

Sermon – August 16, 2020
“Twenty Pieces of Silver”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Good morning. It is great to be back in the house of the Lord and to have another opportunity to worship God together in this place and in all the places where this service is joined by those connecting via live stream. Welcome to everyone. It could just be my optimism, but it seems to me that the heat of summer has begun to abate and we are starting to move towards fall. Schools are starting to open in some form, and the lazy days of summer are giving way to the beginning of fall. I am sure we will have some hot days ahead of us, but I think it is time to plan for our annual Hawaiian Sunday. So, mark August 30th on your calendars for the annual Hawaiian attire Sunday to celebrate the end of summer and the start of our journey into fall. You can translate Hawaiian attire to suit your closet, but think Hawaiian shirt, shorts and sandals. Let's celebrate the end of summer with an abundance of color and comfort. I would be remiss if I did not mention that this past week the UMW at Afton got together with their masks and prepared lunch for the volunteers at the free health clinic. Thanks to everyone who took the time to prepare meals and lend a hand. I also want to remind everyone that we are continuing our Bible studies at both churches. The Old Testament study at Fairfields with Sandra Richter is a growing blessing, and our study of Romans at Afton continues to bless us with new insights for loving our neighbors as ourselves. Please consider joining a Bible study, either in person or via Zoom. You will be welcomed and blessed.

CEF (Child Evangelism Fellowship) is moving forward with plans to continue to spread the Good News to elementary students in the shadow of Covid-19. Please keep the leadership and workers in your prayers as they venture into a new approach for sharing the love of Christ in our community.

Let me provide some background for today's scripture, and let me share with you that I am going to include a discussion of Joseph's dreams that were not part of this morning's scripture reading. Hopefully, you are reading along through Genesis and are aware of all that has transpired in the lives of our ancestors since our last stop on their journey.

It will be helpful for us to know that since we last looked at the story of our ancestors, Jacob has crossed into the Promised Land, gone to meet Esau, and bowed before his brother in total surrender to his leadership, in the confidence of God's protection. Esau has welcomed Jacob

and his family into the land and invited him to come and travel with him. This was not the response that Jacob had feared from his brother. Jacob has moved into the land of Canaan and has settled in the land. Jacob's daughter Dinah has been taken and ravished by a prince of Shechem and some of Jacob's sons in vengeance have killed all of the men of Shechem and taken the flocks and remaining people captive. Rachel has died giving birth to Benjamin, her second son and the last son to be born to Jacob. Jacob now has twelve sons. Isaac has died at 180 years of age and was buried by Esau and Jacob, just as Ishmael and Isaac buried Abraham. These moments when the sons come together to bury a father are moments when the story of God's people transitions to the new heir of the family, the new patriarch, the new leader, and the new person who is the bearer of the covenant promise with God. Esau and Jacob have lived in the land together for a time, but they quickly discovered that the land cannot support them both as their possessions are too great. Esau has decided to separate and has left the Promised Land and settled in the east. The story of God's people has now become the story of Jacob's family who chose to stay in the Promised Land, and for a while the focus of our story will be Joseph, the son of Jacob's old age, born to Rachel, who is Jacob's favorite son.

We should notice that Joseph works with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, the sons of the maids and the lowest rank of the family. Joseph is considered the least of the family and his brothers put him to work with those of his status. Joseph, in his brothers' eyes, is the least in the family, but in spite of his work assignment, Joseph has special status. This is seen in the bad report he brings to his father about his brothers. We are not told what they have done, but we see that Joseph does not recognize their authority and instead, with his special status, reports directly to his father Jacob. We will also see the theme of favoritism in family relationships once again. Jacob's life experience with favoritism does not seem to temper his favoritism for Joseph. If anything, it makes it worse. And to note Joseph's favored status, Jacob makes Joseph a special robe. This robe is probably not multi-colored, but long sleeved and full length. It is the robe of a leader. This marks Joseph as Jacob's choice to lead the family and a threat to the established order of the eldest son becoming the heir.

