

August 9, 19A (Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b)

Small graces can give us hope—even in the pit.

by [Michael Fick](#) in the [July 29, 2020](#) issue

Relationships, in all their frailty and goodness, are at the center of Joseph's life in both the worst and best of times.

Joseph's story is present in the collective imagination of even many who would not consider themselves biblically well versed. The story has been told and retold for centuries, and it remains of interest, with varying degrees of accuracy, to modern and postmodern storytellers of stage and film. Joseph the dreamer follows a well-traveled arc of suffering and restoration.

His suffering intensifies quickly in this selection from Genesis 37. It's tempting to paint Joseph as the young, well-meaning victim of circumstance at the hands of evil brothers and a doddering father, but it makes for a long story told quickly with flat heroes and villains. The richness of this text lies in the exploration of complex relationships: between parents and children, between siblings, and between God and God's beloved if rebellious people.

Joseph's position in his family is precarious because his relationship with his father is not one that would have been expected. As the youngest son, Joseph could expect to be last in many things: attention, prestige, inheritance. He could expect to be a helper for the rest of his life. The matter of dreams, mentioned here and explored further in the section omitted from this reading, makes him a figure of both interest and envy that seems beyond his station. And so, as so often happens in families, resentments begin to intensify.

It doesn't help that Israel favors Joseph and seems to trust him beyond what his years or experience would warrant. At best, Joseph is concerned about matters beyond his responsibilities. At worst, he's a bit of a snitch—and his father deploys him to keep tabs on the goings-on in the flock. It's not surprising that his brothers' ill will toward him intensifies. That it should turn murderous is the disturbing development that sets the stage for the rest of Joseph's tumultuous life.

Unpacking a failed or failing relationship and wondering, “How did we get here?” is a painful part of the human experience. Israel is no stranger to unexpected family relationships. His own relationships with his father and brother were often complicated. And his relationship with his oldest son, Reuben, includes discovering Reuben has had a child by Israel’s concubine. The web of betrayals within the family has now entangled Joseph in a dramatic turn of events that has as much to do with his brothers’ relationship to their father as it does with him.

Here, as is so common to our experience, “how we got here” is explained not by one event but by the culmination of the brokenness in human relationships wending through multiple generations of lived experience. This complicates, here disastrously, not only the relationships between kindred but their individual and collective relationship to God as well. Christians experience in Jesus’ death and resurrection the reality that a relationship can become so broken that only the intervention of God can ultimately redeem that which is lost. That cycle of brokenness and healing, suffering and redemption, death and new life, continues to manifest in our human existence again and again.

Joseph’s life is spared by his brothers’ desire to gain more materially by selling him out of the picture than they can from killing him. This seems at this point in the narrative to be the smallest of graces.

In the experience of personal trauma, however, small graces are most welcome. Reuben’s intention to rescue Joseph and initiate a reunion with Israel is an unexpected gesture from an eldest son who has a fraught relationship with his father. And though Reuben is partially thwarted, his action keeps Joseph alive, out of the pit, and foreshadows the hope of a better day.

The selections from Psalm 105 that accompany this reading signal the story’s conclusion. The psalmist sings of the goodness of one sent ahead in suffering so as to redeem those in bondage. Praise for Joseph and for God’s goodness in response to wrath ring loudly in a psalm that can sound dissonant against the Genesis text’s more tenuous or unfulfilled hope.

Such is the psalm’s duty in response this week, to hold in tension the struggles of the past and present with God’s goodness and faithfulness.

The certainty of restoration is not yet on the horizon for Joseph. We often share that perception of the world. But he is, after all, a dreamer. The power of the sacred

imagination to envision a time and place when God will redeem us and our relationships—as individuals, families, even nations—has been at work among God’s people from the beginning. Sacred stories like this one preserve the need to identify the small graces that can engender hope for the hopeless. New dreams for those in the pit. Love for those feeling far from the love of God.

Joseph’s brothers declare it is the pit where they “will see what becomes of his dreams.” Amid great difficulty, what will become of our dreams? Dreams of a world transformed by God’s mercy and grace, lifting up all who have gone down in the pit? It is a small redemptive act by Reuben that sets in motion an arc through which God will save not only Joseph but a people. This moment of grace in a strained relationship is transformative for Reuben and Joseph. God makes a way to hope from the pit.