

JUDAH DRAWING NEAR

Genesis 44:18-34

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on September 6, 2020, the Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church was closed for the Coronavirus pandemic and the sermon was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.

Then Judah stepped up to him and said, “O my lord, let your servant please speak a word in my lord’s ears, and do not be angry with your servant; for you are like Pharaoh himself. My lord asked his servants, saying, ‘Have you a father or a brother?’ And we said to my lord, ‘We have a father, an old man, and a young brother, the child of his old age. His brother is dead; he alone is left of his mother’s children, and his father loves him.’ Then you said to your servants, ‘Bring him down to me, so that I may set my eyes on him.’ We said to my lord, ‘The boy cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.’ Then you said to your servants, ‘Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall see my face no more.’ When we went back to your servant my father we told him the words of my lord. And when our father said, ‘Go again, buy us a little food,’ we said, ‘We cannot go down. Only if our youngest brother goes with us, will we go down; for we cannot see the man’s face unless our youngest brother is with us.’ Then your servant my father said to us, ‘You know that my wife bore me two sons; one left me, and I said, Surely he has been torn to pieces; and I have never seen him since. If you take this one also from me, and harm comes to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in sorrow to Sheol.’ Now therefore, when I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy’s life, when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die; and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. For your servant became surety for the boy to my father, saying, ‘If I do not bring him back to you, then I will bear the blame in the sight of my father all my life.’ Now therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy; and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father.”

The island off the coast of Maine where we have gone for vacation eight of the past eleven years is one of those small agricultural and fishing communities, where three or four families dominate, and everybody seems related to everybody else. Life thus bears some resemblance to the family sagas from Genesis we have been spending time with this summer, sagas to which we return today and next Sunday, to see, as always, if these stories of old can speak to our sometimes wild times today.

Usually when I come back from Maine, some of you express hope I will bring back a few stories to share. One story bubbles up for me today.

On Tuesday night of the Republican Convention, a local lobsterman named Jason Joyce spoke on behalf of the President. He comes from one of three or four families who dominate the island and its one industry of lobster fishing. The next day, another lobsterman, Wesley Staples, from another equally dominant family posted on the island’s Facebook page: “I am anything but a Trump supporter, but I was sure proud to see Jason Joyce last night.”

I think all of us long for such simpler times of political disagreement, of friendship across our disagreements. I pray that we will be restored to such.

I.

Today we turn our attention to Judah, a character to whom not many of us have paid attention, but one whose adult life is worth following.

Judah is one of Jacob's twelve sons. He will later be known as the "Lion of Israel," as he will become namesake of the largest of the tribal territories, the southern part of the country that houses Jerusalem, the nation's capital.¹

When we first meet Judah, he is a late-teenager/early young adult, likely two to three years older than his more famous younger half-brother Joseph.² When ten of Jacob's twelve sons conspire to throw their despised-but-favored-by-their-father younger brother into a pit, sell him into slavery, dip his coat of into blood to add an additional color to its already "many colors," and present it to their father so that he will conclude that Joseph has been eaten by a wild animal, Judah is *among the conspirators* in this near deadly game of family revenge.³

When the sons hand Jacob the bloodied garment, the narrator tells us:

Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son for many days. All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort [Jacob]; but he refused to be comforted...

Among those who tried to comfort Jacob was the eighteen-year-old Judah, even though he knew that if he stepped forward and told Jacob the truth, his father's weeping would not tarry for the night for joy would come in the morning.⁴

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Immediately following this episode of complicity and mourning, the narrator tells us that "at that time" Judah leaves the village to go and live with a friend named Hirah in the city of Adullah south of Jerusalem.

Judah is not the first person in human history, nor the last, to deal with family dysfunction and grief by fleeing from the home in which it takes root. Judah hopes that a new geography, a new set of relationships, a new family, will wipe away the memory of his father's grieving and the complicity he bears for it.

Judah then does something that newly-grieving people sometimes do. He throws himself into a new relationship. The narrator captures Judah's frenetic pace:

...Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; he married her and went in to her. She conceived and bore a son; and he named him Er. Again she conceived and bore a son whom she named Onan. Yet again she bore a son, and she named him Shelah.

Within a few sentences of seeing his father's grief, Judah leaves home, marries, has Child #1, Child #2, Child #3. No time to reflect. No time to mourn.⁵

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² It is almost impossible to reconstruct exacts ages and birthdates, but here is one noble attempt:

http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/otesources/01-genesis/text/articles-books/zimmerman-jacobchronology-gtj.pdf.

³ Genesis 37:1-36.

⁴ Psalm 30:5.

⁵ Genesis 38:1-12.

But as is often the case, whatever weeds are found in the family of origin sprout in the new family as well. With harshness of language that the Bible sometimes uses to our chagrin and bafflement, the narrator says of the first two of Judah's sons: "they were wicked in the sight of the Lord" and "the Lord put them to death." Judah is thus left with a grieving wife – who is never named – and their mutual fear that their last remaining child will be struck dead as well. Judah survives that fear but his wife does not.⁶

After an appropriate period of mourning, Judah goes to a town named Timnah and engages the services of a harlot. She turns out to be Tamar, the widow of one of Judah's sons, to whom, according to the religious law of the day, Judah had promised his third son as husband and next-of-kin, so that Tamar could bear a child and continue the family name. But Judah had failed to deliver on that promise. So disguised as a prostitute, Tamar tricks Judah, conceives a child, and then confronts Judah with her identity and his paternity.

