

Action and Mercy

Genesis 37:9-13, 22-31 and Luke 10:36-37 | Tenth Sunday After Pentecost | August 17, 2025 | Pastor John Klawiter, preaching

Grace and peace to you my friends in Christ,

The summer of Genesis here at Faith takes its final turn into the last main character.

Joseph.

We'll spend three weeks exploring the significance of Joseph's story—from this utterly awful account of his brothers—through what happens to Joseph in Egypt.

During much of the year, we focus on the gospel. We read the story each week about Jesus and reflect on how Christ's words and actions affect us today.

There might be a temptation to say that Jesus nullifies the Old Testament and makes everything new.

While the good news of the gospel is liberating and life-changing, it's a bit presumptuous to think everything from the beginning can be thrown out. There are lessons to be learned, but it's more important that we put on a different lens.

There is grace in the Hebrew Bible. There are many examples where God shows up. God is present, even when it feels like all hope is lost.

God shows up, the most often, when it comes to covenant.

Noah—God commits to no longer wiping out creation and makes a covenant through a rainbow. For ALL of creation—for all of our neighbors.

We move to Abraham, Father Abraham. Abraham and Sarah do not have kids, so Sarah suggests that to fulfill God's promise, Abraham and Hagar should have a child. They do. His name is Ishmael.

Which is great, until Sarah, at an advanced age, has a child herself. Isaac, laughter—because when they heard they'd have a child, Sarah laughs at ridiculous that thought is. Now that Isaac is here, despite a nearly catastrophic event, God demonstrates that this covenant is real.

Sarah then has no more use of Hagar and Ishmael, who get cast out, despite that close relationship and a belief that this son would become the heir to Abraham.

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Yet, at the death of Abraham, it's not just Isaac who tends to his dad. Ishmael is there, too.

Isaac will marry Rebekah and they have two sons, Jacob and Esau. We've spent many weeks digging into that complex story—of stolen birthrights and blessings—only for Esau to be waiting for Jacob.

Jacob, fearing the retaliation that he knows he deserves, wrestles with God and prevails. He becomes known as Israel. A new name that will eventually become a new nation.

When Jacob DOES re-encounter Esau, instead of bloodshed and brutality, Esau runs to embrace him.

Jacob has all this stuff to give him—hoping to buy his forgiveness—and Esau, reluctantly accepts the gift. Esau then suggests that they journey together, brothers, on the same team for the first time.

Jacob knows his people and flocks are frail and won't be able to keep pace. Esau goes ahead and Jacob takes his people and they settle in a city called Shechem.

It's in the land of Canaan. What's the first thing he does after arriving safely and knowing that he's on good terms with his brother Esau? He builds an altar to God. Kinda like Scandinavian settlers to Minnesota, what's the first thing they did? Built a church.

Jacob, when he met Esau, had a huge traveling party with his family.

Why? Because when he left Esau as a young man, he was tricked by his uncle Laban and is married to Leah, who struggles to have kids, so her maid conceives.

Eventually Leah has sons. But after Laban agrees, Jacob marries Rachel, whom he wanted to marry in the first place. They don't have kids right away either, so HER maid intervenes. Between the three mothers, Jacob now has 10 sons.

Then Rachel, who is the favorite, which the scripture clearly points out, has a son. Joseph. And right before Jacob re-settles in Canaan, Rachel has another son, Benjamin, after leaving Bethel, he's born before the tribe reaches a little town called Ephrath.

A little town we now call Bethlehem. Yet Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin. Another pivotal moment in the story. Rachel's sons, Joseph and Benjamin, are left to be raised by Leah and Bilhah and Zilpah.

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Jacob, much like Abraham and Isaac before him, gives preference to certain sons and it's not the first born. It's not the Reuben. It's clear to all of these sons who is favorite when Joseph will start telling them dreams about how they'll bow down to him.

It's clear through Jacob's actions when Joseph receives a beautiful coat—an ornamental coat, perhaps one of many colors—who the favorite is.

It's clear that these brothers, who've journeyed across the lands and who've worked for their father, feel slighted by the immense attention that Joseph and now Benjamin receive from their dad.

I think this is a feeling we can relate to. Have you ever felt someone received a position or credit for something ahead of you that they didn't deserve? Have we ever been in a situation on a team where someone played more or was put on a higher team because of their connection to the coach or someone with more influence?

These instances in our lives don't feel good when we are the ones who miss out on something we believe we are owed or entitled to. I've certainly had my share of moments growing up where I watched from the sideline while someone else played knowing that I could play better, but didn't get the chance.

For Jacob's ten oldest sons, the fact that they hatch a plan to get rid of Joseph doesn't shock me. If anything, we've seen an entire family tree worth of sibling rivalry, dating all the way back to Cain and Abel.

It's not so much that the act of conspiring to commit murder against a family member, then pivoting to sell them—to traffic them—is that unheard of to us. This happens all too often today.

The realization that hit me this week is that this feels incompatible with why we have a Bible in the first place.

It kinda throws out the logic on us when we wanna make the argument, "it's in the Bible, so that's how you should behave."

That's clearly not the case today. Yet, the value of this story might be in where it points us to Christ.

The part of today's story that really makes me struggle is that there are two brothers who ALMOST do the right thing.

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Reuben, even if it's for self-serving reasons, plans to save Joseph. As the oldest, his neck is on the line. He will at least need an explanation to come home and tell Jacob. He buys some time because he intends to save Joseph and return him to the father, as the hero.

But before he can do that, Judah gets the other brothers on board with a new plan. Again, it won't kill him, but it will bring them some money. Judah suggests they sell Joseph to the Midianite traders.

Reuben returns to see Joseph is gone, so he quickly acts to cover it up—making it appear that Joseph must've been slaughtered by a wild animal. But Jacob is devastated. First Rachel, now Joseph.

How would Jesus interpret this story to this point?

Many of the parables of Jesus bring us a bit more to consider—they rarely have a clear answer. Yet in the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan, we receive advice that's good news for all of us.

How should we treat someone who is in a helpless situation and is left for dead? Jesus makes it clear that the actions of the Samaritan man are who we model—the Samaritan is the one who showed mercy. Jesus says, "go and do likewise."

For us, isn't the expression to "go and do likewise" similar to the award presented on Lutheran Night at the Twins game? Zebby—short for Zebulon, one of the names of Joseph's older brothers by the way—got the Faith in Action award.

As Lutherans, our faith in action is what we've all about. We come to worship and this is a place to refuel, to recharge, to get ready for the world out there.

Out there is a world that looks a lot like the broken one that Joseph lived in. Our call to serve, our call to pray, our call to be good friends, our call to patience when someone DOES get something that we think we deserve... this is part of the Christian condition.

Christ calls us into something better than the mindset that we must achieve to prove our value and our worth. Jesus points out the small things—like a Samaritan man noticing a stranger and showing compassion and mercy.

The Joseph story isn't over yet. We have some big twists and turns ahead. Through Christ, we see ourselves in this tale—we see the ways God puts our faith in

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action. We hear the call to show mercy. We enter the world ready to serve, not to be served. Go, and do likewise. Amen.