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Lent Series 2012: *Stunning Sins and Vast Forgivenesses*  
3/21/2012, Midweek Lent 4  
Joseph and His Brothers, Genesis 37:1-35

PRAYER OF THE DAY (Lent 4)

P God of all mercy, by your power to heal and to forgive, graciously cleanse us from all sin and make us strong; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.  
**Amen.**

HOLY SCRIPTURE ..... Genesis 37:1-35, KJV

<sup>1</sup>And Jacob dwelt in the land wherein his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan. <sup>2</sup>These are the generations of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren; and the lad was with the sons of Bilhah, and with the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives: and Joseph brought unto his father their evil report.

<sup>3</sup>Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours. <sup>4</sup>And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him.

<sup>5</sup>And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it his brethren: and they hated him yet the more. <sup>6</sup>And he said unto them, Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed: <sup>7</sup>For, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf. <sup>8</sup>And his brethren said to him, Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us? And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words. <sup>9</sup>And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me.

<sup>10</sup>And he told it to his father, and to his brethren: and his father rebuked him, and said unto him, What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth? <sup>11</sup>And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying.

<sup>12</sup>And his brethren went to feed their father's flock in Shechem. <sup>13</sup>And Israel said unto Joseph, Do not thy brethren feed the flock in Shechem? come, and I will send thee unto them. And he said to him, Here am I. <sup>14</sup>And he said to him, Go, I pray thee, see whether it be well with thy brethren, and well with the flocks; and bring me word again. So he sent him out of the vale of Hebron, and he came to Shechem.

<sup>15</sup>And a certain man found him, and, behold, he was wandering in the field: and the man asked him, saying, What seekest thou? <sup>16</sup>And he said, I seek my brethren: tell me, I pray thee, where they feed their flocks. <sup>17</sup>And the man said, They are

departed hence; for I heard them say, Let us go to Dothan. And Joseph went after his brethren, and found them in Dothan.

<sup>18</sup>And when they saw him afar off, even before he came near unto them, they conspired against him to slay him. <sup>19</sup>And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer cometh. <sup>20</sup>Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him: and we shall see what will become of his dreams.

<sup>21</sup>And Reuben heard it, and he delivered him out of their hands; and said, Let us not kill him. <sup>22</sup>And Reuben said unto them, Shed no blood, but cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, and lay no hand upon him; that he might rid him out of their hands, to deliver him to his father again. <sup>23</sup>And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stript Joseph out of his coat, his coat of many colours that was on him; <sup>24</sup>And they took him, and cast him into a pit: and the pit was empty, there was no water in it. <sup>25</sup>And they sat down to eat bread:

and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmeelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry it down to Egypt. <sup>26</sup>And Judah said unto his brethren, What profit is it if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood? <sup>27</sup>Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmeelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother and our flesh. And his brethren were content.

<sup>28</sup>Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt. <sup>29</sup>And Reuben returned unto the pit; and, behold, Joseph was not in the pit; and he rent his clothes. <sup>30</sup>And he returned unto his brethren, and said, The child is not; and I, whither shall I go?

<sup>31</sup>And they took Joseph's coat, and killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the coat in the blood; <sup>32</sup>And they sent the coat of many colours, and they brought it to their father; and said, This have we found: know now whether it be thy son's coat or no. <sup>33</sup>And he knew it, and said, It is my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces. <sup>34</sup>And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. <sup>35</sup>And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him.

HYMN LBW 357 *Our Father, by Whose Name*

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>32</sup>And [the brothers of Joseph] sent the coat of many colours, and they brought it to their father; and said, This have we found: know now whether it be thy son's coat or no. <sup>33</sup>And he knew it, and said, It is my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces. <sup>34</sup>And Jacob rent his clothes... (Genesis 37:32-34, KJV)

## PERISHING BY THE SWORD

This scene puts me in mind of the saying in the New Testament about the sword. When a disciple of Jesus proposes to defend Jesus by hacking with a sword, Jesus commands him to put away that sword:

<sup>48</sup>Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I shall kiss is the man; seize him." <sup>49</sup>And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Hail, Master!" And he kissed him. <sup>50</sup>Jesus said to him, "Friend, why are you here?" Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. <sup>51</sup>And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear. <sup>52</sup>Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; *for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.* (Matthew 26:48-52, RSV)

Likewise we could say about Jacob, those who prosper by deceit shall also suffer by deceit. And so it was that last Wednesday we read how Jacob deceived his poor blind father, Isaac, and won the old man's blessing by guile. Now, Jacob himself is getting older and he suffers heartache even more extreme than Isaac did, again through guile.

