

Antiracism: How a Story Works

Genesis 37: 1 - 4, 12 - 28

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I. Telling Stories

I met once with an organizational consultant whose partner was novelist. She told me he sometimes wore a shirt that said, "My job is to make up stories." She had a corresponding shirt made that said, "My job is to tell the truth." It's true, humans need stories to survive. Stories are how we understand ourselves and our place in the world. But just any old story won't do. We need *truthful* stories, stories that help us face the reality of our lives.

Today's story about Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers is both disturbing and confusing.

When you read it, pay attention to all of the questions it brings up, like:

- Why did Jacob have such a soft spot for his son Joseph?
- Why was Joseph such a tattletale?
- Why did his brothers hate him so much, even to the point of wanting to murder him?
- Why did Reuben want to spare him?
- Why did Judah want to sell him?
- Why is this story even in the Bible and why do we keep telling it, if not living it?

Stories like this one explore a big question: "How did we get here?"

As we make our way through pandemics of disease and racism, I've been thinking about the stories we tell ourselves about how we got here.

More specifically, I've been thinking about the stories we white people tell ourselves.

The title for such a collection of stories might be: "The American Dream."

You know these stories well:

- We are descendants of people seeking freedom from despots and kings.
- We are self-made men, pilgrims, pioneers, explorers.
- We are unique individuals, entrepreneurs, industrialists.
- We will not be bound by the constraints of history. We choose our own future.
- We are entitled to all we have and are obligated to defend it.
- Everyone who is willing to work as hard as we do may share in this dream.

There is a certain noble sounding quality to these uniquely American assertions.

But the reality is that none of them are true, at least not in any simple or innocent way.

II. Telling the Truth

The Bible has been called the most sustained honest argument in history.ⁱⁱ

I'm not sure that is a provable assertion, but the point is:

Stories like the one about Joseph and his brothers don't simply affirm the goodness and rightness of a people.

This story is part of a painful collective memory.

There is wisdom and courage in preserving painful memory that is true instead of making up nice, clean, innocent stories that cover over all of the pain of the past.

Right after I graduated from seminary, I moved to Manhattan and joined a CPE program as a chaplain at the NYU Medical Center.

(CPE stands for Clinical Pastoral Education.)

In my cohort was a man named Abdul Hakim.

(In 1998, he might have been the first Muslim imam to go through a CPE program.)

As we built trusting relationships within the program, Abdul and I came up with nicknames for each other.

From California with blond hair and blue eyes, I became "Melrose Place."

From Queens, a tall, black, former bounty hunter, Abdul became "Repo Man."

These nicknames were funny because they spoke a partial truth.

I *did* fit the Melrose Place look, but I still have never seen the show, and I didn't fit the stereotype of its stuck up, materialistic characters. Well, mostly I didn't.

And Abdul became an imam because he wanted to serve others with love rather than serve them papers or repossess their vehicles.

I didn't realize it until later, but we used those nicknames to call out a painful truth about how society viewed us.

And in relationship, we overcame stereotypes and became more fully ourselves.

III. The Old Story

Joseph's brothers called him a name. They called him "Dreamer."

And hearing the whole story, it's hard to blame them for being angry at him.

"I had a dream that you were all bowing down to me," he told them once.

What sibling could take that statement in stride?

Joseph asserted his superiority over his brothers, even flaunted it.

He had his father's affection and a long robe to prove it.

The long robe even had sleeves, which means he wasn't meant to work, but to oversee.

No wonder they were so resentful... but murderous?

"Here comes the dreamer," they said. "Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what becomes of his dreams."

It's hard to imagine the stories they would have had to tell themselves in order to justify killing their brother.

Perhaps they felt justified: It's not like he does any work.

He doesn't love or respect us, why should we love or respect him?

With him out of the way, maybe dad will have more room in his heart for the rest of us.

Whatever it was, the scene is horrifying.

And it is only because Reuben, the eldest brother, speaks up, that they decide not to kill him.

Instead, when he arrives, they tear off his precious robe off and throw him into a pit.

And then this chilling detail: "Then they sat down to eat."

What stories, what nefarious justifications, what detached rationalizations, could they have told themselves so that they could then sit down next to a dry pit into which they have just thrown their brother, and eat?

Did he cry out? Did he complain? Did he plead with them? We don't know.

We're just left with a 17-year-old in a pit and his brothers eating and plotting how to profit off of his suffering.

What stories do we continue to tell ourselves as we go about our lives while our neighbors, our fellow citizens, our kindred in the family of God, suffer?

Are we able to allow their complaints to crack open our own wounded hearts?

Are we able to admit that neither privilege nor oppression is earned or deserved?

Are we able to accept that our own pain will not be soothed by violence?

IV. The New Story

In response to these questions, Christians have a story to tell.

It is a fraught story that must be retold with humility and openness.

It is a story that about death and resurrection, betrayal and reconciliation, sin and grace.

It is a story based in the character of God who is about the business of redeeming the entire world with no exceptions.

In the Joseph narrative, God thwarts people's evil intentions to bring about the good.

It doesn't happen all at once with a wave of the hand.

It happens through tiny graces such as Reuben's erstwhile attempt to save his brother.

It happens in spite of dire circumstances such as Joseph being carried away to Egypt by Midianite traders.

It happens when we tell the true story of our lives and accept the reality of who we are rather than the cleaned-up story of who we wish we were.

As America grapples with its heinous legacy of racism, learning to tell the whole story will be a powerful act of antiracism.

In fleeing from kings, we white people subjected an entire continent to our service. We are self-made except for the fact that we could not survive a week without neighbors we've never met.

We are unique individuals, but not so unique, and deeply dependent on our communities to remind us who we are.

We are not bound by the constraints of our history, but only to the extent that we've learned the full truth of our history, that we are not innocent, that our entitlement comes at a cost, and that success is less about hard work and more about how one defines success.

When Christians define success, we must look at Jesus.

And when we look at Jesus, we must look at the cross.

Success, for Christians, looks like defeat.

Or let me tell the story a slightly different way.

Success, for privileged white Christians, looks like defeat, looks like letting go, looks like emptying oneself of privilege so that God's love can pour out.

Out of the the emptiness of the tomb pours the good news of resurrection.

New life emerges in a new story of God's presence and possibility in a world that refuses to recognize its addiction to violence and death.

Resurrection is our better story, and it only comes after we've told the part about the cross,

about how Jesus died at the hands of Rome,

how Joseph was thrown in a pit by his brothers,

how the American Dream has been a nightmare for people of color.

When we learn to tell the whole, true, ugly, beautiful, story, we will see more clearly how God is working to overcome the sin of white supremacy by breaking hearts wide open.

That is how a story works.

And that is how we survive.

Amen.

ⁱ Michael Fick, "Living by the Word," *The Christian Century*, July 29, 2020.

ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, among others.