



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 14A, AUGUST 9, 2020
GENESIS 37:1-4, 12-28; PSALM 105: 1-6, 16-22, 45b; ROMANS 10:5-15; MATTHEW 14:22-33

TRANSFORMATIVE STORIES

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 [*Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. 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. 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. 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. Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. 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." 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, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." 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. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. 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." But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." 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. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. 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. Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 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. 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 two months now, our Sunday lectionary has woven a thread through the colorful book of Genesis, treating us to a layered storyline— from creation and God's forging a relationship with our ancestral progenitors that stretches down to us today. It is a

storyline replete with tales of humanity's capacity for good and evil, a storyline laced with tales of tricks and lies and holy scrapes, a mythic saga of the ways humans hurt one another, and forgive one another. Broken relationship and healed ones.

Today we turn to the last section of the great book, and begin the remarkable tale of Joseph and his brothers. Next Sunday concludes the jaunt through Genesis with the bookend of Joseph's story—a beautiful ending to an otherwise harrowing story of pain and suffering. We call these stories myths—not because they aren't true, but precisely because they are true for every generation including ours today, and there is much to glean.

Myths may or may not be true on the literal surface of things, but they are always true on the inside, tapping the mettle of the human condition pervading all our narratives. So we read these great stories that plumb complex themes, and wrestle with them, for a purpose.

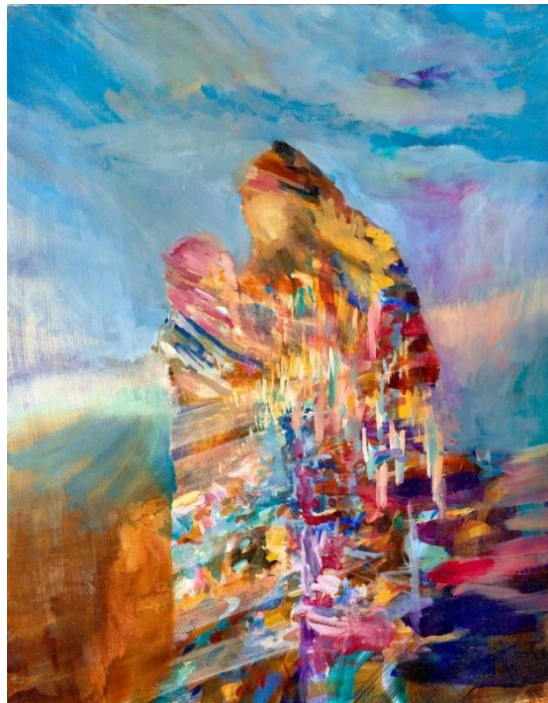
Richard Rohr says: “If we don't transform our pain and suffering, we will transmit it.”ⁱ News flash: none of us gets through life without pain and suffering. What we do with it is what really matters.

Every healthy religion angles in on this essential truth: If we don't transform our pain and suffering, we will transmit it—usually to those closest

and dearest to us, and often upon our children, thereby propagating the pain across generations.

Enter Joseph and his brothers... Their father Jacob played favorites among his many children, much as his parents Isaac and Rebekah did. Joseph was his special one, coming late in life, and the boy's ego swelled with the attention. Joseph's false-self dreamed arrogant dreams of their subjugation to him; he lorded his specialness over them and relentlessly rubbed his brothers' noses in it.

His brothers were hurt by it all. Their pain mingled with hatred, they plotted to kill him.



Reuben has second thoughts and suggests they just throw him in a pit instead, with no water. Judah makes the case to sell him into slavery. Good riddance. Forget about him.

They take his coat—the technicolor gift from father to son—they smear blood on it and tell Dad a wild beast got him.ⁱⁱ

They did not anticipate the depths of Jacob's grief. Grief that lingered in the air they

breathed. Grief that refused to forget. Pain transmitted all around.

