# GRACE FROM THE BEGINNING


## "In the Beginning"

Weekday Bible Studies
Winter/Spring 2021

Falls Church Presbyterian Church
225 East Broad Street
Falls Church, VA 22046
www.FallsChurchPresby.org

# Grace from the Beginning -- Genesis: A Study

## Acknowledgment

This study draws on a number of books and commentaries, but it is especially indebted to one in particular, Walter Brueggemann's *Genesis,* the first volume in the *Interpretation* set of commentaries published by John Knox Press. These books are intended for a wider audience – one including lay people – than most commentaries. (Brueggemann, an Old Testament professor retired from Columbia Theological Seminary, is one of the most prolific Christian writers of our time, and any book by him is probably worth your time.) The four major subdivisions of this course, along with their focus on God's "call" as a unifying theme for understanding and interpreting Genesis, are lifted straight from Brueggemann's book.

## Some General Notes on Bible Study and the Study of Genesis

One of the difficulties with doing serious, faithful Bible study grows out of a difficulty of listening to ancient texts, cast in the mode of "story," when we live in a world which expresses its truths through "objective" means such as science or history. This problem is even more acute for Protestant Christians who understand the Bible as the source par excellence for faith and practice—the ultimate source of revelation. How does one take biblical truth seriously if the Bible makes inconsistent or even contradictory statements about important events or issues? Likewise, how does one handle the tension between biblical accounts and history or science?

The book of Genesis poses some particular challenges on both these counts. For starters, it reports two somewhat contradictory creation stories. Then there is the obvious problem of reconciling its stories with a history of earth reconstructed from the fossil record and archeology, or with scientific explanations of the processes that produced the earth and all its inhabitants.

Sometimes this leads people to make a choice. If the Bible is true then science must be wrong, or vice versa. Unfortunately, resorting to such choices does great harm to study of the Bible. First, it suggests that Bible study is inconsistent with higher intellectual pursuit. (I've encountered many intelligent people over the years who are deeply suspicious of the Bible and of Christians because they're convinced one must turn off his or her brain to take faith seriously.) Second, even if one chooses Bible over science, the text is still captive to our modern ideas about objective truth and so on. Those who are most adamant in declaring "God said it; I believe it; that settles it," very often have the greatest difficulty opening themselves to what the biblical writers are actually saying. They are so captivated by questions of history or science that they miss the faith proclamations sometimes explicit and often implicit in the stories.

Curiously, while Bible study is sometimes viewed as an anti-intellectual pursuit in our culture, the texts of Genesis (along with much of the Old Testament) are the product of Israel's greatest intellectual resources. Far from being simple stories handed down from generation to generation, the final shape of Genesis' stories reflects a sophisticated processes of editing, compiling, and reinterpreting, so that the stories carry Israel's peculiar understandings about their God, and how creation, particularly the human part of creation, related to this God.

It bears repeating that most of Genesis comes to us as story, and we need to approach it that way. As such, it is neither myth, nor is it history or science. Genesis does not explain the nature of reality or chronicle events. Some of its stories bear remarkable resemblance to creation/flood myths of the Near East, and certainly many of its stories connect with history. But these stories' purpose is the proclamation of gospel, of promise.

I should point out that one need not consider themselves an intellectual or be concerned with scientific theories to appreciate what Genesis has to say. What is needed is a willingness to look for what you have not seen before. While parts of Genesis are some of the best-known biblical passages, too often this knowledge is superficial and stereotyped, and too often the stories are badly misunderstood. A certain openness on your part can help us move beyond that—to hear bold proclamation that has decisive claims for our faith lives.

Presbyterians believe that Scripture is a witness, that it points us to God in Christ. We also believe that God's Word is a living, dynamic thing, not simply a static account of events or collection of truths. The dynamic power of Scripture to transform and renew us calls us to be open to what it may be saying that is fresh and new. I sincerely hope that you will be open to the Spirit speaking in Scripture as we encounter the grace of God in the book of Genesis.

**Which Bible?**

A large number of different translations are available, and the class will benefit by hearing from a variety. However, not all Bibles are created equal. I use the NRSV and consider it the most accurate translation available. Its predecessor, the RSV, is also very good. Many other translations are less word for word but still quite good. New translations continue to come out. None match the NRSV for accuracy of translation. (Readability is another matter.) But as all translations include, by necessity, some interpretation, consulting multiple ones is always good practice. A distinction should probably be drawn between translations and paraphrases. *The Living Bible* isn't much use for Bible study because it paraphrases other English translations. The newer CEV is somewhere in between paraphrase and translation.

## Session I
## Introductory Matters and Course Outline

**The Question of "Sources"**

We will not focus a great deal on "sources," but any study of Genesis cannot avoid the fact that it is not so much written as it is compiled. Genesis is the product of a complex editorial process most likely completed sometime after Israel's exile in Babylon. Some of the stories in Genesis are much older than others, and some individual stories themselves (such as the Noah story) contain remnants of multiple versions of a story. It is worth noting two of these "sources," the so-called "J" and "P" sources. These will be of interest to us largely in the so-called pre-history of Genesis found in 1:1-11:29.

- **J or the Yahwist Source -** This source gets its name from the regular use of God's name, Yahweh. (In most Bibles this is indicated by this distinct printing of the word "LORD.") It's called J instead of Y because Yahweh was first mistakenly transliterated Jehovah, and because of German origins where a j makes a y sound. J is the oldest of the sources for the Old Testament, though "J" itself contains stories of much older origin than its supposed writing in the time of David or Solomon. Many think this material forms a criticism of royal abuses, focusing on human attempts to gain autonomy from God. The Garden of Eden story is from J.
- **P or the Priestly Source -** P is commonly dated to the time of the Babylonian exile. Much of P in the Old Testament is not narrative, but the Bible's opening story of creation in 7 days is from P. If J sometimes focuses on the negatives of humanity, P insists on hope in the midst of despair. The goodness of creation and the enduring "image of God" in humanity are ways

that P expresses God's continued presence and care for humans even in light of human sin and unfaithfulness.

**The Theme of Call in Genesis**

**"**Call" is a familiar term for most Christians. We speak of elders, deacons, pastors, teachers, and so on being "called by God." We know stories of the call of Abraham and of Jesus calling the disciples. Each of us is called to be a disciple, to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In all these cases, the one called must respond. Calls always leave open the possibility that the one called may refuse. Even in the mundane example of a mother calling out the back door for her child, "Timmy, come in for supper!" Timmy may choose not to come. He may ignore her, pretend not to hear her, or simply disobey her. Calls produce a kind of partnering. For the thing to work there must be an interplay between the one calling and the one responding.

For this class, I'd like you to think of call in somewhat larger terms than simply those of God calling someone. For interpreting Genesis, we'll speak of God having two related but distinct call partners—creation and Israel. Israel is part of creation but is nevertheless distinct from it. All of creation is called into being by God and is called to live in harmony with God. Israel is called out from creation for the special role of being God's special community of witnesses to the world. New Testament language about the Church being in the world but not of it echoes this idea. The Church is part of the creation/world, yet it is called out in order to be God's witness to this creation/world.

Walter Brueggemann suggests a division of Genesis organized around this idea of call. This division is as follows:

Genesis 1:1-11:29, "The Sovereign Call of God"
Will God bring creation to the unity God intends?

Genesis 11:30-25:18, "The Embraced Call of God"
Will Abraham live by faith?

Genesis 25:19-36:43, "The Conflicted Call of God"
Will the younger rule the older?

Genesis 37:1-50:26, "The Hidden Call of God"
Will the dreamer keep his dream?

In all these sections, the content of God's call is "promise." God has given promises to the call partners, creation/Israel. God has promised to stay with the partners, to see the thing through and help the partners gain the promise. The partners are called to rely on the promise. The question that Genesis raises has to do with the faithfulness of the call partners, God and creation/Israel. God has made gracious promises to those with no real right to the promise, but will God be faithful to those promises?

As to creation/Israel, will they be faithful to the call? Will they respond with the obedient faithfulness required by the promise? And what happens to God's commitment if the call partner (creation/Israel) doesn't respond faithfully? In a sense, Genesis seeks to give a partial answer to these questions.

Such questions are hardly academic. They are basic faith question. As Christians called into relationship with God through Jesus, can we trust in the faithfulness of the one who calls us? In a world with so much obvious suffering, fear, pain, and hopelessness, can we really trust in the faithfulness of this one who calls? And what of our own faithfulness to the call? Will we respond

faithfully to God in Christ? There are temptations, reasons not to trust the promise, distractions and doubts. Even if God will be faithful, can we? What happens if we are not?

Genesis wrestles with these very fundamental questions. These are its concerns, much more than anything related to science or history. The burning questions for Genesis are not "How did God do it, and when did it happen?" The burning question is, "Can we rely on God's faithfulness, and can we live in faithful relationship to this one who calls us?"

## The Prehistory of Genesis (Genesis 1:1-11:29) "The Sovereign Call of God"

### Some Introductory questions

This first section of Genesis is often labeled as "prehistory" because nothing in this section can be connected to any "known" events in history. Abraham can be given a roughly approximate date. Most of Genesis can be located with more or less accuracy somewhere alongside other historical goings on, but the prehistory cannot. Creation, the Garden Eden, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel are "outside" history (though not unknown to Near Eastern myths). **What faith questions are related to issues of creation? In other words, what difference does creation make for a person of faith? Why did Israel "need" to say something about creation? What questions might Genesis be trying to answer in talking about creation itself?**

Many of us have not visited the book of Genesis much as adults. (In some ways this is true for much of the Old Testament.) Try to recall what you can of Genesis, especially its prehistory. **What sort of images do you remember? What kind of memories dominate? What sort of book do your memories suggest Genesis to be? Why do you suppose you remember Genesis as you do?**

## Session II
## In and Out of Paradise – Creation and Human Destiny

Readings for this session:
**Genesis 1:1-3:24**

**Important terms**

**God/LORD -** We tend to speak as if "God" were a name, but of course God is a term, not a name. Yahweh, or something close to that, is the name of the God of Israel. Using the word "Lord" was a device adopted by later Jews to avoid actually speaking God's name. Most modern Bibles continue this practice, indicated to the reader by the small capital typeface LORD that the name Yahweh is meant rather than the word Lord. As you read Genesis, it is very helpful to notice how some stories always speak of God while others regularly refer to Yahweh. For example, you will notice that the 7-day story of creation never says Yahweh, but the second creation story begins "In the day that Yahweh God made the earth…" (2:4b) Noticing this as we go along can help you recognize where stories or sources change and may help you better understand what is meant by the story.

**Water -** Most people know what water is, but water occupied a much different place for the people of Israel than it does for us. As an arid land, Israel was always in need of water. Springs, rain, rivers, etc. were a great blessing, but water was also a fearful thing. Israel was not a seafaring people. They were frightened of the sea, and it represented danger and chaos to them.

**Dome/firmament -** The biblical word for what God names "sky," (some translations use other words) this "dome" can be thought of as an upside-down bowl placed over the earth. Its purpose was to hold back water. Ancient people believed there was water beyond the sky as well as beneath the earth. Rain came from God allowing a little through, and floods and annihilation might come if the sky failed, or if God removed it.

**Man/human/Adam -** The generic Hebrew word for man is adam (אדמ). It is similar to the Hebrew word for earth, adamah (אדמה). It can mean a male or it can refer to people in general. (The word ish (איש) specifically refers only to a man, a male person.) The name Adam is this same word. In a sense, the name of the first man is Man. The "Adam and Eve" story makes a distinction between when it is talking about "the man" vs. when it is speaking of "Adam." With one debated exception in 2:20c, the Bible only speaks of "the man" until after the expulsion from Eden. The woman is also unnamed until 3:20.

