

“Joseph the First”

Genesis 37: 3-8, 26-34; 50: 15-21

We are coming to a close on our Summer Series. Over the past few months, we have been taking a look at foundational stories for us as people of faith in the book of Genesis. These stories have shown us that although plans have not always gone as God expected, God has always been there for God’s people.

Today we transition in these foundational stories from Jacob to Joseph, one of Jacob’s sons. And typical of the stories in Genesis, once again, we see that it is a younger son who is lifted up as the one who will continue on the faith tradition for the people of God.

Now, I think it is safe to say, that even in this day of Biblical illiteracy, most people are familiar with the Joseph story found in Genesis. We have probably all seen, “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolored Dream Coat” at some point in our lives. Maybe even on Broadway itself or maybe just a production of the show at the local community theater.

There seems to be this fascination with Joseph’s story. However, a few years ago, DreamWorks Studio did a cartoon version of this story that made me wonder

for the first time ever after seeing Joseph's played out on screen, wonder for the first time ever why we ever really thought this story was appropriate for children.

Joseph's story has intrigue and jealousy. It has deception and sibling rivalry. Also in Joseph's story, one of the biggest themes is betrayal! Let me say that again: this story is filled with intrigue, jealousy, deception, sibling rivalry. And we think it is appropriate to tell our children. I'll be honest, I'm not sure I want my two children thinking that the way we deal with our siblings when they make us mad is to throw them in a pit and then lie to the parents about the outcome of said sibling.

Maybe it is time we realize this story wasn't meant for children. However that doesn't mean we should throw it out. Joseph's story still has a lot to teach us as adults. I think the reason this story of Joseph resonates with us as adults is because we have dealt with this world enough to relate to the intrigue, the jealousy, the betrayal, the sibling rivalry found within Joseph's story. We too have also experienced these things in our lives at some point or another. Sometimes, all these things make up a Monday morning for us. Joseph's story is a great story for us as adults. It resonates with us. We can relate to it. And it has a lot to teach us as people of faith.

Many Biblical scholars believe that Joseph's story is one complete novel, the only one found within the whole Book of Genesis. Unlike the other patriarchs,

Joseph's story is complete. We know all about Joseph. We hear about his beginning as a, yes I'm going to say it, a bratty teenage kid who tells on his brothers every chance he gets. We also hear about a young man who is transformed into a great leader for his people as we continue to read his story.

I have to tell you that although I like Joseph's story, and yes it is one of my favorite Bible stories, I have to tell you, that I struggle with it. As a complete story, a story that leaves nothing out, sometimes Joseph's story is just too much. It can be too human. It can be too honest. It can be too revealing about the relationships in our lives.

Through Joseph's story, we get an inside glimpse into just exactly how broken relationships can and do affect families. The broken relationships between brothers go beyond just sibling rivalry. Each and every one of these individuals are struggling with feelings of inadequacy, feelings that go back to the family's very beginning. Just read about Leah and Rachel. Just read about Bilhah and Zilpah. Just read how they all competed for Jacob's attention. This was the family environment these brothers grew up in. This is the environment in which they learned how to relate to one another. As we read this story, we realize that all these individuals to through life each and every day knowing he or she will never measure up.

Knowing that, thinking that, does something to one's very soul. It becomes a darkness that overtakes one's mind, overtakes one's heart and it doesn't let go. It is this type of darkness that shapes this family, that breaks this family. It is this type of darkness that we come face to face with in this story.

And yet, we discover that in spite of the darkness that threatens to tear a family apart, a darkness that shatters relationships between brothers, there is forgiveness.

Maybe this is the place where I struggle the most with this story. Are we really expected to believe that after all Joseph's brothers put him through, after all Joseph's brothers do to him, are we really expected to believe that he just forgives them? Are we really expected to believe that after all the deception, after all the betrayal, after all the hurt and hate, Joseph is going to just stand in front of his brothers, the very ones that sold him into slavery, the very ones that profited from his oppression, and offer them forgiveness?

This is where I struggle with this story.

And this is also where I am thankful God is God and I am not.

Too often we are taught that there must be justice and punishment for those who have done something wrong. That's how our world works. There are clear lines between good and evil. Everything falls into one of those two categories

But here is something that I have discovered as I have continued my faith journey, our world is not made up of easy choices. Life tends to be more grey than clear cut.

Case in point-The Ashley Madison scandal that is filling up social media. Ashley Madison is a website designed to encourage married people to have affairs. On the Today show the other morning, after millions of names were released- names of people who have signed up and used this service-millions of names were released, the anchor was interviewing a marriage therapist on this story. The anchor asked, Would this marriage therapist encourage her clients to find out if a spouse's name was a part of this data dump?

To which the therapist replied-"What is this information worth to you? If you have to know, then look, but make sure you know what you are going to do with it. Finding out whether your spouse cheated on you or not doesn't change the fact. It just has the power to wreck your family."

I'm not here to preach on the right or wrong of this situation. I'm just bringing up the fact that this issues is more complicated than just a website and data dump.

You see, it is not always black and white. Do you want to know or not? Regardless of the fact, people are going to be hurt by someone's actions. Someone

who decided that justice needed to be served, is going to destroy lots and lots of families, is going to hurt a lot of innocent people who are caught up in the deceit through no fault of their own.

