

**“He Didn’t Get That Off the Rack”**  
**Sermon Series: “In the Beginning...”**  
**Genesis 37:2b-8, 19-28; Acts 7:9-16**

Some of you men will remember, though you may not now admit it, that at the beginning of your junior and senior year in college you would slip down to freshmen orientation to size up the new arrival of freshmen women. Well, my buddy, Art, did sort of the same thing with our incoming classes at seminary. But rather than looking for girls, University of North Carolina educated Art was evaluating basketball talent.

The seminary had an old gym where we played intramural games. At first blush, the thought of would-be preachers playing basketball against one another sounds rather tame. But at this time, many of us had arrived from places like North Carolina, Duke, Kentucky and Indiana, and felt almost as passionate about our basketball as we did our faith. So, these games which were intended to provide recreation and relaxation often featured very little of either, hence the desire to sign up newly arriving talent.

And Art’s recruiting skills paid off my last year as he nabbed Big Jim to play with us. Jim hailed from California and said things like, “Hey Dude.” But those of us from the South overlooked that because Jim stood about 6’8” and possessed the body of a Greek god, or for our purposes, a rebounding maniac. But Jim was also never shy about his basketball abilities and superiority, which was hard on those of us who believed real basketball was only played on this side of the Mississippi River. And though his self promotion could be irritating, one had to admit that Big Jim did have some reason for his boasting. Playing major college basketball at a school in California, he had yearly gone head to head with the legendary Bill Walton.

So, though the seminary was filled with a number of people who had played small college basketball, our team constructed of a number of us who grew up playing and believed the legacy of our schools was enough to cement our round ball positions, with Big Jim we were certain we possessed the team to destroy all these wanna-be preachers pretending to be basketball players.

But the fallacy of our reasoning became evident in the first game when Big Jim, all 6’8”, 230 pounds of him, decided he wanted to play guard instead of center. Inside our 6’8” center was a 5’8” guard determined to get out. Instead of posting up down low and rebounding, Big Jim planted himself twenty feet from the basket taking jump shots. He was certain he possessed, and was determined to display, the skills of shooting, dribbling, and running the offense. As a star, he thought he should be shooting, and leave the mundane tasks of rebounding, passing, and playing defense to all the rest of us.

Now, in our scripture, Joseph sees himself as the star of the family, and not only does he quite openly declare himself as such, but leaves the mundane tasks of work and chores to his less qualified brothers.

Our story begins with the patriarch Jacob, the son of Isaac, and grandson of Abraham, now an old man. He possesses a number of wives, and children, significant flocks and herds. But the apple of his eye is seventeen year old Joseph, the son of his true love and number one wife, Rachel. The way *we* know Joseph stands first in Jacob’s heart is that verse four tells us Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons. But

everyone else also knew because Jacob gave Joseph a special coat, an expensive coat, what the scripture describes as a long robe with sleeves.

Now, if you are of my generation you read in the King James Version of the Bible that it was a coat of many colors. Actually, no one knows how to translate this Hebrew word. Its only other use in the Old Testament is in II Samuel 13:18, where it describes the outfit of a princess. So, whether it was a long robe with sleeves or a coat of many colors, the point is that it was a luxurious garment none of the other brothers possessed. Otherwise, while the other siblings were working the flocks and herds, Joseph was strutting around wearing mink and serious bling.

Well, as you can imagine, the other brothers are not too fond of this fatherly bias. But what makes it worse is that Joseph is a real pain. He tattles to his father when the other brothers stray from their duties. He has two dreams where his brothers, and in one even his father and mother, bow down to him and he eagerly relates this premonition of superiority to his parent and siblings.

So, when his brothers move their father's flocks for better pasture and then Jacob sends Joseph to check on them, the reader can see trouble coming. And sure enough, when the other brothers spy Joseph coming down the road, a full day's journey from home and their father's protection, they quickly grasp their opportunity.

"Let's kill this dreamer, throw him in a pit and see what becomes of his dreams." But then the oldest brother, Reuben, intervenes, "Let's not kill him, so we don't have blood on our hands, let's just throw him in this pit."