**Woman -** The Hebrew word for woman, ishah (אשה) is derived from the specific word for a man, ish (איש).

**Exploring the Readings**

The opening story of the Bible is a newer story than the creation account which follows in 2:4b-4:26. It is most likely written by the "priestly" group at the time of the Babylonian exile, around 550 BCE. This story borrows heavily from Babylonian creation myths, but reinterprets these myths in significant ways. **Assuming that the people of Israel would have easily recognized the presence of the Babylonian myth in Genesis 1:1-2:4a, and realizing that people of the ancient Middle East saw wars as extensions of struggles between their gods, in what ways might these verses speak to Israel in a time of crisis and doubt following their defeat and exile?**

**In the same way, assume that the people of Israel were familiar with the "Adam and Eve" version of creation when the newer story of Genesis 1 is attached in front of it. How might hearing the 7-day story first affect the meaning of the "Adam and Eve" story?**

Some have suggested that 1:1-2:4a is a song, noting how "there was evening and there was morning, the _____ day" seems almost like a refrain. **If it is a song or hymn, does that impact how we might understand and interpret it?**

In 2:4b the Yahwist story begins. It is not so much a different creation account as it is a different story about creation. The first story is cosmic in view, with all of creation reflecting the glory of God. In the second story we get down to the nitty-gritty of human life lived together in God's creation. This focus on humanity produces a much more anthropomorphic looking God, a God who shapes things with hands, walks in the garden, and so on. Brueggemann says that this story reveals a divine will for humanity consisting of *vocation, permission,* and *prohibition*, and that all three must be kept lest human life become badly perverted. Much attention has been paid to the prohibition part, less to vocation and permission, but all three are equally part of the story. **What are the vocation, permission, and prohibitions of the story? What does the story say about why this is so?**

No sooner has the man been placed in the garden than a problem is noted. Yahweh says, "It is not good that the man should be alone." It seems creation is incomplete. There is alienation and loneliness, and so God acts. (In terms of the story, Yahweh has responded to the man's needs before the man's own awareness of the problem. See Isaiah 65:17-25. "Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.) God now creates all the animals, but none will suffice. They are not able to be "a helper as his partner." And so woman is created. Phyllis

Trible, a feminist scholar, notes that the woman is a second creation story, one that is necessary in order for creation to be complete. For reasons the story will not tell us, God cannot or will not be the helper/partner of the man. It must be another creature. Humans will live out their vocation, permission, and prohibition in covenant with others. **Look at 2:18-25. Drawing on these verses, how do you understand the relationship between the man and the woman? What does it mean to speak of her as his "helper?" (It may be helpful to use a concordance to look up other examples of the word "helper" in the Old Testament.)**

The end of Genesis 2 is a high point comparable to the end of the 7-day story, but it all goes downhill rapidly in Genesis 3. It isn't at all clear that the Bible intended this as a story of "The Fall" even though it has routinely been interpreted this way. Within the story however, vocation, permission, and prohibition all are affected when the man and the woman attempt to live in ways apart from God's design for creation. Central in this story is the serpent, probably one of the most over interpreted characters in the Bible. Notice that the serpent is explicitly labeled a crafty, wild animal, created by Yahweh. This is not evil incarnate, and there is absolutely nothing in the story pointing to the serpent as Satan. If anything, the serpent is a literary device that allows for a theological discussion, the first in the Bible. The serpent and the woman talk, not to God or with God, but about God. God becomes an object to be surmounted, circumvented, managed. The conversation exposes a hazard found in all talk about God, the temptation to bend God to our desires, to subvert the divine call of vocation, permission, and prohibition to our purposes. The serpent raises the question of whether or not God's creatures will live according to God's design, whether they will trust the gracious promises and call of God, or if they will trust in their own designs, devices, and conclusions. **Read 3:1-7 very carefully. Notice that the serpent never actually lies to the woman. Why do you think the woman violates God's prohibition? Does the line in 3:6 about the tree making one wise mean that God had hoped humans would remain unknowing?**

In the aftermath of eating the fruit, the delicate balance of Yahweh's creation is imperiled. Failure to live with *prohibition* will distort *vocation* and *permission* along with the covenant between the man and the woman. Notice how in 3:8-13, the man rattles off the word I. "**I** heard the sound of you in the garden, and **I** was afraid, because **I** was naked; and **I** hid myself." The creature has become obsessed with self. Community is shattered. The man blames the woman. The woman blames the serpent. The serpent would have no doubt done the same if a scapegoat could have been found. **Look at 3:14-24. How are vocation and permission warped and distorted by the human failure to live faithfully as creatures?**

**How is covenant relationship between the man and the woman distorted?**

**The humans are unfaithful, but what of God. Reread 2:17 then look at the punishment God hands out. What is revealed about Yahweh here? (Don't forget 3:21.)**

Commenting on this story, Walter Brueggemann calls it

> a theological critique of anxiety. It presents a prism through which the root cause of anxiety can be understood. The man and woman are controlled by their anxiety (3:1). They seek to escape anxiety by attempting to circumvent the reality of God (3:5), for the reality of God and the reality of anxiety are related to each other. Overcoming of God is thought to lead to the nullification of anxiety about self. But the story teaches otherwise. It is only God, the one who calls, permits and prohibits, who can deal with the anxiety among us. The text may be brought to comment upon the power of anxiety among us: *(a)* The causes for anxiety among us are wrongly discerned. This text fixes the issue in terms of accepting the realities of our life with God. Our mistake is to pursue *autonomous* freedom. Freedom which does not discern the boundaries of human life leaves us anxious. *(b)* The attempts to resolve anxiety in our culture are largely psychological, economic, cosmetic. They are bound to fail because they do not approach the causes. (*c)* Our public life is largely premised on an exploitation of our common anxiety. The advertising of consumerism and the drives of the acquisitive society, like the serpent, seduce into believing there are securities apart from the reality of God. Hermann Gunkel has a marvelous phrase for interpreting our text and our cultural situation. He says the man and woman seek to have Vernunft ohne Pathos, reason without pathos. They seek masterful discernment of all, without the capacity to suffer and be vulnerable. The assertion of this text is that every embrace of reason must live with the power of pathos. Every attempt to control by knowing must reckon with the anxiety-producing reality of God. (*Genesis,* pp. 53-54.) See also Matthew 6:25-33

# Creation (the Priestly version) 1:1-2:4a

**God does not shape, form, or fashion. God creates. Only God creates!**
**Creator creates creation. Creation is object, not subject.**

**God said, "Let there be…**
**And it was so.**
**God saw that _____ was good…**
**God called the _____ "_____"**
**It was evening and morning, the ____ day.**

**Structure, Order, Symmetry**

**SABBATH**

| | |
|---|---|
| **DAY 1**<br>**Light**<br>***Day* and *night*** | **DAY 4**<br>**Luminaries for the**<br>***day* and *night*** |
| **DAY 2**<br>**Firmament/dome (*sky*)**<br>***Waters* above, below** | **DAY 5**<br>**Birds in the *sky***<br>**Fishes in the *water*** |
| **DAY 3**<br>**Dry *earth* from sea**<br>**Vegetation** | **DAY 6**<br>**Animals and humans**<br>**on *earth*.** |

**Another Structure**

**Three Separations…**
- **Light from dark** ***Time***
- **The waters (Firmament/dome)** ***Above/below***
- **Dry land from waters** ***Here/there***

**…followed by**

**Three (Four) "Quickenings"**
- **Plants**
- **(Heavenly bodies)**
- **Animals**
- **Humans**

## Session III
## Bad to Worse, Yet Hope Remains

Readings for this session:
**Genesis 4, 6:1-9:29**

**Important terms**

**Sin -** This word first shows up in Genesis 4:7, in the story of Cain and Abel. This term is used quite differently in different parts of Scripture. Often it is used to speak of a person's actions, the sins he or she commits. But the Bible also speaks of sin almost as an entity, something that corrupts and leads us down the wrong path, something that must be wrestled with. Paul's letters and much of Reformed/Presbyterian theology speak of sin this way, as does the Cain and Abel episode.

**Righteous -** The words "righteous" and "righteousness" get used a lot in the Bible. In our time the word has taken on an almost pejorative meaning, but not so in Scripture. Righteous means to be right in the eyes of God. Noah is a "righteous man." This doesn't necessarily imply perfection. It means that Noah lives in ways that maintain a right relationship with God. That can include repentance and a recommitment to live faithfully before God following missteps.

**Covenant -** The word "covenant" also shows up for the first time in our readings. The word is seldom heard in our routine conversations. It is reserved for legal contracts and weddings. It is also a legal term in the Bible. In the Old Testament, covenants were normally something like treaties, usually entered into by parties of unequal power. The superior party promises certain things in return for the inferior party agreeing to certain terms. Most often this would involve a greater military power agreeing to protect and aid lesser powers in return for tribute payments and the promise to be an ally in the event of war.

**Exploring the Readings**

The problems that began with the man and the woman eating from the prohibited tree continue in the readings for today. Alienation from God began as the man and woman chose to try to be like God themselves. The break with God has also led to alienation between the man and the woman, between humans and nature (or at least the serpent), and between the man and the earth from which he must produce food. Now the downward spiral will expand to the relationship between siblings and between people in general. However, God's gracious care remains with the humans, and with creation.

The story of Cain and Abel has some troubling elements that are often overlooked or too easily explained away, specifically the capriciousness of Yahweh who regards one offering but has no regard for another. **Read the story very carefully. What reason is given in the text for God preferring Abel's offering over that of Cain? Why do you suppose Yahweh favored one over the other?**

**Since it is Yahweh who rejects the offering, why does Cain turn against his brother? Does it relate in any way to Yahweh's warning about "sin lurking at the door?" You may want to think in terms of God's call of Cain and Cain's response. (It may be helpful, or at least interesting, to consider the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32)**

The Cain and Abel story has mixed results in ways similar to the Garden of Eden story. **What are the results of Cain's crime? Can any general observations about life with God and others be drawn from this story?**

In the final verses of chapter 4, we see the continued arrogance of humanity. Lamech claims seventy-sevenfold vengeance for himself, a huge multiplication of that afforded Cain. Lamech's desire for vengeance also seems quite counter to the purpose of the mark on Cain. Yahweh sought to restrain vengeance. Lamech relishes it. (It's quite likely that Jesus' command to forgive, not 7, but 77 times in Matthew 18:21-22, is a reversal of Lamech's call for revenge.)

The Noah stories raise the question of whether God's graciousness will continue in the face of humanity's continuing downward spiral, its worsening refusal to live faithfully under God's call. Perhaps God will simply be done with the whole enterprise and start anew or call the whole thing off permanently.

In reading the Noah stories, it is probably worth noting the combining of different sources. This is fairly easy to do by simply noting what language is used for God. Is it Yahweh (the LORD), or is it simply the word God? It may even be helpful in interpreting the accounts if you remember that the Priestly version uses God rather than Yahweh and the priestly account is likely from the time of the exile. You can perhaps see how biblical writers of different eras used and understood the same story differently.

