

The Way of Joseph – based on Genesis 45:1-15
Aspen Community UMC
August 17, 2008

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This reading from the Old Testament today is just a small part of the story of Joseph.

For the past few months we have been moving through the Book of Genesis and the stories of our founding families, beginning with Abraham and Sarah.

Last week I mentioned that Joseph had been the favorite son of Jacob.

Joseph had had this dream when he was a kid.

He dreamed that his brothers would someday bow down to him – that he would rule over them.

If they were not already jealous enough, this was the last straw.

Jacob, their father, sent Joseph out to find his brothers one day.

When he found them they threw him into a pit.

They took the coat his father had given him and put blood on it -

so it would look like Joseph had been killed by an animal.

But, the oldest son Reuben, convinced them not to kill the little troublemaker

but to sell him to some people who were traveling through on their way to Egypt.

That is how Joseph ends up in Egypt. Joseph is in Egypt at the point of our story today.

I want to talk about the Joseph story because it was an important story in early times.

Perhaps if we look at it we can get an idea why –

and at the same time see if it says something to us.

James Kugel who teaches Hebrew at Harvard points out that most of the family stories in Genesis are relatively short and straightforward.

The whole story of Abraham and Isaac is just nineteen verses.

Jacob's fight with the angel is just ten verses.

But, Joseph's life stretches out over nine chapters and more than three hundred verses.

Joseph's story is a complicated series of interrelated events.¹

In Egypt Joseph was sold as a slave to a high Egyptian official named Potiphar.

Joseph rises to become the manager of Potiphar's household staff.

Then Potiphar's wife attempts over and over to seduce Joseph, and Joseph rejects her advances.

Afraid he may report such to her husband,

she accuses him of rape and gets him thrown into prison.

In prison he meets two jailed Egyptian officials, and interprets some dreams for them.

One of those persons had been the cupbearer to the king.

The cupbearer is the person who tastes food and wine to be sure it has not been poisoned.

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Joseph helped clear this man of the accusations that had caused him to loose favor with the king,
and help him get out of prison and back to his job.

When the king has a troubling dream,
the cupbearer recommends Joseph.

So, Joseph is rushed from his cell to Pharaoh's throne room, to hear the dream.

Joseph interprets this dream.

The message of the dream was that Egypt would have seven years of plenty,
and then Egypt would have seven years of famine.

So, to prepare for the lean years ahead, the king put Joseph in charge
of storing up and distributing food.

Joseph was now a high official himself, second only to the Pharaoh.

Joseph is one of those persons who turns lemons into lemonade, as we might say.

When famine comes about, Joseph's brothers go down to Egypt to buy grain.

And who do they come before, but the brother they sold off to slavery.

Joseph recognizes them. And sure enough,

like in Joseph's dream back when he was a child, his brothers bow down to him.

But they do not recognize him.

Joseph may want more time with them,

or he may want to give them a dose of their own medicine.

He accuses them of being spies. They say, "no," indeed we are all brothers from Canaan.

Our youngest brother, we left in Canaan with our father.

Joseph detains them by putting them in prison for a little while.

Then he releases all of them except Simeon.

He tells them to go home and bring this younger brother, Benjamin,
because Joseph (whom they still do not recognize) wants to see him.

So the brothers go back to Canaan.

Jacob is reluctant to release Benjamin to accompany his brothers back to Egypt.

But, with food running out, Jacob really had no choice.

The brothers return to Egypt with the now youngest son Benjamin.

Joseph greets them warmly, but now he conspires to hide a goblet in Benjamin's grain sack.

The brothers are apprehended again, and Benjamin gets charged with theft.

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One brother, Judah, was afraid the news of Benjamin's being taken to prison, would be too much for their father. So, he offers to go to prison for Benjamin.

One thing after another in this saga.

Once again, they are back in Joseph's presence,
Joseph can no longer restrain himself, and bursts into tears.

This is what we read today.

Joseph makes peace with his brothers. He sends for his father.

Joseph arranges for them to settle in the rich agricultural area of Goshen.

And, we are told Jacob lives out his life in comfort and eventually dies.

His descendents stay in the land of Goshen, where they grow to be a mighty people.

And there ends Genesis.

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This story is told in the three major religions.

The Koran describes it as "the most beautiful of stories."²

Here we have this story – more of a novel – really with its intrigue and its twists and turns.

The story reads more like a work of fiction than anything having to do with history.

Scholars think it might be an Egyptian or Canaanite tale – either way – a popular story.

Perhaps it is the story of Jacob and his sons, laid upon this older tale.

That would explain some of the inconsistencies, like Joseph and Benjamin
being identified as the youngest son.

Surely the story of Joseph intersected with history, because the Israelites did migrate to Egypt,
and eventually became enslaved there. This will be in the Book of Exodus.

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Is it still an important story? Does it have anything for you and me?

It's not how the story is constructed, or whether it happened or not, that is important now.

What is important is that the story
was seen by the ancient storytellers – to merit inclusion – in the story of all time.

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Joseph is often praised for his ability to forgive.

Some Christian interpreters have suggested he was as a precursor to Jesus.
He suffered at the hands of others but responded not with vengeance but with grace.

I would not suggest this – but would receive the story as it is.

We might think about the story of the Dalai Lama
who was taken from his home country against his will -
but flourished even in exile and did things he might not have ever done had nothing happened.

Good stories are stories we find ourselves in. And that is what I love about them.
Some say that Joseph looks like the very model of the ancient Near Eastern sage.
They were known to believe that everything happened according to a divine plan.

He does seem to represent, in the ups and downs of his life that cardinal virtue of patience.
Things will always turn out for the best, no matter how bad they appear at one time or another.

So, perhaps it was a story to capture people's attention and carry
this basic belief of the sages - that all will turn out well when life is lived faithfully.

Surely the story is in some way – a story for many of us.
Do you have some of the parent in you – who cherishes all your children –
but has special wishes for one of two of them?

Or, if you ever wanted to do away with a bothersome,
perhaps arrogant sibling – even if he or she is what some say gifted?

Or, have you ever been the one thrown into a pit and left for dead?

Have you ever been Reuben, the oldest brother –
who had the chance to be a mediator and keep a bad situation from becoming worse?

Have you been just one of a gang who went along with the crowd
when you knew it was not a good thing to do?

Have you ever been accused of something you did not do?

Have you ever been in the position to forgive?
Have you ever had the opportunity to bring grace to others who may have harmed you?

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This may be the key to the story. For here is the grace and the opportunity.

These roles comes our way from time to rime.

Let's look them in the face. Let them guide us day to day.

The story tells us that the Lord was with Joseph.

But we did not read that the Lord spoke to Joseph like to Abraham or to Jacob.

The way of Joseph was one of grace under pressure in the ups and downs of life -
doing all he could with the gifts he had.

f you are doing this – you are living the way of Joseph.

The way of Joseph – is the way of steady faith and grace.

The way of Joseph is to turn the difficulties of life into blessings,
the challenges of life into opportunities.

That is plenty of reason for it to be good for you and me.

¹ James L. Kugel. *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Than and Now*. New York: Free Press. P. 177

² Ibid. p. 181