Joseph's brothers have done the lad in. Their bitterness toward Joseph is so strong that they seem unable to even acknowledge that he is their brother: "This have we found: know now whether it be *thy son's* coat or no." "Thy son's coat," not "we fear that this is the coat of our brother," but "thy son," as if he were a stranger to them. Well, indeed, they made him a stranger. They had treated him more cruelly than they would have treated a stranger or a dog.

## NAIVETÉ

Perhaps we should learn a lesson about naiveté from this story. By no means do I want to defend these older brothers, for what they did was wicked and astonishing in its hardheartedness. Still, it seems to me that both old Jacob and his son Joseph were pretty naïve here -- Jacob in his obvious preference for Joseph, and Joseph in his witless reporting of his dreams. The brothers were already resentful of Joseph because their father loved him most, and that was easy to see. They had only to look at Joseph's many-colored coat to see their father's

preference. Those colors seem to have made the brother's see red. But then Joseph made things worse by blissfully relating his dreams in which his brothers and even his father bow down to him. His brothers do not like this. These visions of lordship irritate them and tempt them to the wickedness to which they eventually succumbed.

Back in the days when I was considering the call to serve as pastor of this congregation, the only hesitancy Carol and I felt about the matter was whether the move to the city would be good for our boys, who were quite young then. We wondered whether they would be safe. We wondered whether they would be good. We remember very well the thoughts of our member Carlynn Matern back then. Carlynn suggested that there is a distinction between "innocence" versus "naiveté," such that it was unlikely that our boys would grow up naïve in the big city, yet they could grow up "innocent."

Such a distinction applies to Joseph. He did grow up innocent. In fact, he seems to have been a virtuous and innocent man his entire life long. I can recall no story of sin in Joseph. He went through many adventures and many troubles, but I do not recall any sin in him. But as for naiveté, well, Joseph was pretty naïve as a young man. His mind and his heart seemed not to be open to the turmoil he could place in the heart of others by his conduct, innocent though his conduct might be.

Put more positively, I should think that the path of love would open us up to the impact of things on other folks. We know the impact of things on *ourselves*. Love should lead us to wonder and to imagine the impact of our conduct on other people too.

## JACOB

Be that as it may, Joseph's brothers yielded to their resentment of him and tossed him aside. He ended up being sold into slavery -- a fate that never bodes well for the slave. The story is somewhat unclear as to whether they intended that Joseph should be swept away as a slave. I mean, it appears that it was some Midianite merchantmen who found Joseph in the pit and sold him into slavery to a passing caravan. I am not quite sure how to interpret the pronoun "they" in that text:

<sup>28</sup>Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and *they* drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver: (Genesis 37:28, KJV)

Whether it was the brothers who sold him or the Midianites who did so, it was still the case the brothers were so hostile toward their brother that they openly discussed murdering him. Furthermore, once he was sold into slavery, the brothers did not hasten after him to redeem him, but rather abandoned him and turned for home, with their deceit about a wild animal slaying their brother.

When they told this lie to Jacob, it struck him hard. He rent his garments, as he imagined the wild animal rending his son. He grieved and would not be comforted. For in the supposed death of Joseph, Jacob had been deprived of his chief comfort in old age. Life had not been easy for Jacob after last week's story about the deceiving of his father, Isaac. Jacob had to flee his home. He then tried to marry his beloved Rachel, but was tricked by her father into working fourteen years before he could marry her. Then he had to live through the anxiety of returning home and trying to win reconciliation with his brother, Esau. By the time of this evening's story, Jacob has lived through the sorrow of the death of Rachel, and the horror of the rape of his daughter Dinah (Genesis 34). In the very next chapter from this evening's story, we read of the whoring and incest of his son Judah with his daughter-in-law, Tamar. (Genesis 38) These were not good days for old Jacob. It was a bad time in the old man's life to be deprived of his son Joseph.