It's hard to know exactly how to deal with 6:1-4. This is ancient material with less than certain meaning. It may be best simply to say that the troubles with God's creation are cosmic in nature, not related simply to the human creature. Regardless, the downward spiral of creation has affected Yahweh, and in 6:6, we hear explicitly that "Yahweh was sorry that he had made humankind," and "it grieved him to his heart." The picture is that of a grieved parent whose child has turned out horribly wrong despite the best parenting. Yahweh must take action. This cannot go on. And yet, "Noah found favor in the sight of Yahweh." **How do you reconcile Yahweh's plan to "blot out from the earth the human beings" with this exception: "But Noah found favor…?"**

6:9-22 is from the Priestly account. Notice its concern with the specifications for the ark, something not found in the Yahwist account. Some say this mirrors the detailed specifications for the tent or tabernacle of meeting, the Ark of the Covenant, the furnishing for the tent, and later the temple itself. (The word for Noah's ark is a different Hebrew word that than used for the Ark of the Covenant and is used only here in the Noah stories and in Exodus for the basket which contains Moses when he is set out in the reeds to be found by Pharaoh's daughter.) **Obviously the ark is literally needed to survive the flood, but might the priestly fascination with its design mean something more? Considering Noah's "righteous" designation in 6:9, and assuming some sort of metaphorical linkage between the ark and later religious instruments of Israel, what sort of religious meaning might be taken from the story beyond that of God's rescue of Noah? Again, consider the notion of God's call and human response.**

Save the ark and its inhabitants, the flood very nearly returns the world to its pre-creation state in Genesis 1:1-2. In 8:1, the story begins to resolve when "God remembered Noah," along with all the other creatures on the ark. Creation depends on God's remembering. Israel's psalms often cry out for God to remember them or ask that God not forget them. Often it is only in the midst of great trouble that Israel (and we?) asks God to remember. Clearly humanity and Israel are dependent on God remembering them. As yet it is unclear to what degree God's care for humanity is dependent on humans remembering God.

Nevertheless, God remembers, and the flood subsides, and God's creatures return to God's earth. But what has been accomplished by the flood? **Look at the judgments of humanity in 6:5, prior to the flood, and in 8:21, after the flood. From these two verses, what basic change in humanity has occurred because of the flood?**

**If humanity has not been significantly altered by the flood, what has changed?**

In the Yahwist ending of the flood, Noah offers sacrifices and Yahweh promises never again to destroy, to ensure in perpetuity a reliable nature. In the Priestly ending found in chapter 9, God reissues the blessings of Genesis 1:28, with a renewed call to be fruitful and multiply. (Note that there is a slightly different relationship to the non-human creatures from that in the creation story.) God also establishes a covenant with humans and with all creation not to destroy again. In the legal language of covenants, there is a sign, a guarantee of sorts. God says, "I have set my bow in the clouds…" Obviously this alludes to the rainbow, often seen following the rain. Because of this association, we may forget that the "bow" is also a weapon of war. **Keeping this image of weaponry in mind, what sort of symbolism might be meant by the bow beyond simply reminding God and humanity of the promise not to destroy? Might the image of the hung bow in and of itself have significance?**

The Noah stories close with a strange and unfortunate postscript, the story of Noah's sons. Notice how the interest in Ham is extended to his son Canaan. Clearly the story has important symbolism for Israel. Shem represents the Semites and therefore Israel. Ham leads to Canaan, referring to the people of the land of Canaan, which Israel conquers, and whose religious practices are so often a "snare" to Israel. Who Japheth represents is unclear, though he is clearly an ally in the land against the Canaanites.

The sin of Ham in some ways repeats that of the couple in the garden. He is unwilling to live within the limits and prohibitions required of a son. The nakedness of Noah is highly symbolic. It could even refer to sexual relations with Noah's wife, but it is probably not meant to be that specific. **If we try to view the scene through the theme of God's call and human response, how might Ham's actions be interpreted? What is the wrong Ham does? (It may be helpful to remember that, viewed from a certain perspective, the only thing the couple in the garden did was to eat a piece of fruit. Remembering the 5$^{th}$ commandment may also help.)**

## Session IV
## From Pre-history to Covenant History

Readings for this session:
**Genesis 10:32-13:18; Acts 2; Mark 1:16-20; Hebrews 11:8**

**Important terms**

**Heaven -** In biblical thought, heaven is the place where God lives. The notion of dying and going to heaven is not really from the Bible and isn't even hinted at in the Old Testament. It isn't always clear whether heaven is to be understood as a real place, or if it is a convention necessary for speaking about God and a heavenly court. Unlike other religions, heaven is never really pictured in the Jewish scriptures. God may live there, but no one goes to heaven. The Tower of Babel story certainly seems to speak of humans "storming the gates of heaven," but one has to wonder if Israel understood the point of the story to be preventing the humans from getting there, or a deeper, symbolic, understanding of the humans' persistent desire to be their own god.

**Abram/Abraham, Sarai/Sarah -** Names were much more important for people of the ancient Near East than they are for most of us. The changing of a name denotes some significant change in character, purpose, or the like. It's important to realize that when we meet Abraham and Sarah, those are not yet their names. Receiving new names will be part of their new identity.

**Canaan, Shechem, Bethel, Ai, Negeb, and others -** It is worthwhile to pay attention to these place names and even to locate them on a map. Part of the story of Abraham and Sarah's movements define the land that Yahweh will give to Israel. They also introduce some themes such as Egypt as both a rescue from famine and a threat to the covenant people.

**Exploring the Readings**

Though the assignment does not include the genealogy of chapter 10, it is important to realize the connection of the people in chapter 11 to Noah, the man of faith. As such they are part of God's new covenant with humanity, a part of God's blessing, called to be fruitful and multiply. Indeed, the genealogy ends on a good note. The descendants of Noah are multiplying and spreading out over God's creation. The picture is one of hope and promise, of a world living faithfully under the call and promises of God. And so the Tower story abruptly intrudes into this hope, this story of faithfulness to God.

The Tower story is well known by many. It is, on the one hand, a fairly simple story, but on the other hand, its meaning may not be either simple or so obvious as first seems. The story definitely betrays ancient concerns that no longer are of much interest to Israel's faith. The story "explains" the multiplicity of languages in the world, and the name Babel probably takes a swipe at the city of Babylon. (The reason for calling the place Babel in vs. 9 doesn't actually make sense as the Hebrew word meaning "to confuse" is balal, בלל:) Yet these are not really serious concerns for the faith of Israel.

The interpretive center of the story comes in the contrast between the human plan beginning in v. 4 with "Come, let us…" and the divine plan beginning with "Come, let us…" in v. 7. In both the human and the divine plans, "scattering" is a primary concern. The humans fear it while Yahweh's confusing their languages produces it. While there is obviously residue of an older, mythological story about conflict between humans and the gods, we cannot take very seriously the story's premise that Yahweh is frightened by human potential. Instead we can probably assume that Israel takes well known campfire stories and recasts them to wrestle with issues of

faithfulness. And so the story now seems concerned with how the people's fear of being scattered represents a failure to live faithfully under God's call.

One difficulty with this story springs from the fact that the humans desire unity while God desires scattering. Isn't unity to be desired? Indeed, the scattering of the story is often seen purely as punishment. But perhaps God's scattering of the people is less punishment and more returning the people to their appropriate activity. Notice that the positive ending of the genealogy in 10:32 is resumed at the conclusion of the Tower story, with the humans again spreading out over the earth, even if it is not their choice.

If the issue is scattering vs. not scattering, with God desiring the former, then there is a problem with the particular desire for unity and community that leads to the humans' high rise pursuit. **How can unity and community be bad? What do you think is wrongheaded about these humans' desire to prevent themselves from being scattered?**

Some obvious connections with the Babel episode are found in the Pentecost story of Acts 2. In Genesis, languages are confused so that people "will not understand one another's speech." (The words might also be translated "will not listen to one another's speech.) In Acts, people hear and understand, regardless of their native tongue. One could say that Pentecost represents an undoing of the confusion done at Babel. But the unity of the Church in Acts looks quite different than the one desired by the people of Babel. The Church will actively "scatter" itself over the world. **The Christian community speaks of unity, of being one. What is different about this kind of unity compared to the one desired by the people at Babel? What can we say about unity that is faithful to God vs. unity that is opposed to God?**

In 11:10, the text returns to genealogy. Once again, the story connects back to Noah, though now we are concerned, not with humanity in general, but with the lineage of one of Noah's sons, Shem. The people of Israel connect themselves directly to one of Noah's "good" sons in the genealogy; connect themselves directly to a heritage of responding faithfully to God's call and God's promise. Now the story will take a decisive turn. To this point it has been concerned with God's relationship to humanity, but now a particular relationship is in mind, that with Israel.

With Abraham and Sarah, we move from the pre-history's generic concern with human response to Israel's particular, historical, and present concern with faithful response to God's call.

However, Abram and Sarai are not only connected back to Noah. The use of Genesis' pre-history as an introduction to Israel's beginnings ties Israel to God's creation itself. The God who calls creation into being now issues another call. **What significance do you find in Genesis' using the events of creation and pre-history to set the stage for God's call to Abraham and Sarah? How does knowing what happens in Genesis 1:1-11:9 help to interpret and understand what is going on in 12:1-9?**

We have previously discussed the idea that calls produce a kind of partnering, one in which both parties participate. One calls and the other must respond in some way. The pre-history of Genesis presents a rather checkered story of creation's response to the gracious call of God. With Noah as a notable exception, humans more often fail to respond faithfully. Now we meet Abram, the consummate man of faith. In 12:1-9, he and Sarai go without questioning, leaving family and security to follow God's promise. There is no debate with God, no bargaining or questioning, only faithful response. I don't know that the text addresses the issue of why Abram and Sarai respond as they do, though it is interesting to speculate. **But if the text will not answer the question of "Why?" then what is the meaning of the story? What are we to make of this unquestioning response to God's call? The same question could be raised concerning the disciples' following after Jesus. What is the Bible telling us about God's call and faithful response in these accounts?**

Though the tradition remembers Abram as the consummate man of faith, though he is spoken of by New Testament writers as prefiguring relationship with God through faith rather than the Law, though Protestants see Abraham as prefiguring the gospel of living by grace through faith, Abram's faith is not practiced in a vacuum. Abram and Sarai must wrestle with just what it means to be faithful to their call in the midst of the vagaries and difficulties of life. The text is not at all frightened to show us this struggle.

No sooner have they arrived in the Promised Land than Abram and Sarai must travel to Egypt to escape famine. (Notice Egypt as place of both rescue and danger to the promise.) There, a strange encounter with Pharaoh occurs. (See Genesis 20 for a very similar story in a different setting.) If we ignore the difficulty of reconciling old, barren Sarai with the lovely beauty that Pharaoh lusts after, the story raises faith questions we've seen before. How far will Abram and Sarai trust God's call, and what will God do to insure the call bears fruit. Here God's promise is put at risk by Abram's self-serving deception, and the promise must be rescued by God through plagues that seem to hint at the events of the Exodus. **What sort of character is Abram in this story? What about Pharaoh?**

**Do God's actions in 12:17 seem appropriate to the situation? Does Abram deserve God's protection and does Pharaoh deserve God's punishment?**

**Does your understanding of the story differ if you are a minority population at risk from larger and more powerful neighbors?**

**What do we learn of God and of God's fealty to the promises of 12:2-3?**

Abram comes off somewhat differently in the story of 13:1-13. **Looking at 13:8-9, how would you describe Abram's character?**

**Some say Lot makes a bad choice in vv. 10-11. What are some reasons that might be so?**

## Session V
## Will Abram and Sarai Trust a Promise Delayed?

Readings for this Session:
**Genesis 15:1-18:15; (Romans 4; Galatians 3:6-9; Colossians 2:11-13)**

**Important terms**

**Ishmael -** The name is derived from the Hebrew word "shema" **(**שׁמע), meaning "to hear," suffixed with a shortened form of the word for God, "El" (אל). Shema also means to give heed to or consider. Ishmael has both positive and negative connotations in the readings. God cares for him and he has his own promises and blessings, but he is also a temptation to Abram with regard to God's promises.