Reuben said this so he could come back later and rescue Joseph. Of course, we don't know if this is because Reuben is a compassionate sort of fellow, or since he was the oldest, he knew he would get blamed for anything that happened to Joseph. Also, remember Reuben slept with one of his father's concubines, usually interpreted as a political move seeking to become head of the household. Not having worked, Reuben may be searching for a way to get back in his father's good graces.

Well, Reuben wins out. When Joseph arrives they strip him of his special coat, throw him into a pit, and then sit down to have lunch. As they are eating they notice a caravan of Ishmaelites carrying medicinal and embalming supplies on their way to Egypt. Brother Judah says, "Hey, we're not going to make any money by killing Joseph, so let's sell him as a slave to these Ishmaelites. That way we don't get blamed for killing him. I mean, he is our brother."

Now, at this point, there is a little confusion in the text about Midianite traders fetching Joseph out of the pit and selling him to Ishmaelites. Most scholars believe this is one of the pieces of evidence that there are two traditions in the story. But the bottom line is that Joseph gets sold into slavery in Egypt. And when Reuben returns to find Joseph sold, he asks, "What am I going to do?"

The brothers decide to dip Joseph's special coat in goat's blood and show it to their father. Notice they never lie to their father about what they did. Rather, they only show him the bloody coat and he responds, "A wild animal has devoured him!"

Jacob goes into mourning over his son, unable to be comforted, so grieved that he declares he will mourn Joseph right to the day he dies and into the afterlife. And the story concludes by informing us that Joseph was sold as a slave to the captain of Pharaoh's guard.

You may have heard the story of the golfer who stands over his tee shot for what seems like an eternity to his partner. He looks up, looks down, measures the distance and figures the wind direction and speed. The longer he takes, the more his partner fidgets. Finally, his exasperated partner says, “What’s taking so long? Hit the ball.”

The guy answers, “My wife is up there watching me from the clubhouse. I want to make this a perfect shot.”

Turning and looking his partner says, “Forget it, man. You’ll never hit her from here!”

Now, this little joke is kind of funny, but it also makes us a little uneasy about a man thinking the other was trying to hit his wife with a golf ball. The biblical writer wants us to experience these two feelings when reading this story. The luxuriously clad, tattling, dreaming, youthful arrogance of Joseph is somewhat entertaining, much like the dark humor of the brothers who conclude, “Instead of killing Joseph, let’s sell him into life long slavery, after all, he is our brother.” The story writer uses humor combined with dastardly deeds to reveal both the good and the bad of the story’s participants.

The first point I want to make is one which shines through every single Old Testament story we have studied, or will study. To me, it is the greatest source of comfort these narratives provide. And that is the theological truth that God works through imperfect people.

Adam and Eve disobey God and get thrown out of the Garden of Eden.

Cain kills Abel.

Lot drags his feet to leave Sodom.

Jacob tricks his father Isaac and brother Esau.

And in this story we see Jacob doing exactly what his mother did with him, favoring one child over the others.

I always think about stories like this when I hear people extol biblical family values. The book of Genesis actually needs a warning sign that says: “Don’t raise your kids this way!”

Jacob not only favors Joseph, but he flaunts it. Whether the coat had long sleeves or many colors, what we think it means is that it was the type of coat in which one did not do manual labor. So while the other brothers are out working with the flocks and herds, Joseph is just “around.”

Of course, Joseph only makes it worse. It is bad enough that all the other brothers can see he is the favorite. But then, Joseph runs and tattles to this father anytime he witnesses his brothers slacking off, not doing their duties. So the guy who is doing nothing can hardly wait to squeal on the people who are really doing the work.

And the last straw is how arrogant he is about all of it. Not only does he have dreams where he is the ruler of all the rest of them, he can’t wait to tell them about it. “Oh yeah, I’m Dad’s favorite, the best dresser and no doubt the best looking, and by the way, someday I will be in charge of all of you.”

But, of course, neither are Joseph’s brothers anyone’s prize. To show their brotherly love and concern, they decide to not kill Joseph, but just sell him into slavery while their father grieves to his dying day.

And yet, through these imperfect, sinful, arrogant, self-serving people, God works out his purposes. When we see the traits of this story’s characters in our personalities,

when we despair because of our sinful nature and tendencies, this story reminds us that God can and will employ imperfect people, like you and me, to accomplish His will.

