



Joseph's Coat of Many Colors



A Sermon By
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July 7, 2019
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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Genesis 37

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This is a coloring sheet that the children attending Summer Garden this morning will color as part of their lesson. The image is of a smiling man wearing a multi-patterned garment. Instructions at the bottom of the sheet read, "Color Joseph's coat of many colors." This assignment engages a child's imagination, inviting them to creatively color the designs on Joseph's coat. It's simple, artistic, and age appropriate.

For most of us, this image of Joseph and his coat of many colors continues to stick with us, even as adults. In fact, it is often the primary image that most people remember about Joseph's story. And why not, the image has been memorialized in music, like Dolly Parton's song, "Coat of Many Colors;" and in musicals, like *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber. It makes perfect sense that our minds would recall this detail more than the other details of the ancient story.

But as we hear in today's reading from Genesis 37, there's more to the story than Joseph's clothing, a lot more. In fact, though we read the entire 37th chapter of Genesis this morning, the story doesn't end there. It continues for 13 more chapters, and reads like a short story or novella, which reaches its culmination in Genesis chapter 50.

Sometimes referred to as the "Joseph cycle," this set of chapters relates the dramatic tale of Joseph, the favorite son of Jacob, one of Israel's ancient patriarchs. The story includes Joseph's betrayal by his brothers. His descent into slavery. His rise to power in Egypt. And his ultimate reunion and reconciliation with his family. The arc of the story stretches across all fourteen chapters.

The opening story, which we read today, sets the scene with some deep-seated family drama. The text tells us, "Now Israel (a.k.a. Jacob) loved Joseph more than any other of his children..." (37:3a). That's saying a lot because Jacob had 13 children by 4 different women. But Joseph was the son of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel. He was Jacob's youngest son and his favorite child.

And Jacob didn't hesitate to show his favoritism. The text states that he gifted Joseph "a robe with sleeves." It is this robe that has come to be known as the coat of many colors. It is typical sibling behavior to think a parent likes one child better than another, but Jacob proves his preference with this gift. This kind of parental favoritism is not new to stories in Genesis. But especially striking in this story, is that Jacob's love for Joseph inspires the opposite emotion, hatred, in Joseph's brothers (37:4).

And Joseph's brothers really hate him! The narrative first reports that the brothers hate Joseph because Jacob loves him the most (37:4). They then hate Joseph "even more" because he has special dreams (37:5), and yet again they hate Joseph "even more because of his dreams and his words" (37:8).

Joseph appears full of youthful arrogance. He takes full advantage of his favored status, and rubs it in the faces of his brothers. Joseph is culpable in the growing rift in his relationship with his brothers. But the dysfunction in Joseph's family stems not from any one source, but rather from the brokenness of all parties. Estrangement is rarely one-sided. All of the brothers look at each other through the eyes of hurt and anger. Joseph's actions are one of the reasons for his brothers' contempt. The brothers see only their father's favoritism and their young brother's youthful boasting. Joseph thinks of himself as better than his elders.

This dysfunction leads to more brokenness as Joseph's brothers plot to kill him, eventually change their minds, and sell him into slavery instead. The brothers take Joseph's special robe, the gift from their father, dip it in goat's blood, and deceive their father into believing that Joseph is dead. The coat of many colors, that gift conveying favoritism, is distorted and corrupted; as are the relationships between this fractured family.

At the end of today's story we are left with the words of Joseph's brothers echoing in our ears, "we shall see what will become of his dreams." The next 13 chapters of the saga reveal that Joseph's dreams will in fact come to pass. Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt and rises to a place of power in Pharaoh's court. Today's disturbing episode of violence and betrayal becomes the means by which the family of Jacob and the descendants of Israel will survive a terrible famine. Eventually, these descendants, the Hebrew people, live and thrive in Egypt, becoming so populous that the Egyptians make them their slaves, setting the stage for the story of Moses that we will hear next week.

So that's the backstory on Joseph's coat. In the end, the story, is far more colorful than the coat itself, and far more intriguing. It is a tale of family drama, of deception and dreams. Of power and faith. It is a human story and a God story, for it is the story of God working through human frailty and brokenness to bring about wholeness.

Beginning as a privileged, bratty teenager, Joseph endured a long series of humiliations, struggles, threats, and injustices over his lifetime. Along the way Joseph developed empathy, humility, a tender heart, and, most of all, a deep faith and trust in God's guidance of his life over the long haul. Repeatedly, the story informs the reader: the LORD "was with Joseph" (39:2-3, 21, 23). It was the LORD who blessed Joseph and caused him to prosper in the midst of his difficulties (39:3, 5, 21, 23). Joseph came to know that what he accomplished was not his work but God working through him (41:16, 39; 45:8, 9). God took the evil that humans did, the broken relationships of Joseph's family, and made it into something good and life-giving (45:5, 7; 50:20). Through it all, God molded Joseph into a new person who learned to forgive, to let go, and to work for reconciliation, restoration, and life.

It's tempting to focus on this part of the story (hold up coloring sheet again) – the colorful non-threatening piece. But in Joseph's story as in ours; it's the other stuff, the difficult stuff, that tests our faith and allows God to work in our lives. It's in life's ups and downs, in the brokenness of relationships, the pain of family drama, life's dreams and nightmares; in which we see God stretching us and growing us. It's in these places of grittiness that our hearts are formed for compassion and goodness.

So while this is memorable (hold up coloring sheet), it's not the point of the story. The story is much larger and its point much deeper. The take away from Joseph's story is that God is with us in our lives, always working in us, even in our darkest moments, for the good. God takes what is broken and redeems it. God works in us and through us, even when we are not aware of God's presence. May God help you to see this truth in your own life as you climb the mountains of life's highs and descend through the valleys of life's lows. Amen.