**Circumcision -** The roots of this practice are obscure. It is known in ancient Palestine outside of Israel. Some suggest that its origins involve hygiene, but no one really knows. Biblically, the only interest in circumcision is as a sign of God's covenant. It's quite likely that this mark of the covenant increased in importance during Israel's exile to Babylon. It has no female counterpart in Israel. In the patriarchal society that was Israel, all rights, legal obligations, etc. passed down through the male, so it wasn't necessary for the women to be marked in any way in order for them to be part of the covenant.

**Isaac -** Yet another name freighted with meaning. In Hebrew the name is pronounced Yitzhak (יצהק) and literally means "he laughs." This exact spelling is used to describe Abraham's laughing in 17:17. The name Isaac is explained in terms of Abraham's laughter, but also refers to Sarah's laughter in 18:12, and later to the joyful laughter that Isaac's birth brings the formerly barren Sarah.

**Exploring the Readings**

Crucial issues of faith are dealt with in these readings. New Testament writers refer to Genesis 15:6 when explaining the meaning and significance of faith, and they speak of Abram's faith as prefiguring Christian faith.

The first six verses of chapter 15 help frame the issues that will be played out in what follows. Yahweh dramatically comes to Abram in a vision and briefly restates the promise we have heard before. Yahweh speaks with much less detail than when he first visits Abram in 12:1-3, but this promise harks back to the earlier one. God's promises speak to two deficiencies in Abram's life, the issues of barrenness and landlessness. Abram has neither land nor heir though he has been promised both. The two promises are closely related. Land is meaningless without heirs who can receive it. Barrenness and landlessness can also be powerful symbols of meaninglessness and hopelessness, though our story deals with them quite literally.

Abram and Sarai followed God's original call and promise as soon as it was issued, but time has elapsed. God's promises ring hollow when Abram hears them again, and he protests. Nothing God might give Abram, land or anything else, has much significance since Abram has no heir. To Abram, God's promises unravel because of unresolved barrenness.

A great deal happens in these six verses. God promises. Abram protests. God responds. Abram accepts. God's delay in dealing with the problem of barrenness has produced real doubts for Abram. These texts deal seriously with the fact that God's promises come in God's time, and their delay produces crises for the life of faith.

In 15:1-6, Abram moves from doubt to faith. He holds on to a promise for which there is scant evidence. **But what moves Abram from doubt to faith? What happens between 15:3 and 15:6 that allows Abram to put away his doubt and trust God's promises as reliable?**

15:7-21 references an ancient covenant ceremony of some sort. The issue is once again the reliability of God's promises. Here the specific question is that of land, and Abram asks for an assurance on Yahweh's part. A cultic exercise, most likely mimicking covenants between kings and their vassal states, takes place at the direction of Yahweh. 15:13-16 are the only explicit references to the events of Exodus in the book of Genesis, and they speak of a long delay in actually acquiring the land. Nevertheless, God explicitly states the boundaries of Abram's land in the covenant ceremony.

Covenants were treaties that spelled out the obligations of the parties involved, typically the stronger promising protection to the weaker in return for certain obligations. Clearly Yahweh is the greater power in this covenant, yet the typical covenant formula isn't followed. **What are the covenant obligations specified in Yahweh's treaty with Abram? What does God promise to do? What does Abram promise to do? Why do you think it is this way?**

Genesis 16 begins by bluntly restating the problem that caused Abram's doubt in chapter 15. Sarai is barren. There still is no heir. The promise of God remains, but the problem of barrenness persists, and now the first couple of faith decides to take matters into their own hands. Sarai will get a child by alternate means, and thus an heir will be theirs.

The method they use is not really an issue for the story. Morality is not in play here. This was a perfectly acceptable way of producing an heir in Abram's day. It was no more disreputable than adoption would be today. The problem of Ishmael revolves around faith and trust.

The Hagar and Ishmael stories need to be honored as stories, and not handled as accounts of past events. As stories, they have little interest in some of the questions we may have because of

our historical/scientific viewpoint. The stories seem unconcerned with why God gets involved in the cruelties Sarah and Abraham visit on Hagar, and later on Ishmael. The stories have other issues in mind.

A child is conceived, but Sarai is not happy with the results, and she "oppresses" Hagar who runs away. (Here it is Israel/Sarai who oppresses Egypt/Hagar.) The material from 16:7-16 is not really a Sarai or Abram story. It is a Hagar story. The events of this story don't have much direct bearing on Abram and Sarai aside from the later presence of Ishmael in their home. **So what is it we learn from this story? How do God's dealings with Hagar inform our lives of faith?**

Chapter 17 once again addresses the issue of covenant. There is no new promise here, but there are new names given, and the new covenant sign of circumcision. This is priestly material, perhaps reflecting the later concern with circumcision as the mark of God's special community. In this account, there is now an explicit covenantal requirement on Abraham. All his household must carry this mark.

Within this story is a renewal of the promise of an heir. God says that Sarah will be the mother of the promised people. Note that Abraham argues for Ishmael as the heir in 17:18, but God insists that Isaac will bear the promise. Ishmael will have his own blessing, but he will not be party to the promise God has made to Abraham.

While it might seem that Abraham is simply defending a child whom he loves, I don't think this story means to show us Abraham's concern for his son. Something else is at work here. **If that is true, why does Abraham want to stick with Ishmael, and why does God insist on Isaac?**

Much has been written about circumcision being akin to baptism. (See Colossians 2:11-13) **How is circumcision helpful for understanding the meaning of baptism? How might it be problematic?**

In Genesis 18:1-15 we meet yet another story concerning the still unfulfilled promise of an heir. This time three "men" come calling. Here we get a picture of both Near Eastern expectations of hospitality and of Abraham's diligent adherence to these requirements. Abraham shows true hospitality to the stranger, completely unaware of the men's identities.

Once again, the promise is renewed, and once again, the promise is met with laughter. In 17:17, Abraham laughed. Now it is Sarah's turn. Finally, the promise has a date on it, though Sarah has not yet heard this when she laughs in disbelief. **Why do you think the stories tell us of Abraham and Sarah's laughter?**

The issue of Sarah's laughter is addressed with a question, "Is anything too wonderful for Yahweh?" The question remains unanswered in the story. In fact, the only response to the question is Sarah's denial of ever laughing to begin with.

Is anything too wonderful for Yahweh? In some ways, how we answer that question determines the kind of faith we live. It is a fundamental faith question. Our answer determines the degree to which we will trust our selves to this Yahweh, and to the gospel promises of life in the midst of death, hope in the midst of pain, suffering, and hopelessness. **But what of God? Does our insistence that God conform to our expectations hamstring God? Will Abraham and Sarah's failure to embrace the promise in 18:12-15 restrain God from delivering?**

Walter Brueggemann says there is "anguish" in the stories of 16:1-18:5, anguish over a promise too long delayed. Much of Abraham and Sarah's story, it seems, consists of waiting. **Considering that we live in a world that expects instant results, where does waiting fit into our lives of faith. How does waiting enhance our faith? How does our impatience, like that of Abraham's, pull us away from a life faithful to the call of God?**

## Session VI
## Judgment, Mercy, and Righteousness -&- Bearers of the Promise

Readings for this Session:
**Genesis 18:16-21:21; Hosea 11:1-11**

**Important terms**

**Angel -** Our image of angels has been colored by artwork and other popular, non-biblical influences. The Hebrew word "malak" (מלאך) does not assume a divine creature. The literal meaning of the word is "messenger." The word sometimes refers to divine figures, as in Genesis 19:1, but other times it refers to purely human messengers. (See Genesis 32:3, 6, where the very human "messengers" is a translation of the same word.) The divine nature of a particular messenger must be determined from context or other information supplied by the text.

**Exploring the Readings**

The account of Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction in Genesis 19:1-26 contains an apparently independent Lot story, connected to Abraham only by Lot's kinship. However, the Bible does not simply give us this story about Lot, judgment, and rescue. Genesis 18:16-33 and 19:27-29 bracket this older Lot material, providing a theological commentary on the events of 19:1-26.

Try reading the account first, then the commentary. Read the story of 19:1-26, then go back and read 18:16-33. Notice the disparity between the conclusion of Abraham and Yahweh's discussion at v. 32, and the events that follow in chapter 19. **What do you make of God's apparent relenting of the plan to destroy in v. 32, immediately followed by the story of Sodom and Gomorrah's total destruction? How do you deal with this contradiction?**

Beginning in 18:22, Abraham converses with Yahweh while "the men" continue on toward Sodom. Abraham stands "before Yahweh," a pose that makes perfect sense as Yahweh is his superior. Interestingly, some very ancient textual traditions have Yahweh standing before Abraham, a reversal of what one would expect. Even more interestingly, the conversation that follows actually seems to fit the notion of Yahweh standing before Abraham. It is Abraham who questions Yahweh and Yahweh whose mind is changed by Abraham's questions.

**Look at this conversation, paying special attention to Abraham's words in vv. 23-25. Brueggemann speaks of Abraham being Yahweh's theological teacher here. (This is not the first instance we've encountered of Yahweh rethinking something, even changing profoundly, nor will it be the last. Exodus 32:11-14 has Moses playing a role very similar to Abraham's.) Read Hosea 11, another instance of God's plans changing, though here the conversation is internal to God. Pay special attention to Hosea 11:9 where God decides to act like God rather than a human. With that in mind, what do you think the Bible writers**

**want to communicate through this picture of God being "straightened out" by Abraham? What information about the nature of God is to be found here?**

**What about the character of Abraham in this story? What do we learn about him?**

The "men" who tell Abraham and Sarah of Isaac's impending birth tie that story to what follows in Sodom. (Curiously, the three men who visit Abraham and enjoy his hospitality are now two angels as they come to Sodom. Perhaps the reduction in number reflects Yahweh's remaining behind to talk with Abraham.) Brueggemann calls both visits "strange intrusions by God," one leading to a beginning and one to an ending.

Much has been written over the years about what the sin of Sodom actually is. **Given the strong connections between the visits to Abraham's tent and the one to Sodom, what do you think best describes the sin of Sodom?**

Genesis 19:12-26 reports the actual destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, along with the rescue of Lot and a few family members. (Shades of the Noah's ark story here?) There is little reflection on the events themselves. They are simply reported. But in v. 27, Abraham again enters the picture, gazing from a distance on the destruction. While it seems plausible that Lot is spared because his hospitality shows him to be a righteous man, v. 29 makes a surprisingly different claim. **What does v. 29 say about why Lot is spared? According to v. 29, what accounts for Lot's righteousness before Yahweh?**

Genesis 20 should look familiar, following the same pattern as the story of Abram and Sarai in Egypt. (12:10-20) However, there is much more theological material in this account. Notice how Abimelech in 20:4-5 sounds a bit like Abraham arguing with God in 18:23-25. Abimelech's words explicitly contradict Abraham's claim in 20:11 that "There is no fear of God in this place." **What kinds of things might you infer from this story about God's relationship with people who are outsiders to the Abrahamic covenant? What about the covenant people's relationship and responsibility toward the outsider?**

In Genesis 21, the long delayed promise of an heir is finally fulfilled with the birth of Isaac. But scarcely has the happy event been reported than conflict erupts. (The events of 21:8-21 bear strong resemblance to 16:1-15.) On one level the story portrays an anxious Sarah, worried about Ishmael as a possible threat to her son Isaac. (Notice that Ishmael is never actually named in the story.) Yet the story insists on addressing more profound issues concerning covenant, call, and God's promises. Sarah's seemingly petty behavior distresses Abraham, who is perhaps more invested in Ishmael than she is. But God insists that Sarah's plan has merit. Isaac is the child of promise, and he, not Ishmael shall be the bearer of the promise for future generations.

