

THE OLD MEETING HOUSE  
East Montpelier Center, Vermont

“I Am Your Brother”

Genesis 45:1-28

Preached by Elissa Johnk

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This week, the sermon has written itself.

Each week I turn to the lectionary, I open the passage that has been set for this week – it really can be a beautiful thing, a set of readings that ensures we will look over the majority of the bible in just three short years. I open it up, marvel at what text has been put before me, and then I spend the week looking at the world around me.

The meetings. What does the psalm tell us of our relations with each other?

The outreach to the community. What does this text say to us about the way we live? Our groceries? Our bank accounts?

The pastoral visits. What does Genesis say to that ache? To the scars left on us by life?

This week it wrote itself.

I was visiting family – Don and Alice – my ancestors, my grandparents – here, today. And we had just broken bread. Garlic bread and alfredo, pizza and salad. It had been a beautiful birthday feast.

We retired to the living room, to watch the evening news, and there, on that 19 inch screen, displayed right in front of us, was the book of Genesis.

What follows are portions of the transcript from the report, you will hopefully excuse my pronunciation.

*“DADAAB REFUGEE CAMP, Kenya - U.S. officials are warning that hundreds of thousands of children face death from starvation and thirst. The people at the world's largest refugee camp have survived a journey that has taken weeks or even months.*

*They brought their families through the desert, carried the children, left those who died, and willed themselves through the pain of hunger. CBS Evening News anchor Scott Pelley reports a quarter-inch of wire was all that stood between them and survival.*

*Abdey Adan said she'd been waiting four days to get into the overwhelmed Dadaab Camp. Adan left Somalia on foot with five children 22 days ago. She said two of her children, ages four and two died "because there was no water there was no food."*

*The fence catches broken pieces of families. Mahmood is 15 and alone. His mother, still in Somalia, sent him to the camps because she couldn't feed him. The U.N. tells us more than three and a half million are in danger of starvation.*

*The hospital for the children of the famine is run by New York-based humanitarian relief organization the [International Rescue Committee](#).*

*According to Humphrey Musyoka, the IRC's doctor here, the treatment is often simple - fortified milk or nutrition through a feeding tube.*

*"These children that we've seen in the hospital that look so critical, you can save them,"*

*"I think our biggest challenge has been the late arrivals and at that particular point there is only so much you can do."*

*By late arrivals he means kids who have been without food for 30 days or more. He loses one or two of them a week. Its estimated 29,000 children under the age of five have died in the famine already.*

*Here, mothers or grandmothers lie all day with children who have wasted to the minimum that life requires. The sickest child was Hammad. He's six months old. His mother, Abdia Ali, told us there is no hope for him but God.*

*Hawa Hassan fled the famine and walked 21 days in the desert with 11 children - five of her own and six others. She told us her girl is getting better. Her name is Faiza - which means "victory.""<sup>1</sup>*

We switched the channel, but the images are the same.

A man, in his thirties – well dressed. Dark jeans and a dark blue button-down, perfectly color-coordinated with his dark blue bullet-proof vest, and his dark helmet. In front of him stands a boy. Probably in his early teens, but it is hard to tell. He seems small compared to the flak jacket and gear of the reporter. Well dressed, but barefoot.

David, the man says. David.

Ishmael. Says the boy.

David. Ishmael.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/08/09/eveningnews/main20090306.shtml>

Their rudimentary hand gestures finally understood, they both break out into wide smiles, and reach for each other's hand. The almost-universal gesture. It is nice to meet you.

Ishmael is surrounded by his peers. From the way they look at him, heads tilted in slight awe, he is probably their leader – that one boy who always seems to take charge. He is their spokesman, as David is ours.

I am sure the irony of the names were not lost on the people of ABC news. David, in the Hebrew Bible, 14 generations from Abraham, descendent of Isaac and Jacob and Judah, the true heir to the nation of Israel. Ishmael, the one cast out, first born of Abraham, from whose foot is rumored to have sprung the well of zamzam, still celebrated and re-enacted by muslims on their most sacred pilgrimage, the Hajj.

David

Ishmael

Brothers.

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“Why do you keep looking at one another?” Jacob says. “There is grain in Egypt, go down and get grain for us there that we may live and not die.”

