



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 7 Year C

How Joseph Became a Gift-Giving Man

[RCL]: Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50; Luke 6:27-38

Today let's look at one of the major stories in the Old Testament, and consider how its principal character, whose name is Joseph, changes from a man full of himself to someone who gives the gift of life. In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What we heard just now from Genesis—Joseph's brothers shocked to find him alive and the ruler of Egypt; their return, laden with gifts, to their father Jacob; Jacob's resolve to see his son again, the one he had given up for dead—all this occurs late in the long story of Joseph.

Joseph's story resembles a novel more than does anything else in the Old Testament. This story, this novel, woven of material from various sources, extending throughout fourteen chapters in Genesis, is something complex, complicated, convoluted. Here is how Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, Jewish scholar and storyteller, describes it: "an incredible epic, unfocused, panoramic, disdainful of detail and lacking the terseness and sobriety of a work of art."

Again, today's reading places us late in the story. The viceroy of Egypt, second only to the Pharaoh, reveals himself to be none other than Joseph. His brothers are dumbstruck, terrified! Years before, they had seen him taken away in slavery. They thought they would never lay eyes on him again. Now he appears before them, a ruler with tremendous power, and they come as victims of famine, desperate to buy food for their families.

The Joseph who stands before them is a gift-giving man. He bestows life.

On the nation of Egypt, he bestows life through his administrative ability. Despite a long and severe famine, there is, thanks to him, food enough and to spare safely stored away.

On his scoundrel brothers, he bestows life through his generous forgiveness. He remembers how they hated him and sought his destruction, but he does not want revenge.

On his ancient father, he bestows life by inviting him to a new home. The old man, once brokenhearted by his loss, experiences resurrection because his son still lives.

Yes, the Joseph who reveals himself to his brothers is a man who gives the gift of life.

It was not always so! Joseph began life as a brat. The child of his father's old age, he was his father Jacob's pet and reminded the old man of his deceased wife Rachel. You can be sure that the other sons were wounded by this favoritism.

Worse yet, Joseph was a tattletale. He would tell Jacob all the bad things the other boys were saying, recounting them in detail. Joseph was very effective at making himself despised.

And then there were those dreams! Joseph was a dreamer. He saw his family bowing down to him in homage. He made the mistake of telling these dreams to his already exasperated brothers.

Finally, they have had enough! To avoid outright murder, they throw the obnoxious brat into an empty well. They take his fancy coat, the one his father gave him, mess it up with animal blood, and tell Jacob that wild beasts tore apart his favorite son. Their father almost dies from sorrow.

Joseph, meanwhile, is pulled out of the well by traveling merchants who sell him into slavery. He's strong and sturdy, they see, fit to labor on Egyptian building projects. This itself is a sentence of death. Such slaves do not survive for long! Indeed, they come to yearn for death.

That's what happens to Joseph on the outside. Can you imagine what happens on the inside? There in that empty well abandoned forever by his brothers? There in chains of slavery, being led to a distant land? The old Joseph, obnoxious and full of himself, dies a painful death. In his place appears a different Joseph, who on the exhausting trip to Egypt realizes he has been a fool.

Once he arrives in Egypt, something unforeseen happens. Joseph does not end up as a quarry slave. He is sold to an army officer and begins the far better life of a household servant. He fulfills his duties so well that in time, his master gives him responsibility for the entire household.

But his troubles are far from over! His master's wife keeps trying to seduce him, and he keeps rejecting her advances. A lesser man might have given in, but Joseph feels an obligation to the master who has shown him such favor. He has been entrusted with great responsibility and refuses to betray that trust. No longer is he obnoxious, full of himself. Now there is room in his life for other people.

Feeling frustrated and rejected, his master's wife insists that Joseph tried to rape her. This false charge sticks. A slave has no recourse. Joseph finds himself in a prison cell.

When his brothers threw him into that empty well, Joseph was indeed an arrogant person, but now he is blameless. If his experience in the empty well and his journey into slavery burnt away his arrogance, his time in prison works in him an even deeper change. Through his utterly unjustified suffering, Joseph realizes that he has a companion. As we read in Genesis, “The Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love.”

Joseph in prison remains a man of dreams. Through these dreams, God speaks to him. This familiarity with dreams, Joseph’s wisdom in understanding them, results in a remarkable chain of events that brings this lowly prisoner to the attention of the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt.

For the Pharaoh has dreams to be interpreted. Joseph recognizes that these dreams concern not the Pharaoh alone, but the entire country. Joseph knows that these dreams warn of a long and severe famine. Not only does he interpret these dreams, but he proposes a plan of action to rescue the nation.

Impressed by Joseph’s wisdom, the Pharaoh appoints him to a high government post where he implements his plan to counter the famine. And it is as an important official that Joseph meets his hungry brothers who come to Egypt seeking food. They do not recognize him at first. That comes as no surprise. No longer is he an arrogant, inflated youth. He is now a humble prince, a gift-giving man, one who bestows life.

That Joseph is a person of great ability is not the point. The point is that he suffers, sometimes for a reason, sometimes for no reason, just as you and I suffer. He does not allow his suffering to crush him. He gains something valuable from it. Like us, Joseph has no choice as to whether or not he suffers. But, like us, he has a choice as to whether this suffering destroys him or transforms him.

According to Elie Wiesel, there are many stories about Joseph that add to what we find in the Bible. One of them takes place when he and his brothers return home from their father’s funeral. On the way back, Joseph makes a detour and stops at that empty well which once held him captive.

For a long time, he stands at the well’s edge and looks down into the darkness. His brothers assume that he does this to remind them of how they once mistreated him. But that is not the reason! He stares into the well, that place where his transformation began, to remember his past and express gratitude to God.

Joseph is thankful for everything that has happened since that long-ago time.

I have spoken to you in the name of the One who is ever at work bringing about our transformation: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

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