## **LUTHER'S LOSS OF MAGDALENE**

Indeed, there is never a good time to lose a child. Martin Luther and his wife Katy, for example, had six children all together, but lost two of them. One died in childbirth, which happened more often in those days than in ours. The other child, Magdalene, died at age thirteen and it about broke Luther's heart. In fact, Luther himself died a few years later. Let me tell you a little about the death of Magdalene, for it contains both strong elements of sorrow and faith -- elements we will find in the story of Joseph too.

Here is an account of the illness and death of young Magdalene:

When the illness of his daughter became graver he [Martin Luther] said, "I love her very much. But if it is thy will to take her, dear God, I shall be glad to know that she is with thee."

Afterward he said to his daughter, who was lying in bed, "Dear Magdalene, my little daughter, you would be glad to stay here with me, your father. Are you also glad to go to your Father in heaven?"

The sick girl replied, "Yes, dear Father, as God wills."  
The father said, "You dear little girl!"<sup>1</sup>

On 20 September 1542 she died in his arms. Katy stood somewhat aside because of her grief...As they laid the body in the coffin, the father said that it was well with his beloved child. Then he was overcome with sobbing. But his hope did not let sorrow get the better of him. As they closed the

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<sup>1</sup> Luther's *Table Talk*, LW 54, No. 5494: Illness of Luther's Daughter Becomes Graver, September, 1542.

coffin he said, “Close it! She will rise again at the last day.”<sup>2</sup>

Luther’s confidence here in the resurrection of his daughter Magdalene has an anticipation in the story of Joseph and his father. It is a kind of foretaste of the resurrection: in the end, Joseph is not dead! He lives, and the father’s deep sorrow is changed into deep joy. Luther puts this happy outcome this way:

...there follows the wonderful and peaceful outcome by which his great and unexpected grief is changed into the greatest unexpected joy. For Joseph, whose destruction the father had mourned, is recalled from darkness to light, from death to life, after being preserved by God and rewarded with great honor and dignity by the king of Egypt after he himself had also emerged from many difficulties.

This leads me to my first lesson to be learned from this story: Never despair. Never abandon hope. Never think happiness is lost to you and that your heart will never be light again. Both Jacob and Joseph were innocent sufferers in this evening’s story. Yet they did not remain sufferers forever. For the Lord still reigned, and all these things were in his hands. The Lord restored joy to the old father and son again. Luther gives much credit to the sad old man that he never gave up, and never lost his faith, even when he believed he had lost his son:

...first of all consider the wonderful example of God’s government in Jacob, namely, how God brings His saints down to hell and leads them back again, comforts and saddens them, that we may become accustomed to trust His Word alone and cling to it. For the affairs of the godly must be brought to the point that they feel nothing, understand nothing else, and see nothing on which to rely, especially in death, but the Word.

## **JOSEPH FORGIVES HIS BROTHERS**

My second lesson has to do with the ability of God to bring good from out of bad, including good from out of our sin. The story goes this way: Along the way to the happy outcome where Joseph is restored to his father, Jacob, Joseph forgave his brothers. The tables were turned. Joseph became governor of all Egypt, and his treacherous brothers end up in his hand. His brothers, naturally, fear that one day Joseph will take revenge on them. Then Joseph said this to his brothers:

<sup>19</sup>And Joseph said unto them, Fear not: for am I in the place of God?

<sup>20</sup>But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. <sup>21</sup>Now

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther, Volume 3, The Preservation of the Church, 1532-1546*, translated by James L. Schaaf (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1993), page 237.

therefore fear ye not: I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them. (Genesis 50:19-21, KJV)

There is an extraordinary generosity of spirit here in Joseph. And it contains within it a wonderful claim of faith: the sinner, of course, means his sin to be what it is; but God is well able to take that sin and work good from it. So he did with the sin of the brothers of Joseph. So he can do with your sin, with mine.

Who knows what errors and sins we have committed this day? Who can keep count of it all? Who can even reliably recognize when we have gone wrong? Each of us at the end of the day has reason to approach the throne of grace and to beg for God's mercy and forgiveness for the deeds of our day. But there is even more. There is an additional blessing illustrated in the story of Joseph and his brothers: not only are we permitted to pray for God's forgiveness, but also we are permitted to pray for the reformation of our deeds, so that God converts them into good. That is what we can confidently pray at the end of the day. We can lay our heads down on the pillow and ask God to accept the deeds of our day, repair them, and use them as building blocks for his kingdom, the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.