

The setting is clear: a great famine has struck the land and everyone has to leave home in search of food. Down in Canaan, an old man named Jacob has gathered his 11 sons around him to give them the bad news and to tell them the plan. "I've heard there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there. If you don't, we're going to die." So the boys load their empty feed bags onto the camels and head out. A few days later, they arrive in Egypt and get in the back of the first breadline they can find. "Next," a voice cries out. They move up one spot. "Next." How humiliating. How hard it feels. Standing in line with their life savings in hand. And what if it's not enough? We've never had to beg for mercy before. "Next." It's their turn. Stepping forward, they do not recognize the hand reaching out to feed them. They do not know the sound of the voice that cries out, "Brothers! Are you all here?" And in that moment, they are terrified to think of what might happen next.

Now if you don't know the story of Jacob and his 11 sons, then you might wonder what's going on here. You might think terror a strange response to a helping hand. Unless you know there was a time when Jacob didn't have 11 sons. He had 12. He used to have a boy named Joseph. And oh, did Jacob love Joseph. All of Jacob's 12 sons, including Joseph, would have told you that their father loved him the most. That every Christmas Joseph always got a little something extra under the tree, something none of the other boys got. That whenever they all went somewhere together, Joseph always got to sit on dad's lap. Jacob probably never meant anything by it. It's just that Joseph was the son Jacob almost didn't have.

On the day Jacob met Joseph's mother Rachel, he went head over heels. I mean, one look at her and the guy was a piece of string wrapped around her finger. Jacob went straight to Rachel's father to ask for her hand in marriage. As was custom in that day, Rachel's father Laban told Jacob he'd have to earn her. "Put in 7 years of hard labor on my farm," Laban told Jacob, "and then I'll know you're worthy of my daughter." So Jacob did, and at the end of the 7 years, in the middle of the night, Laban sent his daughter into Jacob to seal the deal. Only Laban didn't send in Rachel to Jacob. Instead he sent in Rachel's older sister, Leah. The next morning, Jacob rolls over, sees Leah lying there next to him, and he goes straight to Laban. "What's the big deal? I said Rachel!"

“Well, I thought about it, but it just didn’t seem right. In our culture, you never let the youngest get married ahead of the oldest. I couldn’t do that to Leah. I’ll tell you what though, you stick around for another 7 years and I’ll let you have both girls.” So Jacob does. He puts in 14 years for Rachel and in the end, he gets Leah, too.

If the whole thing feels a bit unrefined to you, if you prefer a love story with softer edges to it, I don’t know how to fix this one for you. Except to say, the story isn’t over yet.

Back home with his two wives, Leah gets pregnant and gives birth to 6 boys and at least 1 girl. (Most likely, there was more than 1 girl in the family, but we only ever hear about Dinah, whose story, found in Genesis 34, becomes one of the most tragic tales in all of history. Why that is the only story we get to hear about Jacob’s daughter’s is also tragic, and a sermon for another time.) If, however, everything about Leah can be described as full of life and promise, everything about Rachel can be described in two words: empty and bitter. “Give me children, or I shall die!” she tells her husband.

Jacob, angry and bitter himself, yells back, “Am I God? Don’t talk to me about it. Talk to God. He’s the one who is keeping you from having children.”

It’s God’s way, and God’s doing. I would like to ask if you believe that. I would like to ask you to tell me what you believe about how God works in our lives and in our world. Because as we’re going to find out, what we believe about how God works is going to make all the difference in how things turn out, for Rachel, for Jacob, and for us. Would you think about your answer to this question, and we’ll come back to it in a moment?

In the case of Rachel, she gives her slave girl, Bilhah, over to Jacob, so that she might do for Rachel what Rachel cannot do for herself. Bilhah becomes pregnant and bears Jacob sons #7 and 8. Meanwhile, Leah’s slave girl bears sons #9 and 10. But Rachel...Rachel is still without. Until one day, Genesis records, God remembers Rachel. God opens her womb, and she bears a son, whom she names Joseph. He must have come into Rachel’s world like water in the desert. Having a child was everything to a woman, and to her husband. With Joseph to her name, the other women could no longer treat Rachel like she was a second-class wife. She was, finally, Jacob’s first and greatest love. To top it all off, Rachel ends up having another son, Benjamin. 12 sons in all for Jacob, with Joseph in the lead.

It doesn’t last for long, though. On the day Benjamin is born, Rachel dies, and Joseph starts to have these crazy dreams in which he sees his brothers bowing down to him like

stalks of tall grass bowing down to the wind. He tells his brothers about it. Why I do not know. Maybe he already knew how much they hated him for being the favorite son. That it was only a matter of time before they'd cut him off the family tree anyway, and this was his way of begging them not to.

