

July 26, 2020 • 8th Sunday after Pentecost • Online Worship

“Six Great Bible Stories: Joseph and His Brothers”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Genesis 45:4-15

Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.’ And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

As our sermon series continues, “Six Great Bible Stories,” we find ourselves this morning at the emotional climax of the great story of Joseph and his brothers. I’m sorry that we didn’t have time for David to read for us the several chapters from Genesis that lead up to this astonishing moment, but let me summarize just briefly how we got to this scene.

Another descendant of Noah, Joseph was the eleventh of Jacob’s twelve sons and the first-born of Jacob’s favorite wife, Rachel, and that made Joseph his father’s favorite and all of you with siblings know just how dangerous that kind of dynamic can be in a family. Moreover, Joseph had dreams that revealed to him that he would become more powerful than all his brothers. Jacob gave his favorite son, Joseph, a beautiful, special coat of many colors. By that time, his brothers hated him so much so that the scripture says that they “could not speak with him peaceably.”

It gets a lot worse before it gets better in this family. One day out in the fields, the jealous brothers conspire to kill Joseph. They strip him of the coat, throw him down in a deep pit and leave him with to be devoured by wild animals. But instead, when a caravan of Ishmaelites come along on their way to Egypt (Larry’s sermon next week will take us back to the story of Ishmael), they see an opportunity for profit. They sell their brother into slavery for thirty pieces of silver.

Talk about “physical” and “social” distancing! The brothers need Joseph out of the picture so that they can hang on to their story of selfish entitlement, resentment, and jealousy they’ve told themselves their whole lives.

The brothers tell their father that Joseph is dead. But instead, now in captivity, Joseph is sold again, this time to Pharaoh’s guards. And there, he prospers...learns the language, takes an Egyptian name, and uses his skills, including his gift of interpreting dreams, to carry him all the way to the second highest office in Egypt. And all the while, Joseph stores up grain in warehouses for the famine he knows is coming. Ah, a cunning, powerful man with access to the most precious resource—not oil in that day and age, but grain.

Just as Joseph had foreseen, severe drought comes and famine spreads across Egypt and Canaan. Many come to Joseph for food. Even old Jacob sends ten of his sons to Egypt to buy grain, never realizing, of course, that they would be negotiating with their own long-lost brother. When they come into the court, Joseph recognizes them right away, but they do not recognize him. Through all their subsequent bargaining and trickery, Joseph’s heart is breaking. He goes off again and again to weep. He weeps so loudly, the scripture says, that the Egyptians heard it, the whole household of Pharaoh heard it. His own brothers still did not recognize him.

Now in many books, many great books, this is where the story would end, in sorrow and failure. Indeed, sometimes even in our own families, this is where the story ends. But not in our book. Not in this sacred book that over and over again recalibrates our vision and our hearts.

In our book, Joseph dramatically re-writes the ending. Despite all that had happened, perhaps the ancient words of Scripture were echoing in his heart: “Who is my brother?” “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Joseph knows how God would always have him answer. And so, he turns and seeing not evil men but seeing brothers, he says to them who had treated him in such vile ways: “Come closer. I am your brother, Joseph whom you sold into slavery in Egypt. And now, do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life...It was not you who sent me here, but God. Go now and tell my father to come to me, and to settle here.” And their eyes were opened and they could finally see him for who he was—their own beloved brother. And then he and his brothers wept and wept together and later, they talked with one another.

This is one of the most beautiful stories in the whole Bible of relationship restored, of enmity overcome, of hatred and bitterness put aside and left behind. And all because Joseph chose to make it so. He knew that the grain they so desperately needed to feed their hungry stomachs could become the grain that could feed their hungry hearts as well.

Joseph chose to see how God could work through all that jealousy, betrayal and deceit to bring good out of evil intent. He chose to see that God longed for unity to be restored in that family and among those brothers. He chose to open up his heart and let the tears wash away his anger. Joseph chose to let God create something new.

This story shows us that all those who are able to have confidence in God’s providential care can find the grace and courage to love even their enemies. And this is because, as the Bible reveals to us over and over again, God is always at work behind the scenes, in ways not immediately discernible to us, always at work to preserve life, to bring life out of death, to do the things that make for peace. And when we trust this, when we put all our trust in God, when we believe with all our hearts that God is doing this work even now, as did Joseph, working in and through us to make all things right and new—then lo and behold, new things indeed happen. They seem like miracles--but the hand of God has been in it all along. Radical love remaking us and the world from the inside out in the holy pursuit of reconciliation and transformation—in a word--of resurrection.

In recent days, our country lost a leader who showed us how to do live in this love. Congressman John Lewis died at the age of 80, still showing up and speaking up for justice and love. An apostle of non-violent action, taught and trained by United Methodist pastor Rev. James M. Lawson, Congressman Lewis pointed us always towards what Martin Luther King, Jr. called “the beloved community.”

The beloved community, as envisioned and created in the heart of God, is the place we

start from. And it is the promised land towards which we strive, sometimes requiring of us, as John Lewis put it, “getting into trouble, good trouble, necessary trouble.” “You are a light,” he wrote. “You are the light. Never let anyone — any person or any force — dampen, dim or diminish your light ... Release the need to hate, to harbor division, and the enticement of revenge. Release all bitterness. Hold only love, only peace in your heart, knowing that the battle of good to overcome evil is already won.”

God gives power to envision and live into a new future, as it was for Joseph and his brothers. God is always offering that power to us, too, so that we, in our own lives, may choose to act in ways that restore relationship and overcome division. God sheds abroad holy light in each of us. God’s Spirit works in us to draw us towards one another, into restored relationship, into beloved community.

Let us live as children of light, those to whom God has entrusted the message of reconciliation, all the while, radical love remaking us and the world from the inside out in the holy pursuit of reconciliation and transformation—in a word--resurrection.

AMEN

Notes:

John Lewis in *Across That Bridge: A Vision for Change and the Future of America*