Yet God's attitude toward Ishmael is still very different from Sarah's. Sarah simply wants to be rid of a threat to her son. She has no concern beyond that from the story's point. God is altogether different. Ishmael will have his own promise. **What promises does God make concerning Ishmael? What seems to be God's general disposition toward him?**

**Can any general inferences about God's relationship to "outsiders" be made from this story?**

## Session VII
## Contradiction in God: Testing and Providing

Readings for the Session:
**Genesis 22:1-19; 25:19-34; 27:1-28:9; Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 4: 1-12; 11:2-4; 22:39-46**

### Important terms

**Rebekah -** Since we are not reading about how Rebekah became Isaac's wife, some background is in order. (If you have time you would do well to read this material we are skipping over.) As he nears the end of his life, Abraham sends a trusted servant back to his homeland to find Isaac a wife. He is adamant both that Isaac not marry a Canaanite woman and that Isaac himself not journey back to the land of Abraham's kindred. Yahweh is providentially involved in the choice of Rebekah, who happens to be the granddaughter of Abraham's brother, Nahor. This story revisits themes of God's blessing and abundant provision for Abraham, and it introduces us to Laban, brother of Rebekah, who will play a prominent role in the Jacob stories.

### Exploring the Readings

The story of Abraham's call to sacrifice Isaac is well known, filled with important theological themes, and exceedingly difficult to interpret. Most of us are probably familiar enough with the story to have found ways around some of the more troubling issues the story raises. I hope you will try to open yourself to this story with all its difficulty. This is certainly a text that desires to engage us, and in wrestling with it, we may indeed receive a blessing.

There is a temptation to regard such stories as "primitive." This is one way to avoid taking seriously the claims of the text. While the story may indeed have some primitive roots, issues of human sacrifice and the like, the story we have in Genesis is far from primitive. It is a complex narrative which seeks to tell us something of the nature of God and the nature of faith.

The story is neatly structured, which provides clues for its understanding. Much of the action plays out in vv. 1-12, which exhibits a remarkable symmetry. There are three sections in these verses that follow a very distinct pattern, the first in vv. 1-2, the second in vv. 7-8, and the third in vv. 11-12. In each Abraham is summoned, first by Yahweh, then by Isaac, then by the angel. Each time Abraham immediately responds with "Here I am." Each time there is a request from the one who summons. If we think in terms of a structural outline of the passage, there is an a/b/a´ pattern in each. However, the second section has an additional element that breaks the pattern in a significant way. Abraham responds to Isaac's question with a statement. There is no corresponding statement in the other two sections. Here the pattern is a/b/a'/b'. This structure highlights Abraham's statement, "God himself will provide," suggesting it as a key for understanding the entire passage. We might say that it is the "interpretive center" of the passage.

This "interpretive center" may help us in understanding this difficult text, but first we must admit to that difficulty. After all, it is God who creates the predicament of this story. It is God who puts Isaac's life at risk. It is God who creates the entire scenario. It is God who places Abraham in this untenable position, who threatens to throw Abraham back into barrenness.

A second structural feature of the story highlights this difficulty. There are close parallels between v. 2 and v. 12. The first creates the crisis ("Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love) while the second resolves it ("since you have not withheld your son, your only son,"). The first puts Isaac at risk while the second rescues Isaac. Bracketing the events of the story as the verses do, something between vv. 2 and 12 must explain this move from crisis to resolution.

To get to the resolution, we must take seriously the crisis created by verse 2, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love…" **Why is it that God creates this crisis? What does God hope to do? What sort of things can be said about God as a result of verse 2?**

Genesis 22:1 says, "God tested Abraham." In 22:12, Yahweh says, "now I ***know*** (emphasis mine) that you fear God…" **Is this test necessary for Yahweh to know whether or not Abraham truly is a man of faith? Why do you say yes or no?**

If Genesis 22:8 is indeed the interpretive center, then it is closely related to both the testing and the resolution. We might even say that it reveals the content and the outcome of the test. **If this is so, what then is the true center of faith according to this story? What determines whether or not Abraham is a man of faith?**

In this story, Yahweh is cast both as the one who tests, and as the one who provides. The natural human tendency is to insist that God is only one of these things, with the vast majority preferring a God of provision over a God of testing. But our story insists Yahweh is both tester and provider, that true faith must wrestle with God's call which is somehow embodied in both promise and testing command. This is hardly an issue for Israel alone. The early Church knew there were times of testing. They prayed for strength to weather such times, to be found equal to the test. In fact, the Lord's Prayer addresses both testing and providing. **Look at the two versions of this prayer in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4. Many of us say these words regularly in worship, without a great deal of thought to their meaning. But consider them**

**in light of this story in Genesis. What does it mean to pray for bread, and to pray that God will "deliver us from temptation" or "not bring us into the time of trial?"**

The New Testament tells us that Jesus had tests of his own. Read the account of Jesus' temptations in Luke 4:1-12. Notice how it ends with a report that the devil "departed from him until an opportune time." Also read Luke 22:39-46. (Ignore vv. 43-44, likely a later insertion.) **Why is it that Jesus does as God wishes, even though it is clearly not what Jesus wants? How might we say that Jesus' faith mirrors that of Abraham?**

This Abraham story, along with much of the Bible, insists that faith requires us to make choices, choices that are often difficult. It insists that the encounter with God will put us to the test, that God will come to "know" whether or not we will live by faith. **What are the tests of faith in your life? Are you able to say "God himself will provide" in the midst of such tests? What is it that allows a response such as Abraham's?**

Christians are often quick to see this story about Abraham's testing as prefiguring resurrection, in my view, often too quick. This quick move allows us easily to dispense with the difficulty raised by a God who puts Abraham to such a test in the first place, using resurrection to do away with the story's insistence that God is both tester and provider. Still, I do think this story provides some insight into a resurrection faith. **If we say that Abraham's faith prefigures a resurrection faith, (even though the story won't let us say Abraham expects God to bring**

**Isaac back to life) what is it about Abraham's faith that embodies resurrection hope? Specifically, what do Abraham's words to Isaac in 22:8 tell us about what it means to live a faith grounded in the hope of resurrection?**

There are no more particularly significant things to learn about Abraham following this story of testing and faith. He has proved himself the consummate man of faith. There are details of Sarah's death, his remarriage, and finally his death, but none of these really tell us anything new about the man and about life with God. The story now moves on to another generation. Isaac serves mostly as a bridge, teaching us little about faith and about God. The next lessons come through stories about Jacob.

God's choice of Abram in 12:1 does not specify any reasons for choosing him, but it is easy for us to assume Abram must have somehow deserved God's favor. Jacob will make it hard to maintain any such assumptions. He is a cunning trickster and a rascal. His choice as bearer of the promise runs counter to popular religious thinking that would easily tie God's blessing with morality and the like. On moral grounds, the choice of Jacob is downright offensive. Jacob's life is filled with strife, struggle, and conflict, much of it apparently the result of Yahweh choosing him. Even before his birth, struggle is predicted.

Notice in 25:21 that the problem of barrenness still haunts the promise. It is scarcely mentioned here, but 25:26 tells us that Rebekah's barrenness lasted nearly 20 years. Only God's intervention solves the problem of barrenness, though this blessing soon leads Rebekah to question, "Why do I live?"

There is little to endear Jacob to us in these chapters. He is a Momma's boy, an opportunist, a liar, and a cheat. **We will learn much more about him and his relationship with God in future readings, but based on meeting him in the readings for this session, what conclusions can we draw about God? What does it say about God that God has chosen this Jacob?**

## Session VIII
## Call and Conflict: Jacob and God

Readings for this Session:
**(Review Genesis 25:19-34; 27:30-40) Genesis 28:10-30:25; Luke 1:48, 52; 1 Corinthians 1:27-29**

**Important terms**

**Primogeniture -** The notion that the oldest is first and favorite was well established in ancient society, and indeed is still active in the world today. Wealth, status, etc. were conferred on the first born. That is simply how it was. It is the conventional way that the world has of transferring power, of ordering society. Israel's narrative undercuts this notion of how the world is in radical ways. It is important to remember how accepted primogeniture was to fully appreciate Israel's stories.

**Bethel -** This literally means house of God. It is a combining of the word for house with El, the shortened form of the word for God, Elohim. In Hebrew the word is pronounced closer to "beyit-el." Bethel was an extremely important shrine site in the northern kingdom of Israel, and some of the Jacob stories originally helped legitimate Bethel as a valid site of worship in the north as opposed to Jerusalem in Judah to the south.

**Exploring the Readings**

In the previous session's readings, we saw the trickster Jacob wrest blessing away from his brother. First Jacob manages to purchase Esau's birthright from him. Then, with the help of his mother, Jacob tricks his own father into giving him Esau's blessing. Conflict seems to follow Jacob around. If we only read the stories where he connives and schemes, we could perhaps say that Jacob brings it on himself, but Jacob and Esau are introduced to us with a statement by Yahweh in 25:23. It seems that Yahweh is involved in Jacob's conflicts, that indeed Jacob is somehow destined for conflict.

It is possible that Yahweh simply foresees the future in 25:23, but that seems unlikely. This future is somehow of Yahweh's making. Yahweh has already acted in surprising ways by choosing Abram and Sarai, a couple under the curse of barrenness, as the ones to carry the promise. Now God chooses Jacob, the second born and a "heel" of a man. (see 25:26) **What do we learn of God by God's choice of Jacob? Read the 1 Corinthians passage as insight into the choice of Jacob.**

Esau is in many ways a tragic figure. Though he does lack the faithful pose of waiting (see 25:29-34) he nonetheless has his blessing stolen from him by his brother. Surely there is much agony and pathos in the scene where Esau asks his father Isaac if there is no blessing left for him.

Surely there are memories here of Ishmael's departure, and also of the agony surrounding God's call to sacrifice Isaac, for now Isaac, in a way, must give up his son, the son whom he loves.

But in the inscrutable ways of God, the promise will follow a certain route, and bypass others. The promise travels by Jacob. Isaac can no more retrieve his blessing to Jacob and give it to Esau than Abraham could choose Ishmael over Isaac. Still, Isaac loves Esau, and he offers him what he can in 27:39-40. It is not a great deal, but there is a note of hope in it. **Remembering that Esau will give rise to Edom, a people subjugated by Israel in its heyday, how might the final note of Esau's blessing give hope to people outside the covenant?**

The story of Jacob gives us two different reasons why he leaves Canaan and returns to Haran. The more obvious reason is he fears for his life. He is simply fleeing to save his skin. But even Jacob's flight serves the purposes of the promise. He will find a wife from the family of promise, not from among the Canaanites.

As Jacob journeys toward Haran, he stops to rest at the place which will be called Bethel. In the scene Jacob is apparently alone, without protection and vulnerable. He has to sleep out under the stars with no one to take him in and show hospitality. Alone in the wilderness, surely he slept lightly, ready to defend himself if a wild animal should attack or, worse, if Esau should find him. Jacob has every right to be anxious and worried, even if he is the cause of his own worst fears. He is right to consider himself vulnerable and in danger.

In all his vulnerability, Jacob falls asleep. But it is not a lion or Esau who finds him. It is Yahweh. **Surely Jacob feared being found as he slept, but Yahweh does not act according to Jacob's fears. What does Yahweh do? What is the basis for God's gracious treatment of Jacob?**

The image of the ladder or ramp in Jacob's dream at Bethel is an interesting one. Most likely this should not be envisioned as a ladder as we think of it, but more as a stair-like ramp of the type seen in ziggurats of ancient Assyria and Babylon. Those pyramid-like temples were built to be intersections of heaven and earth, and are perhaps belittled in the Tower of Babel story. But here the ramp is of heavenly origin, not human.