200 miles they travel. 200 miles of desert and wilderness, on foot. Ten brothers, a family divided. And at the end of their journey, what separates them from survival is far thicker than a quarter inch of wire, although they do not know it. What stands between them and survival is powerful, strong, history. Their history. Their brother. The brother they enslaved years before. Joseph.

Joseph sees them, knows them. And though he has come to realize it is not their fault he was sold, not their own doing – they were themselves wrapped up in a history they could not control – but he cannot help himself. He has tested them several times. And they have passed. Instead of turning their back on their kin in exchange, even for survival, they have defended him, pleaded for him. Chosen love over survival.

And so we find ourselves at this morning's reading. Privy to an intimate moment.

A man. Dressed impeccably. A group of men, their chosen representative out front. Well dressed, but clearly from a different place. Hungry.

Joseph. He says, pointing at his chest. I am Joseph.

You are Benjamin.

I am your brother.

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Asked what he has seen in the refugee camp, Humphrey Musyoka replies, "I think what I have seen here is the resilience of the human body and the capacity to take that kind of battering in terms of hunger and still be able to make it. I regard that as a miracle."

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So often we find ourselves immersed in the horrible nature of these stories. Of the Bible. Of the news.

The faces, the pictures. It can be hard to see anything else. To see, like Dr. Musyoka, the miracles.

The miracles of the human body. Of little baby girls named Faiza – victory. Of mothers who will walk 100 miles with eleven children, abandon everything they know, to preserve life.

Of people like Dr. Musyoka, who risk their lives for Faiza, for victory.

Of chance encounters between David and Ishmael, separated by thousands of years of history, of difference, and to be able to hear in their encounter those ancient words:

I am your brother.

God has sent me before you to preserve life.

The miracles of one's own past – the sins and burdens of one's history – coming back in such a way that allows us to say to our brothers and sisters – I am your brother, God has sent me before you to preserve life.

Brothers and sisters, the history and the politics and the realities of Kenya and Somalia are beyond any of our capacities to understand. They are beyond anyone's capacities to understand alone – they must be solved together.

But there is more good news in this morning's scripture. And that is that, while the world situation – the famines and the droughts and the floods might be out of our hands, what *is* in our hands is the ability to say I am your brother.

Two weeks ago, the United Church of Christ has announced a special appeal for funds to go to the East Horn of Africa.

Each year, each church in the UCC, if it is willing, takes a special offering and gives a tithe to "Our Church's Wider Mission". This is the mission branch of the denomination, which enables us to live out our call as Christians in a way we could not do alone. OCWM, as it is called, pools church resources to fight precisely these types of problems – hunger, disease, water-supply issues and education. It works in partnership with Church World Service, which combines the resources of many denominations.

Believing our Christian roots as refugees, and our Christian beliefs, call us to take care of the outsider and the outcast, over the years, the two organizations have done much work together to help us – each one of us – be the body of Christ for the world.

It is extremely rare that this body puts out a special appeal, given that it does so much work in the area of refugee care already. It indicates the difficulties that are being had – both from the dangers of piracy and militias to the extreme number of refugees. To put things in perspective, to qualify technically as a famine, thirty percent of an area's children must be suffering from acute malnutrition. There are estimated to be 10 million people affected by the famine.

On the table below the pulpit, I have placed a basket, with information beside it about the church's efforts in the area. As you are leaving the sanctuary today, to whatever activities await you in this beautiful summer day, I would invite you to stop, if you are able, and place a donation in the basket, which will be sent directly to these relief efforts – primarily to the camp at Dadaab, featured in the news stories. If you are unable to do so today, you will also find information about how to make a secure online donation.

For those of you who might be uncomfortable with an appeal for donations so early in my tenure here, I want to reassure you that, of course, I am aware that these are not the only ways available for us to provide relief for the people of Africa. And I am also aware that the people of Africa are not the only ones in need of relief – one need only go down to the Onion River Food Shelf to know this.

But I am also aware of this. The good news. The gospel.

30 centuries ago, Joseph stood before his brothers. The tears streaming down his face, his weeping so loud that “the Egyptians heard it.” Weeping for their history. Weeping for a hunger that would drive them to walk hundreds of miles for the chance at food. Weeping for their presence there before him.

Weeping that he was able to bring them the good news.

I am your brother.

We are their brother.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.