

"The Story of Joseph"

"Genesis Series: Decisive Moments"

Pastor Rich Knight
Trinitarian Congregational Church
August 21, 2011
Genesis 50: 15-26

We've been studying the Book of Genesis this summer. We've said that the Book of Genesis has a simple structure - 4 great events, 4 great patriarchs.

Creation - Fall - Flood - Tower

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph.

Jewish Author Elie Wiesel says that Joseph is the most beloved of all the patriarchs, because of what he overcame. Wiesel writes: *"One loves him (Joseph) more, and more readily, more joyously than any other Biblical figure. Abraham is respected and admired; Isaac is pitied; Jacob is followed; but only Joseph is loved."*

Our text this morning comes at the very end of Genesis. If you've seen the musical, *"Joseph and his Technicolor Dreamcoat,"* you know the story. Joseph was the youngest of 12 sons. He was despised by his brothers, so much so, that one day they decided to beat him up, throw him in a well and then sell him into slavery, where he would be carried off to Egypt. This passage happens years later. Their father, Jacob, has died. Joseph is a very powerful man in Egypt and the brothers now fear for their lives, because now that their father is dead there's no telling what Joseph will do to them. Let's take a look:

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's household; and Joseph lived one hundred ten years. Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation; the children of Machir son of Manasseh were also born on Joseph's knees. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." So Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying, "When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here." And Joseph died, being one hundred ten years old; he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

My name is Joseph, son of Jacob. My story takes up some 14 chapters in the Torah. I wish that Moses and the others who collected these stories had left a few of those chapters out. But don't we all wish we could do a little editing with our life stories. When God forgives us, isn't it almost like editing? God forgives us completely and treats us as if we'd never sinned. *"So far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed the sins of God's people."* The scriptures say, *"God blots out our sins."* God edits.

Well, God edits, but Moses didn't. And so Torah records my arrogance as a young man. I was the 11th of 12 sons. That probably set me up right there to be spoiled. Add to that I was a son of my father's old age and born to my father's favorite wife, Rachel. I was destined to be my father's favorite. My father loved me and favored me so much that he gave me his coat of many colors. – this actually did me no favors. My brothers despised me when they saw me wearing it. But I kept on wearing it. Arrogant was I. I knew they hated seeing me in that coat. It was a reminder of how much more our Father loved me, more than all of them combined. They hated me. We couldn't even have a decent conversation, but that didn't stop me from talking to them.

One day when I was 17 yrs old I decided to share with them a dream I had had. I said to them, *"Listen to this dream that I had. We were all there in my dream. We were all in the field one day, binding sheaves. (bundling up stalks of grain) Suddenly, my sheaf rose and stood upright. Then your sheaves gathered round it and bowed down to my sheaf."* My brothers were offended at my dream and said, *"Are you to reign over us? Are you to have power over us?"* (see Gen. 37:5ff) So they hated me even more.

I shared a second dream with them. (Gen. 37:9ff) In this dream, the sun, the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me. 11 stars, one for each of my brothers, bowing down to me. My brothers hated me even more. But I was just sharing! Dreams aren't right or wrong, are they? They just happen. I've since learned that wisdom is found not always in what we say, but also in what we don't say. It was foolish of me to share my dreams with my brothers, who were already jealous of me. It was foolish and arrogant, and I believe you'd say, "Egocentric," – I thought the world revolved around me - the sun, moon and stars bowed down to me. I don't know what was worse, actually dreaming that dream, or being foolish enough to share it with my brothers. Both were the result of arrogance and immaturity. I'd like to edit that part out - not just out of the story but out of my heart. It's one thing to be embarrassed that someone knows your faults. It's another thing to be embarrassed by the faults themselves. I'm embarrassed by the faults themselves.

Well, my brothers decided to teach me a lesson once and for all. They actually wanted to kill me, but Reuben talked them out of it. He talked them into ripping the dreamcoat off me and throwing me down a deep pit, a well that had dried up. There I sat in a deep, dark pit. This wasn't how I dreamed it up. My brothers decided they could make some money off me by selling me to some Ishmaelites who were on their way to Egypt. They sold me for 20 pieces of silver (Jesus would one day be sold for 30 pieces of silver). Off I went to Egypt where I was sold to one of Pharaoh's officials, a man named Potiphar, the captain of the guard. My brothers went home and told my father that I had been killed by a wild animal. My father torn his clothes, ripped apart by grief. He mourned profoundly and refused to be comforted. He said, *"I shall go to my grave mourning my son."* My brothers did everything they could to comfort my father, everything but tell him the truth.

The next chapter of my life however was a good one. I prospered in my work under Potiphar, so much so that we put me in charge of his entire affairs. I was in charge of everything that was his, and everything I managed succeeded greatly. Potiphar said he never had to worry, knowing I would

handle everything with great care and skill. But I didn't just impress Potiphar. I impressed his wife as well. You see at this time I was pretty handsome, if I do say so myself, even the Torah says so. And if the Bible says you're good looking, you must be pretty good looking!

Day after day Potiphar's wife tried to seduce me. And day after day I said no. I said to her, "Your husband trusts me with everything that is his. How can I sin against him and God?" We should never be afraid to do what's right. And we should have a healthy fear of doing what is wrong! When we break the commandments we break part of ourselves as well.