But to our surprise, Judah owns up to what he has done. "She is more in the right than I," he says. His acceptance of responsibility stands out for the rarity with which it occurs among far too many men in far too many cultures and eras.⁷

Tamar then gives birth to a son named Perez.⁸ Perez becomes an ancestor of David the King and Christ the Messiah. And Tamar is remembered by the author of the Book of Ruth,⁹ and Matthew includes her as one of four women he depicts leading up to Mary in the genealogy with which he opens his gospel.¹⁰

II.

But back to Judah.

22 years pass from the time Joseph is thrown into the Pit¹¹ and Judah marries, loses wife and children, and encounters some of his own darker instincts in the most intimate aspects of human life.

- During these same years, Joseph, though a slave, has risen to become "minister of agriculture" in Egypt, in a time of famine for the entire region.
- Egypt has food; no other country does.¹²
- Joseph's brothers – including Judah – come to Egypt seeking food.¹³
- Joseph recognizes them but they do not recognize him.¹⁴
- Joseph "toys with them" for a while – like a cat after a mouse – trying to learn more about his father's condition while plotting some sort of self-revealing or revenge or both.¹⁵
- On their second journey back to Egypt, Joseph has required that the brothers back with them Jacob's now only remaining favorite son Benjamin (Joseph's full brother).¹⁶

⁶ Genesis 38:7-12.

⁷ Genesis 38:13-26.

⁸ Genesis 38:27-30.

⁹ Ruth 4:18-22.

¹⁰ Matthew 1:1-6.

¹¹ Zornberg, *Murmuring* 300.

¹² Genesis 39-41.

¹³ Genesis 42.

¹⁴ Genesis 42:7.

¹⁵ Genesis 42-43.

¹⁶ Genesis 42:34.

- When they arrive with Benjamin, Joseph demands that they leave him behind, as punishment for an alleged theft Benjamin has done but for which, in fact, Joseph has framed him.¹⁷
- Judah knows that there is no way the brothers can return to their father Jacob without his beloved Benjamin.
- So Judah breaks ranks from his brothers. The narrator puts it this way:

Judah *draws near* to him and says:

...when I come to...my father and the boy is not with us, then, as [my father's] life is bound up in the boy's life, when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die; and [my brothers and I] will bring down the grey hairs of...our father with sorrow to Sheol... Now therefore, please let [me] remain as a slave to [you] in place of the boy...

For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father.

III.

Judah's words are the conclusion of one of the longest speeches in the early books of the Bible. We read most of that speech as our scripture reading for today.

When the narrator says that Judah "steps up" or "draws near" the Hebrew word is *va-yigash*.

Sefat Emet, a nineteenth century Jewish scholar writes:

And Judah drew close *to him*: that is, *to Joseph*. But also *to himself, his true self*. And also, *to God*.

He continues:

...although Judah said nothing new in his speech and had no real claim to make on Joseph, yet since he *clarified the truth* of the matter, *salvation came* to him...To come to [one's] own self is to come to God.¹⁸

Thomas Mann once wrote:

...nothing comes first and of itself, its own cause, but...everybody is begotten and points backwards, deeper and down into the depths of [our] beginnings, the bottoms and abysses of the well[s] of [our] past.¹⁹

To come to one's own self *is* to come to God.

¹⁷ Genesis 44:1-17.

¹⁸ Sefat Emet, *Va-yigash* 249. Quoted in Zornberg, *Murmuring* 307.

¹⁹ Thoman Mann, *Joseph and His Brothers*, quoted in Zornberg, *Murmuring* 297.

IV.

When Judah “draws near” to Joseph, it leads Joseph to break down. After two decades of being one of the most contained and calculating characters in all of Scripture, after a lifetime of holding his emotions deep within himself out of a need and commitment to focus and survive, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers:

“I am Joseph,” he says. “Is my father still alive?”

Joseph weeps so loudly that the Egyptians hear it and the household of Pharaoh hears it. He weeps on Benjamin’s neck who in turn weeps on Joseph’s neck. He kisses all his brothers and weeps.²⁰

Judah drawing near has opened this family up, has led them to face one another, has led them to reconcile. And this is one story that ends in genuine happiness – Shalom – with Joseph, his brothers, and their father reunited, resettled in Egypt, where they live out their days with peace, security, food, family, faith, forgiveness.²¹

When Judah stepped forward to Joseph, he brought a self, a family, a people, a nation together. The promise of God kept its long and winding road toward fruition.

Amen.

Sources

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginnings of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995). See especially “VA-YIGGASH: The Pit and the Rope,” 314-351. Referred to in notes as BD.

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009). See especially pages x-xiv, and Chapter 10, “The Pit and the Rope: Recovering Joseph,” 297-312. Referred to in notes as MD.

²⁰ Genesis 45:1-15.

²¹ Genesis 46-48.