. Jacob, the father, is devastated with grief and heartache.

But by chapter 39, Joseph the slave is not just in Egypt, he has been bought by one of Pharaoh's managers, and it says that God was with Joseph. So God is not talking, not giving specific direction, not seemingly active, but God is very much present in the mess of life and the mess of this story. That is a good and powerful reminder. At various downturns and setbacks for Joseph, things seem to work out better than expected. And by chapter 45, Joseph has an influential position in Egypt. He is manager of the foodstores for Pharaoh in a time when the region is covered with famine. In fact, there is such famine in the land that Joseph's brothers come to Egypt in desperation, looking for food. And so much time has passed, and so many things have changed, that the brothers

do not know who Joseph is – they do not recognize him, even as they are asking him, begging him for grain for their family and livestock.

Hear a few more verses from the story from Genesis 45:3-6:

3 Joseph spoke to his brothers: "I am Joseph. Is my father really still alive?" But his brothers couldn't say a word. They were speechless—they couldn't believe what they were hearing and seeing.

4-6 "Come closer to me," Joseph said to his brothers. They came closer. "I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt. But don't feel badly, don't blame yourselves for selling me. God was behind it. God sent me here ahead of you to save lives.

The dream is working itself into reality. The brothers had already been bowing down and begging at Joseph's feet for food to address their famine, though they did not know it was Joseph. And when Joseph identifies himself by saying "I am Joseph," everything changes.

First, there is fear and great anxiety among the brothers. Would Joseph seek revenge for what they did to him, for throwing him into the pit and selling him as a slave? Would Joseph act in kind from his place of power and force his brothers into slavery? This is what they are fearing!

But secondly, grace and generosity emerge! Joseph says, "do not be distressed or angry because you sold me here. God sent me before you to save life. God sent me to preserve a remnant for the earth, to keep the promise."

In just three words – "I am Joseph" - everything is re-defined, especially because grace and generosity and God are at work. They thought he was dead – he is alive – their grief is overcome. They thought the promise was over, or finished – it is not! – God preserves life. They were worried, fearful of revenge, and he comforts them in their fear and guilt.

You see, we have a story here that intends to speak directly to the mess of our lives. Just when we think things are hopeless, God offers hope. Just when we might be filled with fear and guilt, God offers grace; in this story, it comes in Joseph's words. Just when we tend to be overwhelmed with whatever comes our way, the story reminds us that new things emerge. Joseph's dream imagines a different kind of day – and that dream is becoming a reality – not a reality of Joseph reigning in power over his brothers, but Joseph acting in love on behalf of his brothers from his place of power. God is at work here. The story shows the good news of God's ways! If you thought the Old Testament was only about wrath and failure and doom, and lacking gospel, here it is – it echoes that great verse from Romans – can anything separate us from God's love? Can tribulation or peril? Can Joseph's torn coat, or his tossing into the cistern, or his life as a slave destroy God's plans – no, nothing can separate us from God's love. God preserves life. Out of the mess of life, there is another message – God's love is there. Out of the mess of life – the scheming, the deceiving, the sadness and guilt, the fear and shame – God works new ways. It is all through this story. God's ways prevail! It is the story of Easter and hope. It is the story of all Scripture – God is present and at work and out of

the messes we make, God is still at work. This speaks to our lives and our world in these challenging days wherever we find ourselves.

There is one final and important piece to this story – it is in Chapter 50. Jacob dies – the father of Joseph and his brothers dies. Whenever a major player in the story dies, everyone’s role changes. Whenever the family dynamics change – as with the death of the patriarch – everything is up for grabs again. Hear these words from Genesis 50:

After burying his father, Joseph went back to Egypt. All his brothers who had come with him to bury his father returned with him. After the funeral, Joseph's brothers talked among themselves: "What if Joseph is carrying a grudge and decides to pay us back for all the wrong we did him?"

16-17 So they sent Joseph a message, "Before his death, your father gave this command: Tell Joseph, 'Forgive your brothers' sin—all that wrongdoing. They did treat you very badly.' Will you do it? Will you forgive the sins of the servants of your father's God?"

When Joseph received their message, he wept.

18 Then the brothers went in person to him, threw themselves on the ground before him and said, "We'll be your slaves."

19-21 Joseph replied, "Don't be afraid. Do I act for God? Don't you see, you planned evil against me but God used those same plans for my good, as you see all around you right now—life for many people. Easy now, you have nothing to fear; I'll take care of you and your children." He reassured them, speaking with them heart-to-heart.

See, the brothers are worried, still scheming that things may not be as settled as they seem. They still have guilt about what they had done to Joseph. If they have guilt, they worry that Joseph may still have a desire for revenge. And without the father to balance the family, maybe their lives are still in danger.

So they go and FALL DOWN. Do you remember the dream? It is becoming fully a reality. Guilt is the focus of the brothers – so they beg again for grace. But Joseph is driven not by power and reigning over his brothers – he is also filled with grace: “Do not be afraid – even though you intended it for harm, God intended it for good, in order to preserve life.” It is a possible summary for the whole Bible – do not be afraid – you intended it for harm – God intended it for good, in order to preserve life.”

All through this story, God never speaks. All through this story, there is no heavy emphasis on trusting God, or obeying God, or doing anything. It is simply a powerful story that asserts how we are often concerned with our plans, like the brothers, and then perhaps our guilt! Or we are often overwhelmed with our grief, even paralyzed, like Jacob. And life is so often a mess – hard, and complex, and uncertain, and confusing to the point of despairing. And then this is a story that speaks powerfully another message – God brings life in a world of death; God brings grace into hearts of guilt; God pours forgiveness upon the hurts; God brings healing into the most complex situations; God’s ways prevail – that is the message! The story speaks powerful good news to our lives and our world.

If we can believe this today – imagine, dream even – how differently our lives would be shaped. In a world of heartache and loss, we would be so confident of God’s ways that we would spread light and hope wherever we find ourselves. In a world of selfishness and self-righteousness, we would be so intentional about grace and goodness wherever we could – if we could really believe God’s ways prevail. In a larger church bickering, or a nation posturing for the election, we would know more about God’s abundant love that that love would be our focus. In a time of war and environmental concern, we would be so confident of God’s providence that we would work for peace and life all around – if we could really believe it.

Our life may be a faint tracing on the surface of mystery, but underpinning all things, overarching all things, even regardless of plans and Pharaohs and other circumstances, there is God’s abiding love and sustaining grace that will not let us go. May we believe this good news, and be so shaped by it that our lives and our world exude God’s love, grace, forgiveness, hope, and purposes. Alleluia. Amen

PrayerL Amazing God, you are always present, always loving, always working your ways of love, hope, light, peace, joy, and purpose. Help us to see your presence, to trust your purposes, and to serve you in all things following Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

This sermon was preached as a part of regular morning worship at Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA on Sunday, June 29, 2008 by Alex Evans, Pastor. This is a rough manuscript.