

What Do You Do with a Plaid Coat?

Genesis 37: 2-8; 23-28

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What do you do with a plaid coat from 1979? During our senior year at seminary, my friend Bill Anderson and I engaged in a war of jokes over the pounds we were adding. One day I found a cartoon from *The New Yorker* under my door. It showed a salesman trying to sell a rather large gentleman a very plaid coat. The caption said, “It takes a big man to wear a big plaid.” Bill knew about the plaid coat in my closet.

In the summer of 1979 I was signed up for British Studies at Oxford. A consortium of Southern schools had arranged for us to spend six weeks at University College studying the renaissance. Being a lifelong anglophile, I could hardly wait. We had been told that every night we would have to dress for dinner. So I figured I needed a new coat.

My mother took me to the men’s department to see Mr. Van, the salesman who had outfitted our family for years. We told him we needed a coat for England. Mr. Van picked out this beautiful blue and white plaid jacket. I hesitated. Mr. Van buttoned the coat on me, winked and said, “It’s very British.” So I bought it. It takes a big man to wear a big plaid.

Well, the first night I found out that my coat was indeed very plaid but not at all like the subdued, dull fashion taste of those who live in the rainy, cold climate of the British Isles. I wore it once. People looked at me as if I were a moving dart board. I couldn’t wear it again. But I also loved it. I’ve kept it all these years. Maybe I can wear it to someone’s wedding reception.... What do you do when you have something beautiful that you just can’t be seen in because of the reaction you get?

I wonder if the young Joseph didn’t feel that way. Joseph was the eleventh of the twelve sons of Jacob. But he was the first of the children Jacob had with Rachel, the wife for whom he worked for 14 years, whom he loved with his whole heart. This June we looked at the story of Jacob, how he was his mother’s favorite, how he tricked his brother and his father and had to go on the run for years. You

would think Jacob would have known something about the effects of favoritism. But all his experience didn't stop him from idolizing Joseph. Jacob loved Joseph the best and he gave him a gift to display his love to the whole world: a luxurious long robe with long sleeves and bright, loud colors.

What do you do with a plaid coat or a coat of many colors when someone whom you love gives it to you? It is beautiful, but what a reaction you get when you wear it. Joseph's brothers hated him for being the favorite. They hated that coat. And they hated Joseph for giving bad reports about them to their father. Joseph was not only spoiled; he was a squealer. You'd think that by 17, when our story opens, Joseph would have wised up concerning how you get along with older brothers.

But it got worse. One morning at breakfast, Joseph told his brothers about a vivid dream he had. He and his brothers were out in the fields binding sheaves of wheat. Then Joseph's sheaf stood upright, while the sheaves of the other eleven brothers gathered around it and bowed down. The brothers got the point immediately. Ten of them were older than Joseph. "So, squirt, you think you're going to reign over us one day? Do you think we'll all call you wonderful just like Father does, just because you remind him of Rachel? You do have your mother's eyes, though—very pretty, punk!"

This tongue lashing didn't teach Joseph to keep his mouth closed. He dreamed next of eleven stars, the sun and the moon all bowing down before him. Even his father got mad at the announcement of this dream. "Son, do you really think all your brothers, your mother and your father will kiss the ground before you?" The text tells us that "his brothers were jealous him, but his father kept the saying in mind." As shocked as he was at Joseph's hubris, his father wondered if there might not be some truth about his boy's destiny.

Joseph didn't know what to say. He dreamed what he dreamed, and everyone knows we can't control what goes on in our heads at night. Of course, just because you dream it, doesn't mean you have to say it. His brothers, though, had some ideas about what to do with a braggart dreamer.

Sometime later, the brothers had gone far from home pasturing the flocks. Joseph was sent to check on them. When they saw him coming, they began to scheme. "Here comes the dreamer. He's away from Daddy. Let's see how his

dreams come true if we kill him. We can toss the body in one of the pits and say that a wild beast ate him.” Blood lust ran through the pack. A mob mentality took hold. But finally Reuben, the oldest brother, remembered his sense of responsibility and said, “Look, let’s shed no blood. We can just throw him into one of these pits and teach him a lesson about being high and mighty.” The text tells us that Reuben planned to rescue Joseph later and return him to Jacob. But evidently Reuben did not stick around to see what happened, for circumstances intervened.

