

Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan. ² This is the account of Jacob. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.

³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. ⁴ When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

⁵ Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. ⁶ He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: ⁷ We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it."

⁸ His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.

⁹ Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

¹⁰ When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" ¹¹ His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind. (Genesis 37:1-11)

Why Would You Ever Shoot the Messenger?

"Don't shoot the messenger!" Have you ever said that to someone? Why? You just told them something they didn't want to hear, right? The boss just decided that he or she wants a project redone and you're the messenger. The city just raised the taxes on your house and you get to tell your spouse. Your kids' big game got moved to a far less convenient location and you have to tell the other parents. So you have to listen to people complain and whine. You might even get yelled at. And you want them to understand that you didn't make the decision. You're just the messenger. In the church, we're in the message business. But God's message isn't a big abstraction. What God says and does profoundly affects our lives. Our Old Testament lesson for today gives us an example of the tough spot that reality can put us into. We might just be the messenger. Or, we might have to be the one who gets the message. And we might just be tempted to take our frustration out on the messenger.

Why would you ever shoot the messenger? I think the story of Joseph gives a couple of good reasons. Now, this is not the Joseph we talked about last week. This is not the stepfather of Jesus. This is his ancestor. This Joseph lived roughly two thousand years before Jesus was born. He was the great-grandson of Abraham. So when Joseph lived, there was no people of Israel. There was only an extended family. Joseph had eleven brothers. But his father Jacob had four wives all at the same time. You see, Jacob had dearly loved Rachel. She was the one he wanted to marry, but his father-in-law conned him into marrying both her and her sister, Leah. Leah had six sons and a daughter. When Rachel couldn't have children, she gave Jacob her maidservant as a concubine. Leah followed suit. They're the Bilhah and Zilpah which are mentioned in our reading for today. Those two women gave birth to four more sons. Finally, years later, Rachel gave birth to two sons. Joseph was the older and Rachel died in childbirth with younger.

So Jacob loved Joseph more than all his other sons. He gave him a rich garment to show the whole world that he loved Joseph best. How do you think that made his brothers feel? If you have multiple kids, you know how hard it is to be fair. You know that it takes work to love them equally. If you happened to have those children with different spouses, I have to believe it takes even more work to make them all feel equally loved. But we do the work because it's just not right to love one child more than another. Jacob didn't do the work. And his other sons hated Joseph because he was his father's favorite.

Then God did something that made it worse: God began to give Joseph dreams that foretold the future. This would continue for years, as part of God's plan to make Abraham's family into the nation of Israel. What were the dreams? Once, he dreamt that he and his brothers were tying up sheaves of grain. Then his stood up and the others bowed down to it. In that part of the world, you bow down to your rulers. In the other dream,

the sun, moon and eleven stars bowed down to Joseph. These dreams weren't hard to interpret. Both meant that one day Joseph was going to rule over his family.

I.

That was all going to come true. But the reaction of Joseph's brothers shows us the first reason why we might want to shoot the messenger sometimes: we don't like the message. Moses tells us that Joseph's brothers hated him because of his dreams and that they were jealous of him. He says that Jacob rebuked him, but kept the matter in mind. Does mean they didn't believe him? I think you can make a pretty good case that they did. Why would they be jealous of their little brother's dreams if they weren't at least worried they were going to come true? And they had certainly heard their father's stories of God giving him special dreams during his adventures. So I think the real issue here is that they didn't like what the dreams said. They hated Joseph for being dad's favorite already. Now, God was saying that Joseph was going to rule over them, too. That was God's message.

God has given us a very clear message to share. But it isn't always popular. Many people today don't like being told they're sinners. They don't like being told God actually sends people to hell. Most people today want to believe that God's just going to shrug his shoulders and let everyone into heaven. Why? Because most people today know they aren't living anything like a God-pleasing life. Our society is awash in sin. But as soon as you say that, you're some kind of self-righteous hater. Our society does not want to hear that God hates all these things that we're free to do. And many people today hate our message because they don't understand how a loving God can allow so much evil and pain to exist in our world.

Our message, just like Joseph's, comes from God. He gave every word that he wanted written in the Bible. But if you think that God saying it is going to be enough for most people, go back to Joseph's brothers. They were believers. They knew all that God had done to bring their family there to the Promised Land. But when God said something they didn't like, they wanted to shoot the messenger. Ultimately, they actually sold their brother into slavery. They hated him that much. What do you think is going to happen when we share our message in a hostile society? So our job is just to say what God says and not worry about the results. That's hard to do.

Sometimes, it's our job to point out the way that God works in this life. Sometimes, it's my job to tell families that they need to be ready for grandpa to go home to heaven. Sometimes, it's my job to make sure that grandpa knows that. Sometimes, it's my job to lead a family in praying that God would end grandpa's pain and take him home. The first time I had to do that, I shook with fear. Most of the time, families are glad for that prayer. They know grandpa's dying and they want to hear that it's OK to ask God to take him to heaven. But some people might not appreciate that message.