Next, let's turn our focus to Joseph's dreams. First, we should note that these are the first dreams in the book of Genesis in which the voice of God is not heard. God does not speak in these dreams. They are action dreams and not like the dream that Jacob experienced when he left the Promised Land and God appeared to him. As such, these dreams need an interpreter, one who can understand their meaning and share it with others. We should also understand that in this

time dreams were a very important aspect of life and were taken very seriously. You may recall in the first dream Joseph sees his brothers' sheaves of grain bowing down before his sheaf of grain. In the second dream, Joseph sees the sun, moon, and stars bowing down to him. Joseph shares his dreams with his brothers and they understand the meaning. Here is the least of them, the youngest son, telling them about a dream where they will be ruled over by him, they will come to him and bow down. The brothers miss the aspect of the grain in the dream, which will be important later in their story. Instead, they focus on Joseph moving from his place in the birth order to become a ruler over them. This is a clear challenge to the established order of the family. It makes the brothers angry that the least of their number would speak to such a thing and is bold enough to do so. They also miss in their interpretation of the dream the emergence of a ruler in their family. This is something new for their family, a ruler in Israel's family. This is a dream of power, something new emerging from Israel. The brothers miss these aspects of the dream. For them, the dream brings a fear that the younger would rule over the older, upsetting the established order. Envy comes into their thoughts and gives birth to hate. They can no longer speak peace to Joseph. Jacob does respond when he hears the dream, rebuking Joseph, telling him he cannot rule over his father and mother. Yet Jacob holds this dream in his heart and ponders what it might mean for a ruler to emerge from Israel. We should not miss the connection to Mary when she is told the prophecy about Jesus and how she ponders all of the events in his life in her heart, waiting to see what will come. So, also, we see Jacob waiting to see what will come from this dream.

Don't miss in the text Joseph's response to his father when he is asked to go and see to the welfare of his brothers who are pasturing the flock at Shechem. Joseph's reply is, "Here I am" or, in Hebrew, "Hennie." This is the response we see in the Old Testament before the life of a beloved son is placed into jeopardy. With this reply, the young Joseph is off on a journey, a journey that is far more than he anticipates. The distance from Hebron, where Jacob has settled, to Shechem is approximately fifty miles, and Joseph will need to travel another fifteen miles to reach Dothan, where his brothers are. This is not a trip to the back forty or summer pasture. It will take Joseph days of walking to arrive.

Joseph is found roaming the fields at Shechem by a man. We are not given details about the man and his true nature, but he does just happen to have information about where the brothers have gone with the flock. God's hand or providence is guiding Joseph to his brothers no matter their plans for Joseph.

At Dothan, Joseph is able to find his brothers and with his unique robe, they can see him coming a long way off across the fields. Joseph is not aware of their envy and anger as he continues to them as if he is anxious to meet them. Notice that before he speaks to them, they have conspired to kill him, and we can glean from their discussions that their reason is the dreams. The dreams predict Joseph will be ruler over them. This possibility is something the brothers need to correct, and so they decide to kill Joseph and throw his body into a pit. With that action, they will then see what comes of his dreams of ruling over them. Their actions would sustain the family order they have come to know, an order that Joseph's dreams threaten. We should also not miss their words to each other, "Let us kill him." These are the same words that Jesus uses in his parable about the evil tenants who, when they see the land owner's son coming, say, "Let us kill him." The brothers' desire to preserve their leadership roles in the family parallels the religious leaders' desire to preserve their roles in Israel when they are confronted with Jesus.

Reuben tries to intercede, but not directly as an eldest brother in charge. Instead, he attempts to steer their plans into letting Joseph die in a pit and to take his robe to deceive their father. These pits are cisterns that have small openings and smooth sides to hold water that is collected in the rainy season. The one they throw Joseph into is dry. He cannot escape and will die, just not directly at their hands. Reuben's plan is to sneak in and save Joseph for his own need to be reconciled to his father. Reuben lacks the courage to stand up for his brother and prevent his death. We should also notice the parallel to Jesus when he is stripped of his outer garment and beaten by the Roman soldiers. No one will intercede on his part and he will die on the cross. After throwing Joseph into the well, the brothers sit down to eat a meal. They show no signs of remorse for their actions. This may be the time when Joseph pleads with them to show mercy and spare his life, yet his pleas fall on deaf ears.

