

## REUBEN OR JUDAH

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Genesis 37: 1-4; 12-28 Matthew 14: 22-33

Genesis 37 1:4

<sup>1</sup>Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. <sup>2</sup>This 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. <sup>3</sup>Now 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.<sup>[a]</sup><sup>4</sup> But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Genesis 37: 12-28

<sup>12</sup>Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. <sup>13</sup>And 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." <sup>14</sup>So 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, <sup>15</sup> and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" <sup>16</sup>"I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." <sup>17</sup>The 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. <sup>18</sup>They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. <sup>19</sup>They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. <sup>20</sup>Come 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." <sup>21</sup>But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." <sup>22</sup>Reuben 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. <sup>23</sup>So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves<sup>[a]</sup>that he wore; <sup>24</sup> and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

<sup>25</sup> Then 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. <sup>26</sup> Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? <sup>27</sup> Come, 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. <sup>28</sup> When 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.

For some reason whenever I am called upon to preach, I end up having one of my busiest weeks ever, full of unexpected little surprises. A week so exaggeratedly packed that getting a sermon written seems impossible. And yet, with God, all things are possible. But let's face it. Every week is busy right? It just seems worse when we have something important to get done. And in fact, it really tends to be worse. So I decided that the week when you are called to deliver a message from God, you have to get out of God's way. So what God does is make it so that you cannot spend too much time putting together your own interpretation of scripture. Rather God let's life happen, and in the process sends you snippets of a message. And when you finally sit down to put it together, you realize it was not yours at all ; which is what it makes it so wonderful. So I highly recommend it to all of you. Don't wait to be asked – request a week!

So it started almost 2 weeks ago: when I read the liturgical readings for this week. After reading the first reading from Genesis I gave the sermon a title – “Out of the Pit”. And it would be about how God raises us out of the messes we end up in as He did for Joseph – bad guys don't win – good guys do. Then I read one of my favorites from Matthew – because I love Peter. Because of all of the apostles, I relate to Peter the most. Faithful, emotional, passion's fool Peter. Who is so full of awe and love for Jesus that he jumps right out into the water to meet Him. Act first, think later. Until the rational Peter realizes what just happened, and faith weakens, and logic wins, and Peter sinks. So now my sermon title is “Go the Distance” to keep the faith to keep walking on the water to the other side of the river. And I was going to motivate you all to make it to the other side when you take on the challenging work of God. Don't wander in the desert for 40 years on the same issue. There's another potential title “Stop wandering”. And I chose my readings and was done for the night. But not done with the pondering.

Throughout the busy week I pulled out materials related to the scriptures, I read my usual daily motivational scriptures, I listen to all kinds of music and media, I live my life, and as usually happens, a message starts to form: a common theme. Events at work, throughout my day, all start pointing to a message. They come in snippets, and in phrases. I awake and have to write something down. And then it comes together.

I started with “Out of the Pit”, moved to “Go The distance”, then “Be Ready and Wait”, and finally: “Reuben or Judah?” Each time it came closer to the underlying message: Righteous Leadership. So here it is and I will explain how each of these titles fit together.

There are two brothers named in our readings today besides Joseph: Reuben (the firstborn) and Judah (the 4<sup>th</sup> born). Both are leaders worthy of mention. And we will assess them as such. We don't know their hearts. God judges by the heart. We know what we observe in the story. Reuben is typically viewed as the hero who saves Joseph in this story.