**What do you think is the significance of this ramp or ladder? Is an access point from heaven to earth a good thing or a bad thing? Why?**

Jacob awakes aware that he has been found, though not by some enemy. It is interesting to speculate about what Jacob knows of Yahweh before the events of Bethel. Surely we can assume he knows something of the promise and the covenant, but the text does not say. However, when Jacob tricks his father, he refers to Yahweh as "Yahweh your God." And when God visits him in his dream, the introductions sounds a bit like a first time thing. "I am Yahweh, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac." **Encountering this Yahweh, of whom he has surely heard but whom he has apparently never met, how does Jacob respond? Jacob, a man of faith, can be seen in his response, though Jacob the schemer is still there as well.**

On the run from Esau, Jacob hopes to find hospitality and safe lodging among family at Haran, and he seeks out his uncle, Laban. It is worth remembering as you read these stories (along with many others in the Bible) that they are meant to be entertaining and humorous. There is theological import woven into these stories of Jacob and Laban, but also a good tale.

The story opens well enough. Jacob performs an impressive feat for the lady, and there is a tearful reunion with kin. But conflict follows Jacob around, and it soon erupts between him and Laban. Now it is Jacob's turn to be tricked. Jacob chooses the younger daughter, but he finds himself with the elder, a turnabout of sorts. There is a sense in which Jacob gets his comeuppance, but we know he is the bearer of God's promise and blessing. And so we suspect that Laban will not be able to thwart Jacob entirely.

Jacob had fooled his father in the darkness of Isaac's failing eyesight. Now Jacob is fooled in the darkness. Even though Jacob carries the promise, he is not outside judgment. Still, Jacob will have his Rachel. Yet when Jacob has his favored wife, God favors the undesired and unloved. Leah bears four sons, while the curse of barrenness rests on Rachel. From the tribes of Levi and Judah, descendants of two of these sons, will come Moses and David. God's favor on Leah will bring great blessing for Israel.

But God's involvement once again brings conflict for Jacob as he and Rachel argue over her barrenness. The conflict spreads to a competition between the wives. More sons are produced. These are legitimate heirs who are forerunners of Israel's tribes. Yet the curse of barrenness hangs over the story from 29:31 onward. **Look at all the efforts by the wives in chapter 30.**

**How do you think the story judges these events? Is the promise to be found here? Why or why not?**

**In 30:22, the curse of barrenness is suddenly removed from Rachel. What accounts for this reversal of fortune?**

30:1-21 is a story of human striving. On either side of it are statements about God's disposition toward humans. **What is the common thread joining God's opening of Leah's womb in 29:31, and God's opening of Rachel's in 30:22?**

**What can be said about how God regards people based on this? What is it that causes God to show concern?**

**Consider Luke 1:48, 52. Do these verses agree with your conclusions above?**

Read 30:25. Notice that the end of Rachel's barrenness brings new impetus to the story. It is stuck until this point. **What affirmations about the future can be drawn from this? What is the only source of hope for the story?**

## Session IX
## Struggle and Reconciliation

Readings for this Session:
**Genesis 30:25-33:17; 35:1-29; Matthew 5:21-24; 2 Corinthian 4:7-12; 1 John 4:12, 20-21**

**Important terms**

**Aramean -** Laban is identified as "Aramean" in 31:20. Abraham was also Aramean and a classic Hebrew self-identification goes, "a wandering Aramean was my father." (Deuteronomy 26:5) However, the Arameans will be enemies of the nation Israel. Laban seems to occupy both places. He is family, but he is also an enemy to Jacob in the end.

**Israel -** Jacob receives this name in our reading, and of course it will be the name of the people descended from him. The exact meaning of the word is uncertain. Some suggest "one who contends with God," but the Hebrew itself would seem to suggest something more along the lines of God contends, God preserves, or God protects.

**Exploring the Readings**

The birth of Joseph marks a significant shift in the story. Now that Rachel has borne a son, the focus turns to Canaan. We may have forgotten it during the stories of Jacob at Haran, but he is an exile, far from his home, far from the land of promise. If Jacob is indeed the bearer of the promise, then he is in the wrong place. Recall Abraham's words when he sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac. "See to it that you do not take my son back there." Haran is not the place of promise. It was the place Abram was ordered to leave. The opening of Rachel's womb pushes the story back towards the land of Canaan.

Jacob is ready to leave, but Laban apparently wants him to stay. As earlier, Laban and Jacob match wits. Some of this is just a good story for a good story's sake, but there is theological affirmation as well. **Even in their wheeling and dealing with each other, both share a common affirmation about Yahweh. What is it?**

This affirmation about God seems to be reaffirmed in 30:31, where Laban asks, "What shall I give you?" and Jacob responds, "You shall not give me anything." Laban recognizes that having Jacob around is worth a high price, but Jacob asks no payment from Laban. **Why do you think Jacob doesn't drive a hard bargain here? Why doesn't he ask for cold, hard cash?**

Laban, not surprisingly, tries to take advantage of the situation, yet Jacob soon has the upper hand once again. The events of 30:37-43 are hardly very convincing. The notion that Jacob could determine the appearance of sheep and goats by the methods described must have struck a note of absurdity even in the days when Genesis was first written. But the reader also knows that Jacob has more than his own wits and schemes working for him. **What is it that actually makes Jacob's plan work?**

Genesis 31:1-16 is much more overtly theological in content than the verses preceding it. (These verses offer an explicit answer to the question above.) This material is bracketed by the statements of Laban's sons at the beginning, and by Laban's daughters at the end. The sons wish to contend with Jacob (and God?) while the daughters align themselves with Jacob (and God?).

The call of Yahweh hangs over these verses. 31:3 has strong echoes of the call of Abram in 12:1. Jacob is called to go to the land of his fathers (and to the land of Esau), and he immediately makes plans to do so. He calls his wives and tells them of God's call, and he recounts the events of his time in Haran, giving them a distinctively theological bent.

Much of Jacob's story might be read as one of human activity. Jacob and Laban spar with one another. Which will get the better of the other? But these verses insist that God's relationship to Jacob is critical in all these events. **What do these verses make explicit about Yahweh's relationship with Jacob?**

The conclusion of the Jacob and Laban saga completes an inversion. Jacob comes to Haran a fugitive with nothing. The woman he loves is barren. But in 30:22 God remembers. Now Rachel has a beloved son, and Jacob departs for home a wealthy man.

The story of the stolen household gods is not necessary to the overall story of Jacob, but it does get in a good shot at the impotence of gods other than Yahweh. That Rachel sits on these gods and also defiles them only serves to heighten the insult.

There are also some striking parallels between Jacob's departure from Haran and Moses and Israel's departure from Egypt in Exodus. **From your memory of the Exodus story, in what ways do Jacob's story foreshadow those events?**

With the danger of Laban in the past, now the story returns to the danger of Esau. Notice all the careful planning Jacob does to set the stage for their meeting. Everything in 32:3-21 involves Jacob's desire that the reunion with Esau turn out a lot better than the departure.

Sandwiched in between Jacob's preparations and the actual meeting with Esau is the unexpected encounter with "a man" in 32:22-32. Just like when Jacob fled his homeland all those years ago, Jacob is alone and fearful of what an encounter with Esau might bring. Once again he is found, but this is not the meeting that Jacob has prepared for. **The story seems intentionally murky about who this man actually is. Who do you think he is? Is there more than one possibility?**

This story is remarkably sparse in some respects. It says simply, "Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." Clearly Jacob has not sought out this man and then attacked him. Apparently we are to understand that this man attacks Jacob. **If we decide that this man is Yahweh (as Jacob does in the end), then what are the implications of a God who assaults in the dark? How do we fit this picture of God into our overall understanding of God, into our understanding of faithful life with God? (See 2 Corinthians 4:7-12)**

At daybreak, the man seeks to depart, but Jacob restrains him. This may reflect some ancient notions of a demon who could not remain out in the day, but clearly the story has moved past such notions. Daybreak now serves only as an event to initiate the conversation of 32:26-29. Notice the story's ambivalence about who has the upper hand. At first it seems to be Jacob, who refuses to release the man. Yet then the man changes the subject and seizes the initiative, giving Jacob a new name. The old name meant trickster, supplanter, heel, but the new name is an entirely new identity. Now he is the one who strives with human and divine. Now he carries a name reflecting this, a name that literally speaks of God's perseverance and striving to bring a promise through Jacob/Israel. **This change of names implies that Jacob is substantially altered by his encounter with this man/Yahweh. How is Jacob fundamentally different as Israel limps away from Peniel?**

Jacob/Israel was not prepared for the encounter at Peniel, but he is well prepared for the encounter with Esau. Notice how the family comes to Esau in waves, with the most valued coming last. But Esau does not act as Jacob has feared. Inversion continues. Laban first greeted Jacob with a kiss but became his enemy. Jacob and Esau departed as enemies, but Jacob returns to receive embraces and kisses from Esau. In the midst of this greeting, Jacob says a curious thing. He insists that Esau receive his gift "for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God." **Only a few verses earlier, Jacob has spoken of seeing God face to face at Peniel. Now the meeting with Esau somehow compares to that. How is reunion with Esau like the encounter with God?**

**Many have noted that the struggle with the man at Peniel may echo a story where Jacob wrestles with Esau. Given the careful placement of the Peniel story in the middle of a story about the reunion with Esau, might reconciliation with Esau be related to relationship with God? (see 1 John 4:12:20-21)**

In Genesis 35, Jacob returns to Bethel, the site of the ladder or ramp. Here he is once again named Israel, but this time the name is not associated with striving, but with blessing. **Look at the content of the blessing God speaks. Where have we heard these before?**

Genesis 35:16-27 wraps up the Jacob cycle before moving on to Joseph. In this epilogue there is a note about Reuben laying with Jacob's concubine. (This is less sexual perversion than power play.) This, along with Simeon and Levi's appalling revenge murder of Shechem's family, place a note of conflict at the end of Jacob's story. There is also a note about Jacob and Esau together burying Isaac. **What sort of things might we infer from these notes of conflict and reconciliation marking the end of Jacob's story?**

## Session X
## God's Hidden Call: Dream Versus World

Readings for this Session: **Romans 8:28-30; Genesis 37-39; James 1:27**

**Coat of many colors -** This is the traditional rendering of a difficult Hebrew phrase found only in the Joseph story, which literally reads something like "robe of the palm." The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, translated this "coat of many colors," and that reading made it into many later translations. Most Bibles now try to reflect the Hebrew rather than the Greek translation. The best guess seems to be a robe with full sleeves reaching all the way to the hands, assumedly a sign of wealth or prestige or even royalty.

**Levirate marriage -** In Israel, it was a terrible thing for a man to die with no heir. To deal with this, the practice of Levirate marriage developed. The practice is enshrined in the Law codes of Deuteronomy (25:5-10). This required a man to marry the widow of a brother who died with no male heir. The first male child from this marriage would carry on the name of the deceased brother. This was both a family and manly obligation in Israel, and Deuteronomy describes a ritual for shaming the man who refuses to live up to his obligation. The name "levirate" comes from the Latin for brother-in-law, *levir*.

**Sheol -** This is the Hebrew place of the dead. It was not an afterlife so much as a shadowy existence devoid of life. Sheol held no reward for the faithful. It was merely the murky fate that awaited all humans.

**Exploring the Readings**

The Joseph cycle of stories is quite different from the ones that precede it. With Abraham and Jacob we can see the remnants of many ancient stories all woven together by later editors. With Joseph, the story is much more seamless. Abraham and Jacob are regularly confronted by the presence of God. In the Joseph story, Yahweh is much more hidden, at times even absent.