The brothers' action is a result of the envy they have for Joseph in their hearts. What those who envy want is not what another has. What one who envies wants is for the other not to have whatever it is they hold. The brothers envy Joseph and his dream of ruling over them, and they do not want him to have this opportunity. They act out of envy to keep Joseph from achieving his dream. They are not coveting, which is wanting what another has so strongly that one attempts to steal it from them. This is envy. Those who envy have empty hands and want the hands of those whom they envy to also be empty. The brothers' solution is to kill Joseph in order for him to be prevented from ruling over them. They have missed the grain or food in the

dream. Instead, they resent the blessing that might come to Joseph and, as a result, are envious of Joseph. Their envy results in evil actions against their brother. Satan seems to have the upper hand in their lives, and through their actions, the family connection to God's covenant promise is threatened. There is an old question about Satan that applies here, "Do you know why Satan is so angry all the time? Because whenever he works a particularly clever bit of mischief, God uses it to serve his own righteous purposes." This brings us to another question, "Does God use wicked people as his tools?" One answer is "God gives us the freedom to do great evil, if we choose." This is the idea of free will. We have the freedom to choose to cooperate with God or freedom to choose to do evil. God, in His sovereignty, is not challenged by our decisions and actions. He "uses his own freedom to create goodness out of that evil, for that is what he chooses." We should remember that, "In the long run, God always wins," which we know is true, "but in the short run, though, it can be uncomfortable."¹ For Joseph, the brother's envy has gotten out of hand in their hearts, and they have chosen to let Joseph die slowly in the cistern. God is not done. Reuben's plan to rescue Joseph is in play, but God also stirs another brother's heart, Judah.

As the brothers are eating, a caravan comes by on the road to Egypt. The site of the caravan gives Judah an idea for how to get Joseph out of their lives, end the issues with the dreams, and yet not be responsible for killing Joseph. He suggests to the other brothers present that they sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites as Joseph is their own flesh, another son of their father Israel. This is one of three speeches that Judah will make in Joseph's story. Each time he speaks, his presence grows in force and leadership as he emerges as a leader among the brothers. The brothers agree with Judah's suggestion, and they pull Joseph up from the cistern and sell him for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites. We should not miss the parallel here to Judas' selling of Jesus to the authorities for thirty pieces of silver. As our stop in our family history ends today, we see Joseph being taken to Egypt, a seeming end to his dreams to rule in this family. The brothers will take his robe to their father with blood on it and lie to him about what happened to Joseph, deceiving the deceiver. There will be great grief in the house of Israel over Joseph's death. The dreams have ended, the brothers' lives are not disrupted, no sheaves of grain will appear, no ruler will emerge in Israel. But God is still on the throne working out goodness from evil. Later, when the law is given, what the brothers have done to Joseph will be a capital offense.

There are many parallels between Joseph and Jesus, the one to come from the line of Judah to be a blessing to all the people of the earth. The ancient church fathers saw these connections in this story and wrote about them. Let's look briefly at some of them. First, we should notice that upon seeing Joseph, his brothers decide to kill him to remove the threat of his dreams to their established lives. The authorities in Jerusalem, also upon seeing Jesus, resolve to have him crucified that they may continue to lead the Jewish nation. We heard the idea that Joseph was rejected by his brothers and was given to the Ishmaelites. Jesus our Lord and Savior was rejected by many of the Jews but received by many of the Gentiles. And today in our culture, we see a rejection of Christ in the world, and yet there is still acceptance by those who are able to receive and believe in him. Just as the brothers stripped Joseph of his unique robe and threw him into a cistern to die, so also the authorities of Jerusalem stripped Jesus of his robe, removed his flesh by death on a cross, and placed him in a tomb. And as Joseph was lifted up out of the cistern and sold to the Ishmaelites, when Christ is resurrected, he is bought by the nations at the price of faith. As Joseph is taken down to Egypt to save Egypt from the failure of their crops to produce grain, Jesus goes into all the world to free the world from a famine of the Word of God. The Ishmaelites who bought Joseph were carrying along with them all kinds of perfumes. This shows that the Gentiles, as they embraced faith in God, would spread the different perfumes of justice all over the world as they carried the Good News of Jesus Christ to all people of the earth. These parallels between Joseph and Christ are still seen today as our culture seeks to strip Christ of his power to heal their brokenness through their unbelief. But Christ has won the victory over death, and those who believe in Christ are still healed of their brokenness and seek to take the Good News to all the people of the earth.

Pray with me: Lord, too often, we are those who seek to crush the dreamers among us. Lord, awaken us to a fresh movement of the Holy Spirit among us that we might find new ways to respond to your call, to be ever ready to reply to you, "Here I am, send me." And then to go with you into your mission, even if we, like Joseph, must go in chains that lives might be redeemed. Lord, open our eyes to the dreamers that you send among us and help us to embrace their journey into Egypt. Help us to be those who encourage and lift up those to whom you have sent new dreams. Amen.

¹ Walton, John H. Genesis (The NIV Application Commentary) (p. 697). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.