

BROTHERLY LOVE

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Genesis 45:1-15

I want to do something different this morning. Before I read the scripture passage from Genesis, I would like to take a second so that I might place this reading into context by refreshing your memory on the events leading up to this moment.

Our reading comes at the very end of the lengthy collection of stories about Joseph. This is not the New Testament Joseph—the husband of Mary—but the Old Testament Joseph—the ‘coat of many colors’ Joseph. The Joseph narrative takes up most of the second half of the book of Genesis.

Our reading for today is the culmination of all that has gone before. So, instead of reading the passage and then going back and filling you in, I'd like to start off with the filling-in part and then read the passage.

In Genesis 12, God calls Abraham and Sarah and promises them descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky if they will only worship the Lord. Abraham and Sarah have a son Isaac. Isaac marries Rebecca and they have the sons Esau and Jacob. Jacob has twelve sons (and a daughter) by four wives. The youngest of these twelve sons were Joseph and Benjamin. Their mother was Rachel. You will recall the story of how Jacob was all set to marry love of his life, Rachel, when Rachel's father tricked Jacob into marrying her sister Leah. Jacob had to wait seven years before he could marry Rachel.

Jacob's son Joseph was not popular with his brothers. Joseph had a habit of reminding his brothers that he was their father's favorite because his mother was Rachel. Joseph would also tattle on his brothers by giving his father reports about their poor shepherding. It didn't help that Joseph also had dreams, and he would tell his brothers about the dreams. And in these dreams, there were always twelve of something, and eleven of the things were bowing down to the twelfth. The brothers didn't need to consult with Sigmund Freud to interpret the meaning of Joseph's dreams. They were insulted.

So, one day when Joseph was seventeen years old, the brothers were pasturing the flocks far from home. Jacob sends Joseph to visit the brothers and bring back a report of their work. As Joseph approaches his brothers, they see him and they quickly hatch a plot to deal with their insufferable sibling. *Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams* (37:19). The oldest brother, Reuben, argues not to kill Joseph but simply to toss him into a pit and leave him. Reuben figures he could return later and rescue the boy.

When Joseph arrives, the brothers attack him, strip him of his fancy coat that his father had given him, and drop him into a pit. Reuben leaves but plans to return. Meanwhile, a caravan of traders approaches that is on its way to Egypt. The brothers realize there is no profit in leaving Joseph to die in a pit, but they could sell him to the caravan and make a little cash. So they do, and Joseph disappears from their lives forever. The brothers report to their father that Joseph had been attacked by wild animals and killed.

In Egypt, Joseph becomes a slave, but he is smart and God is with him and he is given more and more responsibilities. Scripture tells us that *he prospers*. There are several stories about Joseph as a slave but what is most important is that he attracts the attention of the Pharaoh because of his ability to interpret dreams. The Pharaoh has some dreams that no one can explain and they are keeping him up at night. Joseph successfully interprets the dreams and falls into the Pharaoh's favor. He is given a job in the court and rapidly rises through the ranks of the Egyptian administration until he becomes the Pharaoh's chief administrator—the number two man in the country.

Joseph knows that the region is about to undergo a great famine. For seven years Joseph organizes the Egyptian government to collect and store up food. After seven years of plenty, when the famine hits, all the surrounding nations have no crops, but Egypt has warehouses of reserves.

Because of the famine Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy food, and the brothers find themselves standing before Joseph. But they don't recognize him. Joseph however does recognize his brothers, and finally, after several instances of testing his brothers, Joseph reveals himself to them. That is our reading for today.

Let us listen to the word of the Lord: Genesis 45:1-15

All of us, at one point or another, have forgiven someone for some wrong they committed against us. The question is, at what point could we no longer forgive another person? What is our line in the sand of forgiveness? Can we forgive someone if they lie to us? What if they steal from us? Can we forgive that? What if they hurt our feelings, or embarrass us publicly? Is that forgivable? What if they hurt us physically? What if they hurt someone we love? What if they damage our reputations and deliberately trash our name through the community? Is that forgivable? What if they kill us? Could you forgive someone if they, with evil intent and malice in their hearts, killed you? Is that forgivable?