They did indeed fall upon Joseph, strip him of that many colored robe and toss him in a pit. Then they sat down to eat and congratulate themselves. Just then a caravan of traders passed by. They were on their way to Egypt. Judah, one of the middle brothers, got the idea that they could sell Joseph as a slave. Was Judah trying to spare Joseph the grizzly fate of being left in a pit in the desert to die? Or did he mean what he said, “Hey, what profit is there in killing our brother? Let’s sell him to these Ishmaelites. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.” So they bargained with the traders. And not very shrewdly. They sold their own brother into slavery for a total of about half a pound of silver—not even a place setting.

Well, did it serve Joseph right? Our first impression of Joseph is not very favorable. He seems spoiled. He was a braggart. And a tattler. He wasn’t very perceptive about people’s feelings. But did he deserve slavery? After all, what do you do with a plaid coat? If your father gives you a robe to wear when you are 17, should you refuse it and break his heart just so your brothers won’t be jealous? Some people are gifted with attributes which make others envious. Should smart people pretend to be dumb? Should someone try to cover up her beautiful looks? Should you not go off to school? Is the gifted one at fault? What’s more, if your brothers are doing wrong, should you never tell on them? No one likes a whistle blower, but some corruption has to be brought to light for the good of the whole. And if God should send you a powerful dream, a dream that woke you charged with energy and wonder, must you remain silent about it? What do you do with a plaid coat? You can’t get rid of it because it is beautiful and given in love? You can’t wear it because of the reaction you will get.

The Biblical text sets us up to feel jealousy and anger along with Joseph’s brothers. We can understand a bit of why they hated him. But at the same time, we really are not told enough to know whether Joseph was a self-centered brat or if he was simply a highly gifted, highly loved young man who by reason of his youth

had not yet learned how to wield all this potential. In the Jacob story, we know for sure that he was a scoundrel in his youth. He cheated, lied and schemed. With Joseph, the verdict is still out. The Bible leaves us hanging. In fact, as we will see, the story of Joseph gets interrupted. We have to take a long, bizarre, side road in Genesis 38. Meanwhile, Joseph is left bumping along, chained in a slave cart heading hundreds of miles down to Egypt.

Back home, the brothers had to break the news to their father. They executed an elaborate cover-up. First they slaughtered a goat, then they dipped Joseph's fine robe in the blood. Next, they brought the robe to father Jacob and said, "We found this? Can you identify it?" They let Jacob draw the conclusion that Joseph had been devoured by a fierce, wild beast. It is a poignant irony that all those years before, Jacob had deceived his own father by putting goat skins on his arms so his dad would think he was his hairy brother Esau. Now his own sons deceived him with the same kind of skins.

Perhaps they thought Jacob would grieve for a few weeks, then stuff his feelings and get on with life. That didn't happen. Jacob refused consolation. So many unanswered questions. No body, no closure. Just the end of seeing the boy he loved. "I will go down to the dead to my son, still mourning." Every day, then, the brothers had to see their broken hearted father weeping. Every day, they had to live with the secret, every moment they had to maintain the cover up.

And so we are left hanging in the story of the family whom the LORD God had chosen to bless the world. Looked at one way, it is the story of mighty promises made and fulfilled. Looked at another way, it is a bizarre story of dysfunctional relationships, long delays and constant misunderstanding. Abraham must wait until he is 99 years old to see the promised son Isaac born. Then he is called upon to offer that child in sacrifice, only to be stayed at the last moment. Isaac's sons are twins who are opposite types, engaged in serious rivalry. The mother favored Jacob and schemed against the father. His tricks led him to years of exile. Then Jacob's own treatment of his sons led to rivalry, violence and deception. Is this any way to save the world?

