

BIOGRAPHY OF A COAT  
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church  
Columbia, Tennessee  
August 10, 2008

Genesis 37:1-36

The story of the patriarch Joseph is rich in wonderful details and makes a great read. But Joseph is perhaps best known for his clothing, a particular garment that he wore. You know the one I mean, because you learned about it in Sunday school. It is his coat of many colors.

But you may have noticed that there was no mention of the coat of many colors in the reading of this scripture today. Instead, it says that Joseph was given a coat with long sleeves. Huh? What sort of a coat is that?

What we've got here is one of those instances which happen occasionally in the Bible where an older translation has been updated. It's in the King James Version that we are told that Joseph's coat was one with many colors. But modern scholars have investigated the matter and have decided that "a coat with long sleeves" is a better translation.

Now actually, a coat with long sleeves would not be too shabby a garment for that time. In a world where most people were farmers or laborers, you didn't want sleeves on your coat lest they get in the way. So the only people who wore such a sartorial get-up would be gentlemen and other special people. So a coat with long sleeves is a pretty special gift.

Still, to say that Joseph wore a coat with sleeves just lacks a certain pizzazz. For today, this is one of those times when Sunday school trumps Biblical scholarship. We learned it as a coat with many colors, and a coat with many colors it will stay. We just can't imagine Joseph dressed in anything else.

It's worth getting that detail straight, because this first part of the Joseph story can be told as the biography of that coat. We can tell what happened to Joseph by telling what happened to his coat.

This famous coat was given to Joseph by his father Jacob. It says that Joseph was Jacob's favorite son. We have already seen how none of these patriarchs have distinguished themselves

for their parenting skills, so we're not surprised to learn that Jacob would play favorites. But Joseph may be the favorite because he is the son of Jacob's old age. All the other sons—10 of them!—are up and grown and gone. And now here comes Joseph and a little later his baby brother Benjamin. Maybe by the time you have your eleventh and twelfth children, you are a little more relaxed about being a parent. You've long since lost your copy of Dr. Spock, so you don't care if this kid eats his broccoli or even if you spoil him a bit. So Joseph gets the coat.

But don't think the other, older brothers don't notice. They had never gotten such a gift, and they resent this whippersnapper getting preferential treatment from the old man. Besides, Joseph is really sort of obnoxious. It says that Joseph went out to help the brothers with their shepherding duties, and brought back a bad report of them to his father. "Daddy, Levi and Naphtali got in a fight. . . . Zebulon said a bad word." What a tattletale!

And it's not just that. It's also the dreams. "I dreamed that your sheaves of wheat bowed down to my sheaf. . . . I dreamed that the sun, moon, and stars were bowing down to me." Even old daddy Jacob didn't much like that, and the brothers were absolutely ballistic.

So, on that day when Jacob sent Joseph out to his brothers, they saw their chance to be rid of him altogether. He was wearing the coat, the coat of many colors, and it made them see red. "Here comes this dreamer. Let us kill him . . . and we shall see what will become of his dreams."

For those of you above a certain age, those words will be familiar. They were words used at the time Martin Luther King was assassinated forty years ago this past April. Martin Luther King was famous for his speech that told that he had a dream: where former slaves and former slave owners would sit down together, a dream where children would be judged, not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. And there were those who found that dream intolerable, unbearable. There were those who did not want to see a nation renewed, and racism overcome by reconciliation. There were some who were so extreme in their views that they wanted to kill him. And they did.

We think of dreamers as those who have their heads in the clouds and out of touch with reality. But sometimes it is the dreamers who see reality all too clearly. Being a dreamer is not always harmless. You can get in trouble for dreaming of a new world, because there are plenty of people who like the old world the way it is.

The brothers didn't like Joseph's dreams, so they resolved to do away with him. They took his coat, and threw him into a pit, while they pondered what to do.