That is the question that faces us in this reading from the Joseph saga. After twenty years, Joseph confronts the brothers who quite literally killed him. You can argue that this killing was just metaphorical—Joseph is clearly still alive. But I would contend that they did was literal. The brothers sold Joseph into slavery and then told everyone he had died. His brother Benjamin thought he was dead. His father Jacob thought he was dead. The brothers presented the evidence of Joseph's blood-soaked clothing to make their case. (It was goat's blood.) Joseph was erased from existence. With his family, Joseph had an identity. As a slave, he was forced to rebuild his life from scratch. He was even given a new name. But with God's assistance, Joseph ascended to power in the Egyptian government. And now, two years into a great famine, Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy food, and the sons encounter their long-lost brother. Of course, they don't recognize him, but Joseph recognizes them. The brothers would never imagine that this ruler of Egypt is the one they sold to a passing caravan.

Joseph arranges several meetings with his brothers to learn more about them. He ascertains that they regret what they did to him. Finally, he can stand it no longer and he sends all the Egyptians out of the room and he confronts his brothers and tells them, *I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?* The brothers are speechless. Why is this Egyptian speaking in their language and calling himself Joseph and asking about his father? What would they know about his father? Joseph calls the brothers closer to him and is more specific as he says to them, *I am your brother, Joseph.* And then to make sure they understand, he says, *Whom you sold into Egypt.*

As the realization hits them, you can imagine the terror that washes over the brothers at that moment. Here they are, in a foreign land, far from home, in the presence of the second most powerful person in the land, a person they had once "killed." They were now completely at his mercy. If he so chose, they could be dead in a matter of minutes, or imprisoned for life, or sold into slavery. As Joseph one foretold, they must bow down to him. They are at the mercy of their brother.

But Joseph reassures them that he is not going to seek his revenge. He explains that God had a plan in their actions. By their selling him into Egypt, God was actually sending Joseph ahead of them *to preserve life.* This famine will continue for

five more years. If not for the warehoused food in Egypt, it is likely that the brothers and their families would starve to death. God sent Joseph to Egypt to *preserve a remnant* for the future.

Joseph commands his brothers to return home and gather up their families and belongings and come back to Egypt and bring their father with them. Joseph will set them up with a place to live and promises to care for them through the famine. Joseph then hugs his brother Benjamin and his other brothers and he weeps.

This story is truly a story of forgiveness. Even though his brothers had “killed” him Joseph still forgives them. He then commits to protecting them through the famine. Joseph is clearly a good person who knows God in his life.

But this is much more than a story of a forgiving brother. This is a story of covenant.

As I mentioned last week, our scripture begins in Genesis with the account of creation—God creating order out of chaos. It is not long before sin makes its appearance in the garden giving the woman and the man the *knowledge of good and evil*. This sin manifests itself into the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. Generations go by and God looks at the earth—this wonderful creation—and sees only violence and corruption and God plans to cleanse it all with a flood. God however selects a righteous person named Noah in order to preserve a remnant of creation. After the flood, God makes a covenant with Noah that God will never again destroy the earth.

Some generations later, God calls Abraham and Sarah and makes a covenant with them—a covenant that assures this childless couple of descendants if they will only worship the Lord. Abraham and Sarah’s list of descendants is rather thin until their grandson Jacob fathers thirteen children. But just as the family is about to take off, they are now in danger of being wiped out in a famine. It looks like the end for the family.

The story of Joseph is God keeping the covenant—to preserve the lives of his people. But this story is more than that. It is also a lesson for us as to how we may participate in this covenant. In the Joseph story, Joseph is a god. Not literally, but he is like God. Joseph promises to preserve his people. Joseph shows extreme compassion when he really does not need to. At this point in time, Joseph owns the world. Everything bows down to him. In Egypt, he has a new life and there is no need to save the family that rejected him. He only does so because he loved them. He wants to be with them just as God desires to be with us. Joseph wants the relationship. This remnant is his people. But they had treated him so badly. They had shown him only violence and corruption. They tried to kill him and then sold him into slavery for money. They turned their back on him and pretended he did not exist. Despite all this, Joseph stuck with them and loved them and saved them.

That is a covenant—maintaining a relationship even when every line has been crossed.

It is this covenant that works its way through our history—God staying with us even when we turn away. It is because of this covenant that God finally comes to us as the Christ, to salvage once and for all God's relationship with us. Amen.