A number of scholars have said that the Joseph stories have later origins than what comes before them. Many suppose that the Joseph stories emerge from Israel in its heyday under Solomon. The sophisticated, worldly, cultured people of this time may have had trouble relating to the "primitive" stories of their ancestors, where Yahweh intruded onto the human stage so frequently.

It is possible that the Joseph stories address an audience with some similarities to our own day. Presbyterians especially have preferred a faith that could be explained, that was rational, and that doesn't violate modern sensibilities. We have tended to be embarrassed by the more overt, explicit stories of the faith. We, along with much of the modern, mainline church, have been quick to explain away difficult stories and texts.

An example would be a popular interpretation of Jesus' miraculous feeding of the 5000 which suggests Jesus knows that many in the crowd have a little food stashed away in their robes. They keep the food hidden out of fear that hungry folks around them would grab it if they showed it. Then Jesus makes the first move, convincing one person to share and publicly offering that shared food to the crowd, unleashing a torrent of sharing. In this way the miracle is less embarrassing to people with a sophisticated, scientific world-view.

The Joseph stories may address a people with similar notions, who don't know much of theophanies in their lives, who are a bit unnerved by overly obvious miracles. The God in these

stories more closely matches their own experience of a God who is often hidden and remote, unseen in their lives.

This is not to say that the Joseph narrative is itself uncomfortable or embarrassed by a too obtrusive image of God. In fact, the story may be seen to assert that Yahweh's presence and activity on the page of history cannot be denied even when God seems not to be present. These stories may insist that God is working out God's plans for the future regardless of human awareness, faithfulness, or willingness to embrace God's call. Brueggemann refers to the Joseph stories under the heading "The hidden call of God," perhaps reflecting this.

The Joseph stories reveal a God whose purposes will not be thwarted by human activity. Says Brueggemann, "The theme of the Joseph narrative concerns God's hidden and decisive power which works in and through but also against human forms of power. A 'soft' word for that reality is *providence.* A harder word is *predestination.* Either way – providence or predestination – the theme is that God is working out his purpose through and in spite of Egypt, through and in spite of Joseph and his brothers." (Brueggemann, *Genesis.* p. 293.)

The beginning of the Joseph narrative is clearly marked in the beginning of chapter 37. "This is the story of the family of Jacob." Immediately Joseph is introduced as a 17-year-old, and immediately, conflict with his brothers is introduced as well. **The story actually supplies us with multiple reasons for antagonism between brothers. What are they?**

Among the things that anger Joseph's brothers, his dreams are most provocative. The dreams require no skill to interpret. Their meaning is quite obvious. The first has the older brothers serving the younger. The second has even his parents bowing to Joseph. Joseph's dreams upset the normal social hierarchy. They are offensive, denying accepted ways of ordering society and family.

These dreams fit well with Joseph's character. He is the younger who is better loved, spoiled, a brat, and a tattle-tale. Yet are we to understand Joseph's dreams as mere expressions of his personality, or do the dreams come from beyond him? **What is the source of the dream? Who gives these dreams to Joseph?**

**If Yahweh is the origin of the dreams, what troubling things can be said about God's participation in human history? Is God the cause of family disruption and conflict?**

Joseph's dreams intensify his brothers' feelings against him. After the first dream, "they hated him even more." Following his second dream, "his brothers were jealous of him." Father Jacob is also taken aback by the second dream, yet while the brothers hate and are jealous, "his father kept the matter in mind." **What significance do you see in this remark? What is indicated by Jacob's mulling the matter over?**

Hatred and jealousy spawn a plan to be rid of Joseph. Joseph's dreams are a threat, a threat that must be removed. Violence and murder are plotted. When the opportunity arises, action is taken. Within the plot to kill there are two dissonant voices from Reuben and Judah. Many have suggested that the two stories are separate accounts cherished by the two tribes of Judah and Reuben, accounts which mitigate each tribe's complicity in the events.

Reuben feels responsible, but he is a coward, and his plan to save Joseph is undone. As Brueggemann notes, "killers of the dream will not be restrained by a responsible coward." Reuben does convince his brothers to throw Joseph in the pit, though. As they do so, we again see the robe with sleeves, the special robe of the dreamer Joseph. It is possible that this robe has royal implications, and certainly the dreams speak of Joseph ruling over his family. **With that in mind, why is it important to the brothers to strip the robe off Joseph? What symbolic action is taking place?**

Selling Joseph as a slave solves any moral qualms that have arisen about killing him. Judah is no braver than his brother Reuben, but by raising the issue of guilt, the murder is called off. Regardless, the dreamer and his dream have been dispensed with. Now all that remains is what to tell the dreamer's father. They deceive Jacob into believing Joseph is dead, and he descends into inconsolable mourning. If we take a symbolic view of Joseph's dreams, reading them as an alternative reality being brought by God, then the desire to kill Joseph can be seen as trying to prevent this new reality from arriving. Jacob thus mourns both dreamer and dream. **If we read chapter 37 this way, what is the purpose of the brief report in verse 36?**

Why chapter 38 interrupts the Joseph narrative at this point is hard to know. Why not somewhere else? Perhaps it functions to delay the story, to remind us that life in Jacob's family now proceeds without Joseph. Regardless, it is essential that this story be interpreted within its own moral context. It will not be forced into a modern world view of sexuality or morality.

This story is one of many in the Old Testament where the powerless who are wronged get justice. Tamar engages in behavior that is clearly outside the bounds of the Law when she tricks Judah into helping her conceive, but in the end Judah declares her "more in the right" or "more righteous" than he. In a sense, her breaking Torah is excused while Judah's crime is condemned. **What does this say about God's Law when one is chastised and the other affirmed, yet both have broken the Law?**

As we return to the Joseph story, he is a slave in Potiphar's house. Yahweh has been unseen in the opening of the Joseph narrative, but now he is visible, at least to the reader. No hint is given that Yahweh's presence is known to Joseph. Yahweh's blessing leads to much success for Joseph, and an honored place in Potiphar's home. Yet just as the dream spurs his brothers to plot against him, Yahweh's blessing once again puts Joseph and the dream in jeopardy. It is his trusted status that creates the situation where Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him. (It is important to remember the power dynamics here. Joseph is a slave owned by this woman's husband.)

Now we get a picture of Joseph's character. Despite his lack of power, he holds to what he knows to be right. He will not sin against his master or against God (or the dream?), and so once again the dream is threatened.

It is hard to resist seeing a conflict between dream and empire, between promise and the powers of this world, in the conflict between Joseph and the Egyptian woman. She sees Joseph's good looks; she sees his success in all that he touches. She sees in him a power to bless, a sort of potency which she desires for herself. She would co-opt the dream to her own purposes. She represents the power of empire that grabs what it wants, that thinks no blessing is beyond its own power to procure, yet Joseph refuses to be co-opted.

Christian faith bears a dream of its own, one even more radical that Joseph's. In it, wolves lie down with lambs, and lions eat straw. In our dream, God dwells in the midst of God's people and wipes away all tears. "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more… (there will be) no need of sun or moon to shine…for the glory of God is its light and its lamp is the lamb." (see Revelation 21.) **If this is our dream, what does it mean for us to stay faithful to the dream? How do powers or empire seek to co-opt the dream? How do we know that the dream is unsullied and unstained by the world? (see James 1:27)**

## Session XI
## God's Hidden Call: Empire and Family

Readings for this Session: **Genesis 40-44**

**Exploring the Readings**

Joseph's dreams put him at odds with his brothers when we first meet him. Now in prison, dreams remain central to Joseph's story. This overriding dream motif reminds us to keep the dreams of chapter 37 in mind as we hear the dreams of cup-bearer, baker, and Pharaoh. Dreams, especially Joseph's own dreams, are crucial to the narrative, but they need to be understood theologically, not psychologically. These stories are not about the truths to be found in dreams; they are not about the skills of Joseph as interpreter. Both dream and interpretation are about what Yahweh is up to in the world, about the future that Yahweh is bringing.

Just as his service with Potiphar initially goes well, so Joseph quickly gains the trust of the jailer. Yahweh is with Joseph and blesses all he does, and so he is assigned to two high profile prisoners brought to the jail, Pharaoh's cup-bearer (or butler) and his baker. One night, both of these men have dreams, dreams that confuse and disturb them.

In Egypt, there were experts who would interpret dreams, but these two men have no way of getting their dreams interpreted. Hence their complaint to Joseph, "We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." Joseph offers to interpret, but not based on any special training that he has had. **Why is it that Joseph believes he can interpret? What theological claims are being made by the narrative about the future these dreams reveal?**

In Joseph's interpretation, there is a word play on the phrase "lift up your head." Normally this has a positive connotation, but here it works both ways. (Some commentators believe the "from you" in 40:19 is a later addition and should not be read.) It's also worth noting that in the cup-bearer's dream Pharaoh is nourished while in the baker's dream the birds are fed rather than Pharaoh. Apparently there are hints of Pharaoh's own dream here, a dream of plenty and want.

We have already seen that Joseph can interpret because "interpretations belong to God," and God is with Joseph. The story doesn't reveal some skill on Joseph's part, but reveals a destiny that we have known since chapter 37. God has chosen Joseph as one who will rule. Joseph is a dreamer but he dreams the dream given him by God.

A striking contrast emerges in these verses. Although Yahweh is with Joseph, though he can interpret and is destined to rule, he is in prison and at the mercy of others. In 40:14-15 we hear Joseph plead to be remembered, and we hear his personal anguish. Brueggemann writes,

> The text brings us to an incongruity where faithful people must live. How may we reconcile the *grand claim* (40:8) which seems utterly effective and the *unrelieved pathos*

(40:14-15) which ends in dismay (40:23)? It is in that incongruity that human faithfulness must be practiced. It is in that setting that the dream of God is tested. The dream of God for Joseph is not for times of obvious credibility. It is for times when the claims run against the evidence. And Joseph is left to wait even as father Abraham had. The butler forgets Joseph now, even as Egypt will forget him (cf. Exodus 1:8). Joseph is left with this question: Is there a *remembering* done by Yahweh beyond the forgetting of the empire? Joseph does not know. The butler does not care. (*Genesis*, p. 325)

**What observations about faith and theology do you draw from the fact that Joseph finds himself dependant on his neighbor, that even though he is God's man, he must await the remembering of a fellow prisoner?**

When the prisoners dreamed, they had no one available to interpret. Clearly that is not the case for Pharaoh. He has at his disposal all the resources of empire, all the wisdom and skill it possesses, yet his dream remains a mystery. This prompts the cup-bearer to remember Joseph.

This must be an odd position for Pharaoh, all the vast resources of empire unable to help him. He awaits the help of a prisoner, a foreigner. **What insights can you draw from this regarding the limits of empire and power, the limits of human capability?**

Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dream as revelation of what the coming 14 years will bring. This future is fixed. It cannot be changed, but preparations can be made for it. Careful planning will permit survival when famine strikes. Notice that Pharaoh himself credits God, and turns to Joseph as the one God has chosen. The one destined to rule will indeed rule. The one who dreamed of others bowing to him will hear the cry "Bow the knee" announced before his chariot.

Before we see the fulfillment of Pharaoh's dream, we witness the fulfillment of Joseph's dream. In the fulfilling of both, the Joseph narrative makes a theological statement about the future. **What does the narrative say about Yahweh's relation to the future?**

At chapter 42, Joseph's family again enters the narrative. It is important to recognize the threat that hangs over the family, and thus over the call and promise of God. Jacob sends his sons to Egypt hoping they may buy the grain he has heard is there, "that we may live and not die."

There are interesting character developments in these chapters. Joseph is now a man of power who seems to enjoy exercising it. He manipulates the situation to his own advantage. He likes the shoe being on the other foot. The brothers also look different. Their guilt hangs over them, and they seem much more concerned about the remaining beloved brother and their father.

