

They Saw Him from a Distance
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Genesis 37:1-4; 12-28

I am haunted by one phrase that is in today's lection, and one that's not, but is certainly inferred: "They saw him from a distance" and "He saw them from a distance."

The phrases are fitting because they not only describe Joseph's physical proximity to his brothers and theirs to him, but the phrases also describe each party's relationship toward the other.

He saw them from a distance.

As Joseph walked north toward Dothan, he could barely make out the silhouettes of his ten brothers. From a thousand yards away, they were just ten blurry dots chasing after several hundred blurrier dots. "That's probably Reuben, and that's probably Judah, and those look to be our herd," he thought. "I'm pretty sure they each own a brown cloak. And the size of the group seems right." And so Joseph kept on walking. But again, he could only recognize them in the abstract. He was too far away to see the distinct features of each man. Therefore he could not see the grimace on each brothers' face, or sense the collective sigh of frustration in their group as they uttered: "Ugh, here comes the dreamer."

But truth be told, Joseph had always seen them from a distance. It wasn't his fault that he had dreams – dreams where God told him he was going to be special, so special that all of his relatives would bow at his feet. And he couldn't help it that his daddy was so devoted to his mamma, the woman he loved more than his stepbrothers' mothers, that he treated Joseph like a prince. Joseph just thought it was normal. And why shouldn't he be proud of his coat? And why should he notice that his brothers were dissatisfied with him, and his father, and their lot in life, and maybe even a little jealous? I mean after all, Joseph had a good life. And he was seventeen. And wasn't his experience normative?

Joseph knew his brothers from a distance. And because of that distance, he had little empathy for the life experiences each of them were living. And besides, Joseph was called to bigger things.

They saw him from a distance.

As they looked south toward Shechem, there it was on the horizon: that coat! That coat given to him by their father, lorded over them, paraded about everywhere he went. And though they couldn't see his face, they knew what that multi-colored garment was bringing: a tattle tale, and the chosen one. Here they were toiling in the fields, resigned to the life of second-class children. Some of them were grown men by now, and some even had families of their own. And they had dreams and talents, too. But they'd never be given a chance to realize them, all because of birthright, all because of chance, all because of an archaic system of property distribution.

In a way, they had come to terms with this system. There wasn't much choice. But that teenager, a spoiled child, he had no empathy for the work they were doing to enhance what would eventually be HIS wealth, HIS name, HIS family. And even if Joseph were coming with good intentions, he'd insulted them enough times over the past few years that they were NEVER gonna give him the benefit of the doubt.

Joseph's brothers saw him in the distance, and they held their empathy and compassion for him beyond arm's length. Because they too, knew him only from a distance.

We're going to continue the Joseph novella next week. We know that Joseph will eventually be sold into slavery and taken to Egypt. And we know that eventually he and his brothers will find shalom with one another. But the resolution is for next week.

This morning, the text compels us to think about the distance we create in all of our relationships. I'm not suggesting that any of us is headed for the extreme of fratricide. But if we experience life long enough, we'll no doubt encounter relationships that seem breached beyond repair.

The events between Joseph and his brothers didn't happen overnight. They were the result of a fractured, inequitable family system whose symptoms festered over time and manifested into crisis. And because there was SO MUCH distance between these brothers, tragedy was inevitable.

Jesus spoke of a hedge. This is the idea that we build a hedge or a warning track around Torah. We cannot be content to live by the basic standards of the Ten Commandments. It's not enough to avoid murder and theft and wrong-doing and disrespect. We have to avoid lifestyle choices that would lead our minds to act in such ways. Therefore, Jesus commands us to love one another, to forgive one another, to live with empathy, to embrace the dignity and respect God has given each of us as created beings. If we love ourselves as we love others, we distance ourselves from the desire to harm one another.

In Joseph and his brothers, we find people who stopped working (assuming they ever started at all) to find common ground with one another.

So when you read today's text, it's imperative that you seek to empathize with all of its characters, because this tragedy was not isolated, nor was it the fault of one party. This tragedy was communal. And next week, we'll discover that so too is the story's resolution.

Now conjure up that image of Joseph and Reuben and Judah in your minds. Close your eyes if you need to. And think for a moment.

Have you ever been chosen? Have you ever been left out? Has somebody ever had something you wanted? Have you ever had something somebody else wanted? Have you ever felt stuck? Have you ever felt trapped? Have you ever felt loved? Have you ever felt hated? Have you ever been alone? Have you ever been swept up in the momentum of hate, or fear, or love? Have you ever been proud of something? Have you ever bragged about it? Have you ever had to be responsible for other people? Have you ever been the messenger? Have you ever been a supervisor? Have you ever been supervised? Have you ever decided to take matters into your own hands? Have you ever acted solely out of emotion rather than reason?

Chances are, each of us has played our share of these roles. The story calls us to think about each role. And the story calls us to be honest about what part we play in the distance we create in our relationships. By acknowledging such roles and such responsibility, we begin to lay the foundations for compassionate living.

This morning, we awoke headlines of another divisive cloak. For reasons I will never fully understand, grown men still find it compelling to don Confederate flags and light torches, all in the hopes of preserving stone idols with stone-aged ideas. They seem to believe that the resurrected ghosts of Robert E. Lee and Adolph Hitler will somehow bring in a new age of prosperity: a chicken in every pot, and a new Honda in every driveway (even though it's made somewhere else), and an extra zero on the end of every salary. And all those folks who've had their privilege removed will feel good about themselves for another decade or two. All of this, despite the fact that the systems Lee and Hitler and too many other have advocated for are built on a single principle: distance. Vilify an entire race of people; drive a wedge between that class and their poorer peers; and line the pockets of the ruling class.

And when I think about that march it makes me angry beyond all measure.

I see that silly, hurtful flag, and I feel the distance grow inside my heart. And on the other end, I'm sure those marchers see our sneers and contorted faces, and it only strengthens their resolve. And they feel the distance grow, too.

As people of faith, we must speak out against those who pursue agendas of hate. But as we pursue justice, we can never fail to seek the humanity in every neighbor, especially those with whom we vehemently disagree. For when choose the ease of distance over the hard work of love, we fail to follow the Christ. And we fail to honor the good creation God has given us.

Whether you find yourself in Shechem or in Dothan, there's still a few thousand paces before you reach the blurry figures on the horizon. As you take those steps, think about the systems you live in: your family, your neighborhood, your faith community, your government, your workplace, your social circle, etc. When have you had privilege? When has privilege been lorded over you? What are you willing to do to bring equity and justice and love to these systems? Do you want to live in a world bound by the Ten Commandments, or do you want to work to create a world where there's so much love, we have no need of such commandments?

As you travel these steps, fear not. God found a way to bring shalom to a band of brothers separated in Dothan. And be it Charlottesville, Virginia or Charlotte, North Carolina, God will empower each of us to bring shalom to the end of any distance we have to travel.

Friends, right now, we see them from a distance. May we soon see them in the nearness of compassion. And they us.

Amen.