One of the brothers, Reuben, the oldest, tried to think of a way to stop the brothers in their evil plan. Surely Reuben knew that he would have to answer to his father, and that killing Joseph wouldn't solve things anyway. Killing never solves anything. Philosopher Wendell Berry

observes that while we think that killing people in wars will solve things, that they do not. The Crusades of the middle Ages are still going on, he says. The American Civil War is still going on.<sup>1</sup> Killing doesn't solve problems, but only brings new problems.

Perhaps Reuben sensed that, so he suggested that they sell Joseph as a slave. His idea was to buy some time so that he could come back and rescue Joseph from the pit and get him back home. What happens next is a little garbled, but while Reuben is away, the others take Joseph from the pit and sell him to some traders who are on their way to Egypt. Twenty pieces of silver is the agreed upon price for this strapping young man who will make a fine slave. And we can see the brothers watching the traders and their new purchase heading off into the distance. That's the last we'll have to deal with that guy.

When Reuben discovers that Joseph is gone, he realizes that he has to come up with another plan. Later in scripture, Reuben will be described as "excelling in rank and power, but unstable as water."<sup>2</sup> Reuben wants to do the right thing, but he also wants to protect himself. So he and the brothers hit upon another scheme that involves this much-used coat. They kill a goat and dip the coat in it and take it back to the old man.

Imagine that, they are going to try to deceive their father. How ironic. Jacob had deceived his old, blind father many years before in order to get the blessing, and now the deception is being worked on him. The ruse had the desired effect. Jacob is totally taken in. He totally believes that his son Joseph is dead, and in his grief he is inconsolable.

And that's the end of the story, or at least it should be. Joseph is sold off down the river. Good riddance. Old Jacob thinks he's dead, and who knows, the life expectancy of a slave was never that great, so Joseph probably wouldn't last long anyway. They'd never know, and the brothers don't care.

Except that there is this one last verse of the scripture that indicates that this is not the end of the story: Joseph was sold to Potiphar, a captain of the guard of the king of Egypt. If you know this story, and so many of you do, then you know that those few words open out a story that is far from finished. It is a story that will involve more garments, not the coat of many colors any longer, but the garment that Potiphar's wife will grab when she tries to seduce Joseph, and the princely robe that the king will place on Joseph when this former slave ascends to the dizzying heights of power. But we're getting ahead of ourselves, for that is far in the future.

There remains but one thing to notice about the story so far. The name of God has not been mentioned. It has been an interesting story and well-told, but nothing here to make it particularly religious. Here are people who play favorites and get jealous and love and hate and do some

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Christian Century*, August 12, 2008, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 49:3.

good things and do some terribly bad things. It sounds like our world. But no mention of God in this scripture. As we have asked before in these stories of the patriarchs, what's this story doing in the Bible?

We have to confess that this story works a little like a soap opera—you've got to come back to get the conclusion. I will give you a clue: God is here—here in all the manipulations and machinations, in the good and bad, the joys and sorrows. We might even say that this story, when it is done, gives evidence of God's directing hand, of—dare we say it—predestination. You've just got to get to the end of the story to find out how it works.

John Calvin, the great reformer, said that predestination is not something we understand in the middle of life, but at its end. We look back and say, "Why, God was guiding me all along."<sup>3</sup> So in a way, being here in the middle of the Joseph story is a little like being in the middle of our lives. We're going along, and there are plenty of times when we have to confess that we don't understand the meaning of it all. We only trust that God is with us, and that all will be made clear in God's good time.

Karl Barth, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, was no stranger to the difficulty of life. As a citizen of Germany, he opposed the rise of the Nazis. Yet here is what Barth wrote about the journey of life:

The Christian is the most alive of all people. . . . If we may put it this way, life in the world, with all its joys and sorrows and contemplation and activity, will always be for the Christian a really interesting matter, or, to use a bolder expression, life will be an adventure. Ultimately and basically the Christian will always be thankful, and in the light of this thankfulness will look forward to what has still to come.<sup>4</sup>

As we look ahead to the next part of the Joseph story, just as we look ahead to what comes next in our own lives, let it be said that we can't wait to see what God has in store for us. †

---

<sup>3</sup> John Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press 1993) p. 228.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3/3, p. 267.