

"Dreaming, Alerting, Adapting & Reuniting"
September 13, 2020; 10:00 am
Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28; 45: 1-15
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

Joseph and His Brothers

37: 1 - Meanwhile Jacob had settled down where his father had lived, the land of Canaan.

² This is the story of Jacob. The story continues with Joseph, seventeen years old at the time, helping out his brothers in herding the flocks. These were his half brothers actually, the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought his father bad reports on them.

³⁻⁴ Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he was the child of his old age. And he made him an elaborately embroidered coat. When his brothers realized that their father loved him more than them, they grew to hate him—they wouldn't even speak to him.

¹²⁻¹³ His brothers had gone off to Shechem where they were pasturing their father's flocks. Israel said to Joseph, "Your brothers are with flocks in Shechem. Come, I want to send you to them."

Joseph said, "I'm ready."

¹⁴ He said, "Go and see how your brothers and the flocks are doing and bring me back a report." He sent him off from the valley of Hebron to Shechem.

¹⁵ A man met him as he was wandering through the fields and asked him, "What are you looking for?"

¹⁶ "I'm trying to find my brothers. Do you have any idea where they are grazing their flocks?"

¹⁷ The man said, "They've left here, but I overheard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan.'" So Joseph took off, tracked his brothers down, and found them in Dothan.

¹⁸⁻²⁰ They spotted him off in the distance. By the time he got to them they had cooked up a plot to kill him. The brothers were saying, "Here comes that dreamer. Let's kill him and throw him into one of these old cisterns; we can say that a vicious animal ate him up. We'll see what his dreams amount to."

²¹⁻²² Reuben heard the brothers talking and intervened to save him, "We're not going to kill him. No murder. Go ahead and throw him in this cistern out here in the wild, but don't hurt him." Reuben planned to go back later and get him out and take him back to his father.

²³⁻²⁴ When Joseph reached his brothers, they ripped off the fancy coat he was wearing, grabbed him, and threw him into a cistern. The cistern was dry; there wasn't any water in it.

²⁵⁻²⁷ Then they sat down to eat their supper. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites on their way from Gilead, their camels loaded with spices, ointments, and perfumes to sell in Egypt. Judah said, "Brothers, what are we going to get out of killing our brother and concealing the evidence? Let's sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let's not kill him—he is, after all, our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed.

²⁸ By that time the Midianite traders were passing by. His brothers pulled Joseph out of the cistern and sold him for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites who took Joseph with them down to Egypt.

45 ¹⁻² Joseph couldn't hold himself in any longer, keeping up a front before all his attendants. He cried out, "Leave! Clear out—everyone leave!" So there was no one with Joseph when he identified himself to his brothers. But his sobbing was so violent that the Egyptians couldn't help but hear him. The news was soon reported to Pharaoh's palace.

³ Joseph spoke to his brothers: "I am Joseph. Is my father really still alive?" But his brothers couldn't say a word. They were speechless—they couldn't believe what they were hearing and seeing.

4-8 “Come closer to me,” Joseph said to his brothers. They came closer. “I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt. But don’t feel badly, don’t blame yourselves for selling me. God was behind it. God sent me here ahead of you to save lives. There has been a famine in the land now for two years; the famine will continue for five more years—neither plowing nor harvesting. God sent me on ahead to pave the way and make sure there was a remnant in the land, to save your lives in an amazing act of deliverance. So you see, it wasn’t you who sent me here but God. He set me in place as a father to Pharaoh, put me in charge of his personal affairs, and made me ruler of all Egypt.

9-11 “Hurry back to my father. Tell him, ‘Your son Joseph says: I’m master of all of Egypt. Come as fast as you can and join me here. I’ll give you a place to live in Goshen where you’ll be close to me—you, your children, your grandchildren, your flocks, your herds, and anything else you can think of. I’ll take care of you there completely. There are still five more years of famine ahead; I’ll make sure all your needs are taken care of, you and everyone connected with you—you won’t want for a thing.’

12-13 “Look at me. You can see for yourselves, and my brother Benjamin can see for himself, that it’s me, my own mouth, telling you all this. Tell my father all about the high position I hold in Egypt, tell him everything you’ve seen here, but don’t take all day—hurry up and get my father down here.”

14-15 Then Joseph threw himself on his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. He then kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Only then were his brothers able to talk with him.