There are lots of other situations that require us to talk about how the God of the Bible actually works. Last Sunday, the president of our congregation read an announcement. Did you hear what he said? Two weeks from today, on Palm Sunday, we're only going to have one service at 9:30. Then we're going to have a special congregational forum to talk about where we are and where we're going. Understand, the church council decided to do something this unusual to make the point that we are at a crossroads in our congregation's history. We have to look honestly at the ministry choices God gives. And we need to make some decisions about what kind of ministry we want to have here. And the council doesn't want to set themselves up as some kind of Lutheran pope who imagines they can tell you what God wants you to do. They want to discuss with you how we're going to do the work of spreading the gospel here. They are going to tell you that if nothing changes – and that's a very important *if*, because our God does amazing things – but if nothing changes you can see the future of this congregation: slow decline until we close our school and go to one service and eventually close our doors. That message might make you want to shoot the messengers. But we have to face the challenges that the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh are throwing in our path. We will face those challenges, under God. And we will take his message forward.

II.

But the message isn't always the problem. Sometimes, it's the messenger. Guess what? Joseph was seventeen. He was pretty snotty about being his father's favorite. His father would send him out to the fields where his other sons were taking care of their sheep. Those sheep were the foundation of Jacob's wealth. Ten of those sons had more experience at taking care of them than Joseph. But Joseph was the one Jacob sent to check on them. And he brought back a bad report. Now, they probably deserved the report. But it sounds to me

like Joseph wasn't above a little tattling here. And the way Moses tells the story, it seems like Joseph gets more than a little pleasure out of telling his brothers about those prophetic dreams. The New Testament encourages God's preachers to be humble and full of love. Joseph wasn't there yet.

Like so many of us, Joseph let his sinful nature get in the way of the work God gave him to do. Now, you and I are not prophets. But God did give us a message. God specifically calls some of us to be pastors or teachers or board members or Sunday school teachers. But he calls all of us to always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that we have. To make the job as clear cut as possible, God has given us that answer: Jesus. But are we prepared to give that answer? Do we want to be prepared? Or do we just wish someone else would do that work for us?

Now being a Christian father or mother is serving God. Being a Christian worker at your job is something God calls you to do. Serving on a board at church is not a better way to serve God. Teaching your own children to know the Lord is just as important as sharing the gospel with unbelievers. But do we personally take responsibility for doing that work? Do we parents take the time to teach our children to know Jesus? Do we read the Bible with them? Do we talk about what we hear in this building with them? Or do we figure that's what we pay our pastors and teachers to do? Likewise, are we Christians *prepared* to talk about our faith when God gives us the chance to do so? Next Sunday, I hope to start a Bible class about sharing your faith. Will you come? Are we willing to give our time to hang invitations, to ask our friends and our contacts to come when our congregation sets special outreach dates? Are we willing to talk about Jesus? Those are tough questions. They're scary questions. I find it just as hard to talk to other people about my faith as you do. But God doesn't *ask* us to be prepared to give an answer. He *commands* it. We might be just as clueless and just as arrogant as Joseph was when he was seventeen. But God sends us anyway. Are we willing to do that work?

If we're not willing to make ourselves ready, that's just sin. It's up to God to decide if he's ever going to use you to reach someone or not. But he commands us to be ready. What a slap in God's face if we refuse! God should just say, "Fine! Don't be ready! And don't expect to be in heaven either!" But he doesn't. Instead, God takes even that sin away. Jesus was the only perfect sharer of God's word who will ever live. He was perfect in our place. So God doesn't see us being unwilling. He sees Jesus and he calls us willing. He sees Jesus laying down his life to pay for all the times we just didn't want to do the work and for all the times we were too afraid to speak. His blood bleaches that sin right out of God's sight. Now, God has made you his messenger. Joseph shows us that you don't have to be perfect to be effective. It's God's message that does the work. Our only job is to share it. Trust God to do that work and share the good news.

Just in case you think that you couldn't ever say anything that would make a difference, let me tell you a story. In my last church, there was a girl in my public school catechism class. Now, she never came to church. She never did any work for the class. Most of the time, she radiated disgust that her parents were making her come to this stupid class. But every couple of weeks, I would say something that made her perk up. Then she'd ask a question that was totally off topic, but that clearly was a real question – about sex, alcohol, witchcraft – just to name a few. The other kids would roll their eyes and groan. I would tell them to just be quiet, because I knew that no one else in her life was going to give her God's answers. Well, after a while, she stopped coming. But several years later, she ran into her and she told me she was getting married. She told me that she really appreciated all that I had taught her in that class, because she needed to hear it. Now, if she hadn't told me that, I never would've known it. But I don't have to know how God works things out in the lives of the people I talk to. What I have to know is that God has given us his power in the message about Jesus Christ. And he's called us to be ready to share that message. Amen.