Meanwhile, Joseph is resold as a slave in Egypt. A few subplots unfold that are worth the read, I promise you: suffice here to say that the story includes an episode from *Real Housewives of Egypt*, a #Me Too moment that might surprise us even today, a stint in prison during which Joseph contemplates the meaning of life.

He learns to interpret the dreams of others, only this time his true self takes the lead, and he rises to prominence, not because he is arrogant, but because he sees ways to help others. He is a visionary whose gifts extend beyond simple dreams.

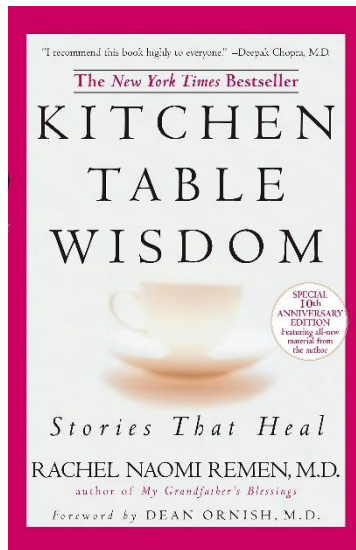
He speaks truth to kings, and they listen, changing the course of human history. His actions save countless lives, including the lives of his brothers, who come to him on the brink of starvation, seeking his help, only they do not know he is Joseph. More tricks ensue, because that's what we humans do to one another, and then, then the culminating scene....

Tune in next week for the rest of the story...

For now, let me offer this teaser: tears are shed. And the pain and suffering are

transformed for good, but not without a twist or two.

Oh my, it's a great story! It is our story, writ large as a mythic saga so that it may inscribe its truths on our hearts, melting them of the hardness that comes when pain and suffering are not transformed.



My friend Rachel Remen, who wrote *Kitchen Table Wisdom* and *My Grandfather's Blessings* (two books I'd recommend to anyone), Rachel said we need such stories to make

sense of life—they hold the key to so much wisdom—that beneath the layers of what we do lies the bedrock wisdom of who we are, who we were created to be. The stories may change with time; they may mix facts with meaning. Facts lead to knowledge; stories with meaning lead to wisdom. And as people of faith, we are a story-formed people seeking wisdom. But for a purpose.

If we do not transform our pain and suffering, we will transmit it. That story is told time and time again, and we know it to be true.

All of us experience pain and suffering—it is simply an inevitable part of life—the suffering may seem absurd, nonsensical, almost an annoyance; it may be smoldering, or it may be traumatic, excruciating, life-deforming. It may be unjust or undeserved, or it may be retributive. Ultimately, left untransformed, it will be tragic in its effects.

Our work, Rohr says, is to go deeper, to find meaning in or through the suffering, to find God in the midst of it, to transform the suffering—not as a self-flagellation and certainly not as resignation to abusive situations—but as antidotes to the impulsive outlets of cynicism, anger, or bitterness or scapegoating that may feel like pressure valves but never offer true healing and release.

It is human nature to try to control it, or fix it, or to understand it, which is to say, to define it factually, in the realm of the ego container designed to box it in, or box it out. Once boxed up, then forget about it. But that will always leave us wanting, aching.

The heart does not experience pain as a boxed-up reality; it aches for deeper

meaning. Soul wounds cannot be prosaically defined.

God sows the seeds of transformative wisdom down in the depths of our soiled existence where there is no need to return hatred or hostility to the one who has hurt us, but rather this is where the courage arises to shed the tears of memory and forgiveness simultaneously, to make one's way to the foot of the cross, to hold the suffering until resurrection breaks into life, resurrection that surpasses human understanding, and yet we know it to be true.

Only then do we discover what it means to be wounded healers rather than transmitters of pain. Only then do we discover the truth that God has been with us through it all.

ⁱ <https://www.ptm.org/suffering-transforming-pain-richard-rohr> Much of the theological development of transforming pain and suffering is derived from Rohr's wisdom shared in this article.

ⁱⁱ The image is entitled *Between Us*, by Ranaan Yoram. <https://www.yoramraanan.com/figurative-prints/between-us>