I. ALL ABOUT JOE

Joseph was quite a guy! Already, at age 17, he was figuring out the “way of the world” and how to navigate his way through it. And how to rub others the *wrong* way at times as he navigated through it too!

He doesn’t have the reputation of “wheeler and dealer, bordering on scoundrel” that Father Jacob gets gifted

with early on by the biblical tradition. No, Joseph falls more into the category of: **“So young, so much to learn.”**

I wonder if we all might identify with Joseph at certain points in our lives? Even if you’re an eldest child, instead of the almost-youngest. Did you ever want to be Dad’s favorite? Wear better clothes than your brothers and sisters? Tell your older (and supposedly wiser) siblings how to do things? Or tell *on* them to Mom and Dad for *not* doing things right?!

I am the youngest of five, and there are *lots* of family dynamics around birth order in our family of origin. I most definitely took on the role of Family Harmonizer and People Pleaser. I *loved* my big family, and just wanted everyone to get along! It *pained* me when they didn’t, and still does to this day—if one sibling speaks badly about another I cringe—even if I agree with the naming of their quirks!

What’s interesting, is I don’t think *they* perceived me so much as the Harmonizer. They just thought I was spoiled and our parents’ favorite! Like Joseph’s brothers, they put up with the Baby, but quickly checked any behavior that veered off the line.

Joseph was cocky. No two ways about it. His worse trait, (and thus “label”), though, was being a tattletale.

In my family, *that* was a cardinal sin. It rarely happened—that I *know* of anyway. We wavered between solidarity with one another, agreeing *not* to “tell Mom” of things, and having our antennae up for any signs of that agreement being breached.

So, I don't remember being a tattletale, but I do remember clearly being perceived as a "spoiled brat" and I couldn't quite figure that out because to my young eyes, I wasn't bratty!

Well, there *was* that time (or five), in the kitchen when a couple of the older kids were supposed to be doing the dishes while Mom & Dad sat in the living room reading the paper, as was their custom. I would wander in, like Joseph wandering into the herding party to see what his brothers were up to, and they wouldn't appreciate my presence, so would grab me and tickle me.

I would scream out that I was being tortured until Mom or Dad would yell back, "WHAT's going on in there?!" And chagrined, the older ones would release me and get back to the dishwasher, pretending nothing had happened. I guess you could say that was a form of **tattling!** And denial of guilt by many, too!

II. ARE WE LIKE JOE?

I wonder how many times we are like Joe—*thinking* we're coming across one way, and being perceived by others as another? I wonder what it was like to have all those dreams, and not be sure how (or if) to tell about them—especially if they seemed to be predicting doomsday, in a way?

His first sharing of his dreams didn't go over too well with the family—and with good reason! He was, after all, a tattletale, prancing around in the fancy robe that Dad gave him, flaunting his favored son status. And the dream was just a tad one-sided. "*Your* stacks of wheat were all bowing down to *mine!*"

Joseph learned, though, over time to take those dreams seriously, to pay attention to what God was trying to say in them, and to convey those messages in ways that others could hear. Life, with its huge change in circumstances, with a dose of trauma, betrayal and looking death in the eye—opened his eyes and his heart to a new way of being in the world.

He began to understand the complexities of relationships—family, foe and friend—and took his own blinders off, along with his fancy coat (well, that was actually ripped off in the horror scene of the movie!) and got down in the trenches of life with everyone else and considered a new way of being in the world, in community.

III. WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM JOSEPH?

We can learn a few things from Joe about spiritual resilience. About how he learned to walk and move and speak in the world in ways that were brave, though honest; humble, yet strong.

1. Chutzpah!

Lesson Number 1: Sometimes you just have to have a little *chutzpah!* Or a lot! And, sometimes, that might get you into trouble—or a lot! Maybe, even fatal trouble. But, listening to God—day or night—might mean that you have no choice but to speak up and speak out.

Joseph listened to his dreams and visions. He wasn't always sure from whence (or from whom) they came, but he wasn't afraid to *share* them—even when he knew they were not going to be **popular**. Even when they bordered being "prophetic," which can lead to

another “p word”—and leave people “**peev**ed off.”
(Might be a good word of caution for us in there too.)

2. Adaptability is the #1 Spiritual Gift!

The second lesson we learn from Joseph is the absolute importance of staying **flexible**! Adaptability is a #1 spiritual gift, in my estimation—in all times and situations. All eras and epochs.