If you own a computer, had trouble with its software, and tried to get it fixed, you will understand the story of the systems engineer, mechanical engineer, and computer software engineer who are in a car careening down a mountainous road without brakes. The driver is furiously pumping the pedal while he steers the speeding car around the treacherous turns — stones flying and passengers gasping. Finally, he finds an incline and the car coasts to a stop. All three get out and, thanking their lucky stars, begin to assess the situation.

“Oh,” says the mechanical engineer, “the brake lines are leaking — let’s patch the hole, bleed the brakes and be on our way!”

The systems engineer says, “Maybe we should consult with the manufacturer and the dealer to ensure that is really the problem.”

The computer software engineer says, “Why don’t we get back in and see if it happens again?”

When we read a story like Joseph’s, we realize that since its beginning humanity has repeatedly acted in the same perverse, sinful ways, thinking we will get a different result. And yet, despite our willfulness, our sinfulness, God continues to love us and use us to accomplish God’s will.

The second point I want to make is a theme not only of this story, but of the Old Testament, of scripture. In the midst of history, in our lives, the purposes of God are being worked out in unseen and unnoticed ways.

Personality and action matter. Individuals may temporarily frustrate God’s will. We can bring harm to ourselves and those around us. But eventually, nothing can stop God. That is what the Book of Revelation is all about. In the end, God wins.

The brothers sell Joseph to Egypt in order to make certain his dream of ruling over them does not come true. But that very action enables it to occur. As the story concludes, Jacob’s dream of extending his line through Joseph seems to be dead, crushed by envy and violence. But we discover that God is still working out the dream, in the midst of human sin finding individuals, like Reuben, who, unknowingly, keep the dream alive.

All of us mess up. We do silly, stupid, hurtful things. And yet, this story reminds us that God does not abandon us or give up on us. Whatever happens, God is here, working out His purposes.

If you visit Harvard University and take the campus tour, you will be told many stories, some true, some myth, and some half and half. One of the most intriguing ones concerns Harry Elkins Widener. The wealthy Harry, and even wealthier mother and father were returning to America from England on the maiden voyage of the super ship, the Titanic. Mrs. Widener and her maid escaped in a life boat. Harry and his father went down with the ship.

The story grew up that Harry, a prominent rare book collector, was about to step into the lifeboat reserved for first class passengers when he remembered his recently purchased first edition of Francis Bacon’s Essays. He never returned. It is also often said that as a condition of giving the money to build Harvard’s Widener Library, Harry’s mother demanded that all Harvard students must pass a swim test to graduate, thinking

that would have saved Harry. And that ice cream be daily served at Harvard meals, expressing Harry's fondness for the dessert.

Though entertaining stories, none of these are true. Yet, the truth although far more plain vanilla, is exceedingly more powerful.

Mrs. Widener's gift of two million dollars built one of the greatest college libraries in the world. Millions of students, scholars, and everyday people have benefited from its enormous repository of books, especially books so important to the world's history, such as the Gutenberg Bible. This gift grew out of a tragedy, but it was a tragedy that a wife and mother used to do something good.

We experience bad things. We do bad things. But in the midst of all of it, we believe God continues to work His will and His ways in us and through us.

#### "He Didn't Get That Off the Rack"

No, Joseph didn't get that spectacular coat off the rack. It was made special for him, coming to symbolize favoritism and arrogance. One of the ways the Bible instills confidence and faith in us is through its honesty. The scriptures realistically and forthrightly describe how life functions, and dysfunctions. How easily we see ourselves in it. As parents, children, and siblings, we recognize our sinful tendencies in this story.

But more importantly in the saga, and if we look closely, in our lives, we can see how God works in the midst of that dysfunction. In this tale of the doting father, arrogant, pampered son and jealous brothers, we find comfort and hope. Their traits, their faults, their actions mirror our own. Their dysfunction is our dysfunction. And yet, whether it is economic turmoil or familial chaos, we see God working. Sometimes you have to look real hard. And sometimes you have to look real hard for a real long time. But the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph continues to work out those purposes here in Westminster Presbyterian Church and in each one of you.

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January 11, 2009