Chapters 42-44 also contain a competition for Benjamin, a competition between Joseph and Jacob. Joseph insists Benjamin be brought to Egypt. Jacob insists he stay. Jacob's motives are easy to see while Joseph's are less clear. Jacob seeks to protect the sole son of Rachel, yet the story seems to need Benjamin in Egypt. This is not a fair competition between Jacob and Joseph, between father and son. Joseph has the knowledge and the power. He knows much more than Jacob and he holds all the cards.

Somewhere behind all this action is "the hidden call of God." Hidden behind the action, it is perhaps hidden from the actors as well. Though unaware of the call, perhaps the actors nonetheless respond, some saying "Yes" and others "No." **Which character(s) says "Yes" to the hidden call? Which says "No?" How do we know? How do they know?**

When the brothers return from their first trip to Egypt, they discover the money still in their sacks. In some way this is simply Joseph manipulating the action, but there may also be implicit notions of God's call and promise here. **What are some possible meanings of grain bought without money spent? (cf. Isaiah 55:1)**

**How do you think the brothers and Jacob view the discovery of this money? Do they see it as blessing or does it bode ill for them? Why?**

Genesis 44:33 is a complete inversion of 37:12-36. Now Judah protects his brother and offers himself as slave. **Why the change? Does Judah have any hint of God's unfolding call; is there any gospel to go with Judah's repentance?**

## Session XII
## God's Hidden Call Revealed

Readings for this Session: **Genesis 45-48; 50:15-26**

**Important Terms**

**Ephraim -** This is the younger of Joseph's two sons, and also the name of one of Israel's tribes. Ephraim and Manasseh are often referred to as "half-tribes" since they are not sons of Jacob but of Joseph. There isn't really a tribe of Joseph, but two "half-tribes" linked to him. Ephraim becomes the preeminent northern tribe, and at the time of the divided monarchy (after Solomon) Ephraim becomes a synonym for the entire northern kingdom, Israel. Judah, the southern kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital, reclaims the name Israel after the northern kingdom is wiped out by the Assyrians.

**Exploring the Readings**

Judah's impassioned plea to take Benjamin's place as a slave apparently is too much for Joseph. Now he must reveal himself, and the story reaches its climax. Genesis 45 reveals the power of the dream, and the hidden hand of Yahweh in all that has happened. But before Joseph can speak to his brothers, he sends the Egyptians away. **Why can the Egyptians not be there for this moment? Why are they removed from the scene? What significance might there be in keeping this a "family matter?"**

When Joseph reveals himself, his brothers are stunned. Verse 3 says that they could not answer Joseph, so "dismayed" were they by his appearance. The word might also be translated "terrified." (Compare the women's reaction to the appearance of the risen Jesus in Mark 16:8.) There is a collision here between the brothers' reality and the reality of the dream. They cannot fully comprehend this shattering of their reality.

Their terror at Joseph's revelation also has an immediate, practical dimension. Joseph has the upper hand and may now have his revenge. In fact, chapters 42-44 certainly seem to show a Joseph enjoying his power over his brothers. Up until now, he has plotted and schemed to entrap them. Yet Joseph does not respond as the brothers (or we?) might have expected. **Why do you think Joseph responds with graciousness instead of wrath?**

As Joseph speaks to his brothers, the hidden call of God is revealed. God sent Joseph to Egypt. God made Joseph father-lord-ruler. Joseph and his brothers have acted on their own, but the divine plan has been running through their story all along. **Do you think Joseph has realized this before now? Is it possible that his toying with the brothers in chapters 42-44 really was revenge being played out, but now he relents?**

Back in chapter 37, Joseph dreamed he would be ruler. (See 37:8) Now in 45:8 he is father-lord-ruler. He rules, not only over his family, but over all Egypt. We have noted how the Joseph story feels different than those of Abraham and Jacob. God is much less conspicuous. The story is much more secular, and yet the story insists on Yahweh's presence.

The story never says that God made anyone do anything. The brothers sold Joseph because they hated him and wanted to be rid of him. Joseph has earned some of their ire by being a brat and a tattle-tale. Jacob's preferential treatment has stoked the brother's resentment. Joseph's administrative abilities have certainly helped him to do well. Yet still Joseph says, "God sent me before you to preserve life." **How do you reconcile the freedom of Joseph, Jacob, and his brothers to act with the hidden call of God which directs the story? What does the story say about the freedom of God and the sovereignty of God?**

Many have noted how the past produces the present and the future. In our own world we see long running conflicts, such as those in the Middle East or Northern Ireland, where people seem captive to the past, where the pains and injuries of the past continue to drive the present and the foreseeable future.

When Joseph's brothers are terrified by his presence, quite likely they fear that their present will indeed be shaped by their past. They assume their hatred and plotting against Joseph will now come back to haunt them. But Joseph invites them into a different future, one not determined by the past. **What is it that makes possible this break with the past? What will allow the brothers to be open to the possibility of this different future? (You may want to look at 45:24 and 50:15 as you consider these questions.)**

The private meeting between Joseph and his brothers ends with kissing and weeping and a final note that "his brothers talked with him." (Compare 37:4) Now Pharaoh and Egypt again enter the story. Pharaoh orders that no expense be spared for Joseph's family saying, "for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours." This is remarkable enough, but even more so in light of the comment in 43:32 that "Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians."

The offspring of Jacob are unimportant outsiders who are not well regarded by the people of Egypt, and yet they now receive the ultimate in red carpet treatment. Some of this can be explained simply as Pharaoh's appreciation for what Joseph has done, but the amount seems excessive for that alone. **How else might all that is lavished on Jacob and his family be understood? How might the great abundance poured out on Jacob be viewed in terms of God's call?**

When Joseph's brothers return and tell Jacob what has happened, he is at first stunned and unbelieving. But when they tell him what Joseph said and he sees Pharaoh's wagons he says, "Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I must go see him before I die." The Hebrew word translated "enough" means much, many, great, sufficient, abundant, etc. We may want to hear meanings like abundance along with Jacob's simple exclamation "Enough!" (Instead of "Enough," the NIV Bible translates this, "I am convinced," perhaps obscuring some of the interpretive possibilities here.) **What may the story want us to notice beyond Jacob being convinced? In what ways can Jacob genuinely cry out, "Abundance!?"**

Upon Jacob's arrival in Egypt, he and his family settle in Goshen, also referred to as the land of Rameses. Notice that in 46:31-47:6, a bit of craftiness is employed. There has been nothing in Israel's stories up to this point indicating that they are primarily shepherds. This distinction seems designed to prevent Israel from being seen as a threat to Egyptian landholders. They will be shepherds for Egypt's flocks (as Jacob was to Laban), not horning in on the valuable grain producing land along the Nile and its delta. Israel will not blend into Egyptian society, but remains resident aliens.

In 47:7, Jacob is brought to meet Pharaoh. **Read 47:7-10 carefully. Who seems to be holding court here? Who is the one with blessing to give? What is the story trying to communicate?**

In his meeting with Pharaoh, Jacob speaks of his and his ancestors' sojourning. This speaks of the landlessness that is woven throughout the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But in 47:11, Joseph seems to act contrary both to this notion of sojourning and of resident aliens. He grants land. Using the power of empire, he supplies what God has promised.

In 47:13-26, Joseph feeds the people from what he has stored up, but there is an ominous note here as well. In the process, the people are enslaved and must pay a fifth to Pharaoh, twice the tithe owed to God. Joseph's attempt to serve both empire and promise is a delicate, and perhaps impossible, task. **Can promise coexist with empire? Is it possible to serve both masters? (Compare Luke 16:13)**

Prior to his death, Jacob blesses Joseph's sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Joseph makes sure to place Manasseh on Jacob's right so that he will receive the blessing due the first born, but Jacob crosses his hands and thwarts Joseph's plans. When Joseph objects, Jacob refuses to put his right hand on Manasseh. **Why must the story remind us, yet again, that the blessing will have its own way?**

Once Jacob dies, the brothers once again fear what Joseph may do to them. They fear that the consequences of their past guilt may yet create distress, and so they appeal to Joseph for forgiveness. They explicitly act out Joseph's dreams from many years before as they bow at his feet. They are still captive to their guilt, and therefore unable to see the dream at work.

Joseph does not explicitly forgive them, leaving that to God. Joseph holds the dream before them, pointing to God's activity that is not at all constrained by their sinfulness. Joseph invites them to envision a different future, one governed by the grace of God who desires goodness and well-being for humanity, who is not bound by their guilt. (The Apostle Paul's writings on Law versus grace deal with essentially the same issues.) **How are we captive to our own inability to see a dream-based future? How do we trust in our own power to create a future of good or ill over the blessing of God whose plans are often unseen?**

It is important to keep the Exodus in mind as we leave Joseph. Turn the page and we read, "Now a new king arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph." (Exodus 1:8) For a moment the dream is visible, but soon it is unseen again. The plans of empire take precedence, pushing dream aside. Just as brothers once tossed Joseph in the pit, Israel will be tossed into slavery.

An interesting question arises here about whether Israel itself participates in hiding the dream. Perhaps Israel is simply oppressed by a later Pharaoh who forgets the blessings brought by these Hebrews, but perhaps Israel helps the process.

Since Genesis is written with full knowledge of the Exodus story which follows, it may be appropriate to end this study with some questions about this journey from Genesis to Exodus. Speaking of Joseph's activity in chapters 46-47, Walter Brueggemann writes,

> …His game is a chancy one. How far can one play the imperial game, for the sake of the promise, before the promise is crushed by the force of the empire?
>
> From that question, it is interesting to speculate on the move from Genesis to Exodus. What all is hidden in the phrase, "a new king who did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8)? Was the fault in the new Pharaoh who could not discern Joseph's peculiar identity? Or might it be that the colors of Joseph had become so unclear and ambiguous that to the new Pharaoh he looked like every other royal administrator?
>
> Perhaps the turn toward oppression reflected in Exodus 1 can be credited not only to Pharaoh, as is conventional. Perhaps the turn is partly based on the compromising way of Israel after the lead of Joseph, who played the royal game and forgot the promise. Pharaoh could hardly be expected to honor a peculiar identity if Israel itself did not take it with singular seriousness. We do not know. But it is clear that Joseph's Israel lived dangerously near the brink of Egyptianization. As the narrative approaches its conclusion, the promise remains intact. But it is in jeopardy from compromise. The old man died steady in the promise. Yet the son has experienced something of the imperial alternative. The choices are subtle and not made all at once. The outcome is uncertain. Could it be that the subtle tempting of Genesis 3:1-7 is again at work on God's special creature? (*Genesis,* p. 358.)

We Christians are people of the promise. We have been entrusted with the promise and with the dream of a new day. We are called to bear witness to dream and promise by our love of one another, by love of God and neighbor, by praying for our enemies and for those who persecute us. We are called to live expectantly for a day when the lowly are lifted up and the hungry are filled with good things.

We also live in a world that is hostile to the dream and the promise. Our world trusts in power, in empire, in individual achievement rather than an unseen divine plan giving birth to a dream. Our world invites us to compromise, to tie promise to culture. It invites Church to lose its distinctiveness, to become indistinguishable from the world around it. But Genesis insists that the future belongs to God and to the promise. The great faith question is whether we will entrust ourselves to it, or make our own way.

**Yahweh brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;**
**he frustrates the plans of the peoples.**
**The counsel of Yahweh stands forever,**
**the thoughts of his heart to all generations.** (Psalm 33:10-11)

**The human mind may devise many plans,**
**but it is the purpose of Yahweh that will be established.** (Proverbs 19:21)