There is great personal power in living out your values. There is great personal power in doing what is right. That's what I believed. That's what I lived out. That doesn't mean that it's always easy doing what is right or that everything will go well when we do. In fact, saying no to Potiphar's wife got me in a lot of trouble (Gen. 39:6ff). She was so scorned by my refusals that one day she torn my outer garment off me and then later showed it to Potifer saying I had come in to lie with her. She accused me of the very thing I had resisted! Potiphar was furious and had me thrown in prison.

But by this time in my life I had developed the ability to bloom wherever I was planted. Just like I prospered previously in Potiphar's house, I now prospered in prison. The head of the prison came to trust me. The Chief Jailer put me in charge of all the prisoners. He trusted me with everything that went on in the prison. If it happened in the prison, I was the one who did it. While in prison it became known that I had gift for interpreting dreams. People would tell me their dreams and I would tell them what it meant.

Well, good ole Pharaoh himself had a dream and none of his wise men and advisors could tell him what it meant. Someone told him about me and he sent for me, and I went before him, listened to his dream and then told him what it meant. It was a strange dream, but dreams often are, aren't they. In his dream Pharaoh saw 7 healthy, fat cows and 7 thin, ugly cows. And then he saw 7 good ears of grain and then 7 bad ears of grain. And the ugly cows ate the healthy cows and the 7 bad ears of grain ate the good ears of grain. Don't you see it! This meant only one thing - *7 years of prosperity, followed by 7 years of famine*. And so I told Pharaoh what he must do - during the plentiful, bountiful years he must set aside 1/5 of the harvest to store away so there would be food for the years of famine.

Well, Pharaoh saw the wisdom in this plan. He also believed that God was with me, that God had given me the ability to see things, to interpret things, as well as the practical knowledge to get things done. So Pharaoh put me in charge of all of Egypt. He put his signet ring on me and the finest of clothes and a gold chain around my neck. I was second in command of the whole nation, second only to Pharaoh himself. Imagine me, 30 yrs old, a Hebrew, the Prince of Egypt. Pharaoh even gave me a new Egyptian name - Zaphenath-paneah. But it was too hard to pronounce, so I stayed with Joseph. Besides, keeping my Hebrew name helped me remember who I was and what I was all about as a child of the Living God. It's always important to remember where you came from if you want to know where you're going.

Well, everything happened as I predicted from Pharaoh's dream - 7 years of prosperity, followed by 7 years of a famine which effected the entire region, including Canaan where my father and brothers lived. So one day I'm tending to the business affairs of the state and who should walk in before me but 10 of my brothers (Gen. 42:6ff). My father had told them there was food in Egypt. Little did any of them know that I was the one in charge of it all! They did not recognize me in all my royal clothes, speaking Egyptian, but I recognized them. They bowed down before me, and I remembered the dream I had when I was 17 years old, the one that I should have kept to myself. At first I treated them harshly.

I threw them in prison for 3 days. The hurt from what they had done to me came flooding back, something I had suppressed for years. But even when I was speaking to them harshly I had to turn away to hide my tears (Gen. 42:24, Gen. 43:30). You know, our lives get linked with all those who have ever loved us and blessed us, and with all those who have ever hurt us and wronged us. And here were my brothers, whom I realized I loved and they had hurt me so much. I didn't know how to handle it. It was overwhelming. I had several dealings with them until finally I couldn't take it anymore and I revealed myself to them. I cried out, "Everyone out of the room!" (Gen. 45:1ff) It was just my brothers and me.

"Come close to me. I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into slavery. But do not be angry with yourselves or distressed because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve your life. God sent me before you to preserve a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here but God. Go back to your home, bring our father here. I will provide for you all."

And so they all came - all my brothers, their wives and children and my father, Jacob. - more than 70 people. This is how we Jews got to Egypt. We lived in northern Egypt, in a place called Goshen, in the land of Rameses (Gen. 47:11). To see my father again was the best present of all. He had never met my children. One day near the end of his life he blessed my sons with these words: *"The God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all harm, bless the boys; and in them let my name be perpetuated, and the name of my ancestors Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude on the earth."*

It wasn't just his blessing. He was extending the covenant to them. That the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would be their God, too. It was an incredible moment. My father passed away not long after that. As was his wishes, we embalmed his body to preserve it and carried him in a coffin back to the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. And there he was buried.

We then headed back to Egypt, my brothers and me. They were nervous and scared, afraid for their lives. Now that our father was gone, what would I do to them? Would I now punish them for the harm done to me long ago? My brothers came before me and wept. They then bowed down and begged for mercy. I said some words that probably took them by surprise. I spoke kindly to them and reassured them. *"Do not be afraid of me. Don't bow down to me. Am I in the place of God?"**Even though you meant to harm me, God meant it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as God is doing today."*

I guess I did learn some things along the way. Early in my life I thought it was all about me. The sun, moon and stars all bowing down to me. It took me years to realize that it's all about God, not me. God not only saved my family. God saved me! I learned to do my best wherever life placed me. I learned to be true to myself, to use the gifts God had given me, and to never forget who I am and whose I am.

May the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob be with you all. Amen.