Our conference minister, Sue Artt, has encouraged and praised the clergy and congregations all throughout this COVID season for being DEFT.

That’s a wonderful concept, and brings to mind an image of **dancing** through difficult times with flexibility, fluidity, quick adaptation when needed and grace. We as pastors and churches, **dance** between countless expectations and game plans, called to use all the skills and gifts we’ve been given in our pastoral and prophetic roles—and everything in between.

Joseph was deft, to say the least! He managed *not* to get killed by his brothers, even if he did get sold down the river! Then, there was that whole soap opera with Potiphar’s wife—like an episode out of “As the World Turns.” He literally danced out of her attempted entrapment and left his garment behind—adapting to the situation as needed.

Then, he managed to land a good job—a very exalted position, in fact—on Potiphar’s staff, in Pharaoh’s kingdom. Why?

Because he listened to his dreams (was that God still speaking?) AND he wasn’t afraid to tell those dreams to others. Why? Because they were important and

people needed to hear and heed them, or they were going to starve. If Joseph’s visions weren’t taken seriously; if the people of the land didn’t adapt their behaviors—storing up food, when that seemed like the silliest thing ever, they would all be in a heap of trouble! And there wouldn’t be heaps of grain to fill their bellies before long.

It reminds us of **Noah** building the Ark when it wasn’t even *raining*!

3. Trust God to Work Together for Good

The third lesson we learn from Joseph, is that “all things work together for good, for those who trust God and work according to his purpose.”

NOT that this is easy! Or comes always to a quick and happy ending. That we also see in Joseph’s story. This was a lifetime of “working together for good”—through a lot of trials and tribulations and moments of searing doubt. But, it is in the trusting, when you can’t even imagine how this can all work out, that we find the bedrock of our faith. Could Joseph have even imagined the ending of this story? I doubt it!

Blind faith, maybe? A game of trust—like we played when we were kids at camp—throwing ourselves out of trees and into the arms of our comrades, with blindfolds on—praying to God that *somebody* would catch us?! (Or, screaming out, cuz you knew Mom or Dad would scold the big kids and relieve you of your suffering when being **tickled**?)

4. Beyond Betrayal to Forgiveness

Finally, the Rest of the Story—beyond what we read today, is poignant and profound.

CHAPTER 50:

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" ¹⁶ So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: ¹⁷ 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to **forgive** your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

¹⁸ His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ **You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.** ²¹ So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

The most *important* lesson we can learn from Joseph and his clan is this: before they could fully celebrate the outcome and everlasting family reunion, they had to acknowledge the past in all its painful chapters.

The betrayal, the horrific intentions of hurling him in the pit—some wanting to leave him to die, and others wanting to just rid themselves of the problem. The jealousy on the brothers' part. The adolescent narcissism and insidious flaunting of rank of the spoiled younger child; Dad's favoritism that didn't help matters at all, and Joseph threw in their face. All that.

All those crazy, mixed emotions, different sides of the story, and roles they all played—intentionally or not. They had to work past placing blame and holding onto their beefs, toward forgiveness and restoration of relationship.

For true reunion to happen; for God to be given sacred space to work all out for good, they had to name the betrayal and hurt on all sides and then move forward.

It can't be "swept under a rug" or "thrown into a cistern in the desert"—hoping to be forgotten—like Joe's brothers tried to do with him! This behavior was not absolved—they literally sold him down the river, then lied to their father about it, and that is pretty inexcusable. But it's not unforgivable—in the heart of God, with the help of God.

God works in the midst of this crazy situation; this complicated system and mess of dysfunctional family relationships to redeem *all* their lives. To save them from the pit, from the miry clay, from starvation. From slavery. God acts to save them from being estranged from one another forever—from their Father Jacob going to his grave in abject grief, with an unforgiving and unforgiven heart.

"What man has intended for evil, God has intended for good."

May it be so with us. All of us—brothers and sisters, Josephs, Reubens, Judahs, Israelites, Egyptians, Kings and rulers, prisoners and slaves. Dreamers, all—of a brighter ending to our collective story—food for

all, reconciliation, forgiveness, coming together instead of further apart. Gathered around our Father and his wishes for a new life, a new way of being and relating in the world with one another—filled with hope and promise. Amen.