What can we learn from this story? Here are four quick thoughts.

1) God deals with real people. I remember after reading about Peter walking on the water, my friend said, "Remember, these are trained Biblical characters.

Don't try this at home!" That's often the way we think, that people from Bible times were different from us. They weren't so distracted. They saw God more clearly. They lived simpler lives and so they were better people. Not so. Not at all. This story tells us that God deals with real people. He deals with the likes of you and me. He chooses for his instruments people who are raw, flawed, unaware, proud, jealous, and even vengeful. Sometimes I think that God picked the biggest scoundrels just so we would know that if he can work with them, he can work with anybody, even us.

2) God is on a long term plan. I tend to make snap judgments about people. I figure where they are is where they're going to stay. Now, especially when you're picking a marriage partner, it's important to realize that people's background and basic personality don't change under ordinary human influence. Who you marry is who you've got the rest of your life, and you can't change them. I think that may be sound romantic advice, but it's a bit short sighted in God's eternal plan. God took a golden boy, tattle tale favorite son and decided to make him a key player in the world's salvation. But it doesn't happen instantly. God would take years to temper and to prepare Joseph. God would take years to bring out the truth of what the brothers had done to Joseph. They got away with it for decades, but not forever. God would take years to bring Joseph and his father back together. But he did it. Our God sees more than the moment. He sees all time, past present and future at once. He is patient, he knows the outcomes and he will make it happen. I think this means he wants us to look at the possibilities in others. He wants us to be like our youth leaders here, able to see a whole lot more in kids than most people see, because they look way down the road at what could be.

3) God prizes change from the inside out. If behavioral outcomes were all the Lord wanted, he could get those pretty easily. Why do the whole Joseph story with a coming famine if all God has to do is snap his fingers and create more food for his people? Why even take so long to fix people anyway? But our God prizes the choices we make to love him from the depths of our being. He yearns for us to choose him freely. He doesn't want pretenders. He wants beloved children with whom he can be in an eternal relationship of love. The LORD planned to transform not only Joseph but his brothers as well. He works with us through the years. He doesn't make our problems go away magically. He doesn't take us out of our crazy backgrounds. He cherishes our unique personalities, flaws and all. Rather, he uses all of that in his transforming purposes. He takes what is marred and makes it beautiful, by deep, inner transformation. He takes our sins and

redeems them, by bringing new life out of bad choices. He takes the ways we have been harmed and makes us lovely and strong even in wounds that still show.

4) God makes our suffering purposeful. Joseph's brothers thought they had foiled his dream of one day ruling over them. Yet even in triumph they had to deal with guilt and the constant pressure of maintaining a cover up in the face of their father's grief. Will their sin and the subsequent suffering be the end of them or can something good come out of it? As he lurched along in the slave cart, Joseph probably thought his dreams would never be realized. He thought he would never see his family again. Only grinding misery and harsh treatment awaited him. But God had other plans. God takes a different view of suffering than we do. It's part of being on a long term plan. These situations that seem to have nothing good coming out of them may well be used in God's providence to bring great good. These situations that seem like they will never be resolved may one day open into possibilities we could never imagine right now. But there's no easy escape from present suffering. There is no way through it but through it. That, I think, is why the Biblical text breaks the story right here. We are left before resolution. Joseph is on the way to Egypt. Jacob is grieving. The brothers are covering up? We, the hearers, wonder, "Will God make anything of this?" That's just the question many of us may be asking about our own lives. And we, too, must wait. We must wait in faith. We must wait in hope that God is indeed going to make our suffering purposeful.

What do you do with a plaid coat? Sometimes you just have to wear it. But you don't make a big deal out of it. If you've got to wear it, enjoy it, but don't flaunt it. You might not have it forever. It might get stripped off of you. It could be that God will take away all signs of his favor for a season. It could be that God is preparing you for a more splendid coat than you can imagine. If you belong to him, God is working out his purposes and his plans in you. It takes a big man to wear a big plaid. It takes a consecrated man to wear the purposes of God in his life and witness.