But they do anyway. On a hot day in Shechem, out tending Jacob's flocks, they see a caravan of Ishmaelite traders off in the distance. "It would be a pity to kill our brother when we could sell him for profit," says the oldest brother Judah. "Don't you agree?" And enough heads to make a majority all nod yes.

So the Ishmaelites take Joseph. Now this is where the story really takes a turn. For who are the Ishmaelites but descendants of Ishmael, the son of Hagar, another one of the Bible's slave girls. You see the turn? A band of brothers, all of whom were born of slavery, sell a brother who wasn't born of slavery, into slavery. Put another way, the victim has become the perpetrator; the brother, the enemy. Of course, we also know Ishmael as the son of Abraham to whom the Islamic faith belongs. While Jews and Christians trace their faith in God through Abraham's other son, Isaac, Muslims relate themselves to Ishmael. In selling Joseph to the Ishmaelites, his brothers are saying, "We know he's family and all, and we know you're family and all, and we know you can't sell family, but here's 20 pieces of silver to try and help us all forget that he's family." Meanwhile, they take Joseph's coat, dip it in some goat's blood, and tell their father there must have been an accident.

Fast forward to the part of the story we have read this morning, though, and what we see is that no amount of silver could possibly make Joseph forget. It's about 10 years later. He is living in Egypt. Surrounded by fame and fortune, he has been made Governor of the land by Pharaoh and put in charge of distributing food to the masses who have come to Egypt seeking relief from famine, when he looks up to see his brothers standing in the breadline. Only they don't know that he is him, that Joseph is Joseph. "What am I supposed to do now?" he wonders to himself. They take the bread he has to give and just as they're about to walk away, Joseph, overcome with joyful sorrow, breaks down and cries. "Come closer to me. Let me look at you, and you look at me. I am Joseph. We are brothers. Now do not be angry or afraid that you sold me, for God sent me before you to preserve life. To make sure there would be food enough for you to eat on this day of famine."

Do not be angry, and do not be afraid. This is God's way and God's doing. Have you been thinking about my question from earlier? Because I would like to ask it again. What do you believe about the way God works in our lives and in our world? If I were Joseph—mother dies when I'm still a kid; father who loves me but can't protect me; brothers sell me out to the Ishmaelites on the other side just to be rid of me; not even the other side wants me; wind up in Egypt where you get falsely accused of assaulting a woman (we didn't even talk about that part of the story); see my brothers now standing in line asking me for bread—if I were Joseph, I'm not sure I'd be able to give it to them. I'm not sure I'd be able to say—after all that—this is how God works. God takes back those who put us out. God welcomes the enemy in.

I'd be thinking more about personal responsibility. How can we say that it was all God's doing? God didn't sell you to the Ishmaelites, Joseph. And God didn't speak their hatred upon you. They did that to you. You have to hold your brothers accountable for their actions. Make them pay the cost. Don't let them off the hook by saying it was God's doing.

I agree. Not all things are God's doing, and we need to take better responsibility for the world we have created. To acknowledge the power we have to ignite fear, or to ignite love. To reach out and build a wall and close a door on our enemies, or to open that door to the hope of reconciliation with our enemies.

It would have been easier, much easier for Joseph if he had just...turned his brothers away that day, sent them home hungry. Said, you are no longer my brothers. Instead he says, this is all God's doing, and if it is God's doing, let there be bread. Let there be peace. Let there be forgiveness, for this is how I believe God works.

Many years ago, my grandfather, who has since passed away, decided to buy himself a pet. My grandmother had recently been moved into a nursing home. We all thought he was just wanting someone to share the house with, to keep him company in the evening, and we said, great idea! Get a dog or a cat. But then he went and picked up a kitten from the side of the road. We all told him he shouldn't keep a stray kitten. He doesn't know where it's been. What sort of diseases it might have. But he brought that kitten home, let her in the house and gave her a name.

First time I went over to see the kitten, she arched her back, let out a hiss, and clawed at me. I told my grandfather, you should get rid of that thing. I left hoping to never see her again.

A couple weeks later I went back. He had put out a small bowl of milk for her in the kitchen and made a bed for her on the floor next to his own bed. He was sitting in the living room, in his recliner, with the kitten on his lap, stroking her back with his hand, and she was purring. I said, "Is that the same kitten? That can't possibly be the same frightened, hurt, hissing kitten from the side of the road." But it was, and you and I know what made the difference.

Not too long ago God reached out a hand to bless the world and me. I looked at God's hand. It was covered with scratches. Such is the hand of love extended to those who need it most. Amen.