And he does, kind of. What is clear is that Reuben does not want to cause his brother harm. But he also does not like conflict with his brothers – particularly brothers who are okay with murder. He could have said “Are you guys out of your mind? Even if you hate Joseph – would you really hurt dad like this? If you want to get to Joseph you have to get through me”. That is not what he does. He says “hey let’s not get our hands dirty – just stick him in the cistern”. He probably knows deep down this is pretty dangerous for Joseph. No water, snakes, scorpions. But he justifies it by his intention to come back and return him to dad; when nobody is watching of course. Still, he is the only one who acts when blood is about to be spilled. And so he is the closest to a hero that we have here. His intentions were clear. It turns out that Judah is really the one who saves Joseph. Did he do it for the profit? What a waste to throw him away when we can sell him. Or did he do it because as he says – “He is our own flesh and blood so we shouldn’t kill him.” It sure sounds like he was justifying making a buck. What were his motives? Does it matter? Can we judge? What we do know is that he acted – and that act led to not only the sparing of Joseph’s life. But also the destiny for Joseph that was necessary for God’s will in his life to happen. So whether deliberate or inadvertent, Judah brought God’s will upon the earth in that act. He probably thought it was his idea. Joseph even says in Genesis 45:8 “So then it was not you who sent me here but God”.

So now let’s dig just a little deeper. Where was Reuben when Joseph was sold as a slave? A whole caravan is approaching – probably large and seen from a distance. It was going to be a little time before they got there. Enough time for Judah to come up with the plan. Where was Reuben? Scripture says he comes back to find him gone. He is too late. He asked “What do I do now?” He cares about his brother, but was saving him a priority? According to Yanki Tauber, a Jewish expert on the Torah, Reuben went out to pray and fast while Joseph was in the cistern and his brothers ate lunch. He was probably agonizing over what to do. Perhaps deep down he knew what he was supposed to do – but was scared and double and triple checking – just in case. He was too late. Judah saw an opportunity, and felt compelled to act. Was it the spirit that moved him? Maybe. He responded. He didn’t go over to a mountain away from the others to fast and pray for an answer. He went with his gut. Does this mean we should always go with our gut? Not if our gut is full of junk. Garbage in – garbage out. In modern day parlance – you might become a compulsive tweeter of nonsense and emotion. Scripture tells us to be ready for you never know when the time will come to act. What does that mean? How can we know what we need to prepare for? Joseph had to wait in jail for years before his time to shine arrived. But when the opportunity came –he was ready. My understanding of being prepared is to just be close. Keep God close. Call upon the spirit every day. Wear the armor just in case. Pray for wisdom to discern. And wait. But wait ready so that when the time comes you don’t act on junk. Thus the title “Be ready and wait”. Maybe pray and fast while you are waiting to get a full dose of spirit stored up. Exercise with God : whatever brings you close. However you succeed to have a personal relationship with God.

Prayer and fasting could be what you do in situations where you are not called upon to act. Being in regular relationship with God, seeking the spirit, will help you to know when to act. The wait may be long because God has to work on us – and we have to let God do so. And when faced with a challenge – the habit of calling upon the spirit will intervene. And you will do things that you thought were your idea – but rather than self-righteous your actions are actually righteous.

If you read on to the next chapter you see that Judah is clearly a household leader: he arranges the marriages of his brothers. He saves Tamar and her two unborn sons from death. He is a leader in all that he does. His brothers followed him. Reuben is also righteous – good intentions – but not the one called to be the sovereign.

Of the 12 sons of Jacob, Judah, Jacob's 4<sup>th</sup> son, was the sovereign ruler. Jacob blesses Judah saying "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the legislator's pen from his descendants; to him nations shall submit, until the coming of Shiloh." And so it was with such descendants as David and Jesus.

All of the sons of Jacob were leaders and we are all descendants of the sons of Jacob. As we know, the twelve sons of Jacob became the twelve tribes of Israel. Each had an individual calling for a collective mission. And we are all part of that mission with our own callings. We say "Thy kingdom come" and we know it is up to us to bring it; each in our own way. None of us, even with the best intentions can do it alone. Peter tried. But as he sank he reached his hand out to Jesus, who pulled him up. Without Jesus, he would have swum back or worse - sunk. In his life, Peter may have taken an impulsive and jagged path, he may have been too loud to hear that still small voice at times, but Peter eventually got to the other side.