It is not always black and white. Life is more grey and messier than we want to admit. Broken relationships, deception, betrayal fill our world and fill our stories as people of faith as well....and here we thought the Bible was just an outdated book with no relevance to our world.

It is not always black and white. Our world is messy. Relationships are messy. And for some reason, we expect there to be a balance of power in these messy relationships. If the situation of power changes at all, we expect punishment and justice. We expect revenge. We expect an eye for an eye. We expect a tooth for a tooth.

Once again, as I read Joseph's story, I am reminded how thankful I am that God is God and I am not.

As people who live in a world that thrives on a balance of power and revenge, especially when it comes to justice, we all know how we expect the story to go. We expect Joseph now that he is in a position of power over his brothers when they come to Egypt to lord it over them. We expect him to punish them. We expect him to make them suffer...just for the sake of revenge.

But he doesn't do any of that. Instead, he embraces them and forgives them. In fact, his first words to his brothers, the very ones who sold him into slavery, and yes, the very ones that are still lying to his face when they approach him, worried about their punishment, Joseph's first words to them are "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?"

Am I in the place of God?

Joseph then goes on to tell them that what they intended for evil, God used for good.

In that moment, Joseph offers them forgiveness. In that moment, Joseph offers them grace. And in that moment, we realize once again, how thankful we are that God is God and we are not.

You see, Joseph could have easily punished his brothers but what about all the innocent women and children whose lives would have been destroyed through no fault of their own. I like to think that maybe just maybe Joseph in that moment saw the bigger picture. He saw how the betrayal, the deception, the jealousy had destroyed his family for generations and he didn't want that for his children. He didn't want to continue the cycle of brokenness. He wanted something different for his children. He wanted a world where healing and wholeness was possible. He wanted a world where grace ruled and God's love guided all decisions.

I also liked to think Joseph realized that he couldn't make the change on his own. He realized that the change, the transformation from revenge to love had to come from God, that he had to trust that God was big enough to handle all the hurt, to handle all the brokenness. Joseph had to hope and trust that God was big enough to figure out a way for healing and wholeness could come to light. I like to think that Joseph realized that he had changed from a bratty teenager who thrived on power and revenge to the person God created him and called him to be.

Maybe when Joseph was looking at his brothers, knowing that they were lying to him, maybe when Joseph saw his brothers standing before him, he realized that they too were created in the image of God. He may not understand them. He may not like them. But they too were beloved children of God. Maybe Joseph when he realized this, began to understand just how messy life can be. Which is why we need God's grace so much in our lives.. Sometimes life is just too messy for us to handle. Sometimes the hurt is just too deep for us to handle. Sometimes, the brokenness is just too much for us and we need to know God is in the process. We need to know God is there, helping us, guiding us, transforming us from people who thrive on power and revenge to people who live by the Kingdom values of love, grace and mercy.

There was this story on NPR this week. I didn't pay too much attention to it the first time I heard it on the radio, but I found myself needing to come back to it

later on in the week. I came back to this particular NPR story, seeking clarification, seeking understanding. It was a story about Syrian Rockers who were fleeing from war and they had found safety in Beirut. Yes, you heard me, safety in Beirut.

Beirut is not the first place that comes to my mind when I think about safety. But for this group, Beirut became a place of safety, of grace and yes of transformation for these young men.

In this story, these young men shared how this band started as a bunch of young youth playing in someone's basement but they never played a gig because the police were suspicious of them. The police thought they were spreading lies, trying to get the people to rebel.

Then in 2011, war came their country. All of a sudden, the darkness of hate and hurt destroyed their world and their band. Their drummer was killed mysteriously. The young men in the band believed the drummer was killed because of his involvement in the protests against the government. It was also during this dark time that they learned their lead guitarist had been drafted into the army.

Their dream of being rockers was vanishing. They began to realize that there was no place for music in this world as much as there was for weapons and war.

But interestingly enough, the rockers' journey carried them across the border to Lebanon and it is there where they found music again. They found hope again.

They realized that there was another way. Rather than letting war, violence and angry protests be their songs, they found another way for their voices to be heard. They began to tell the story of Syria in song, calling all the world but especially the Syrians to realize that despite the ruin of the country, they were alive. There was still hope.

What struck me about this story was a comment that came at the end as one of the young men was speaking. It was right before this group was going to play their first ever gig after five years of darkness, broken relationships, hurt and hate filling their world. This young man said, “this was a critical moment for them. When you see your dream coming true, at the very first moment, you don’t believe it” But it can restore your faith in people. It reminds us that there are those who want peace or want music, who want something beautiful in their lives instead of holding on to what could destroy us.”

The same could be said for Joseph and yes the same can be said for us. We all hope we are strong enough to allow peace in our lives rather than holding on to what can destroy us. This is not an easy process. It is not an easy journey, moving from letting go to letting peace in but what we discover as we read Joseph’s story is that there is hope. As we read this story, as we hear it over and over again, we realize that Joseph was not the same person he was at the beginning of the story. He goes from a bratty, tattle-tell to a person of faith. He makes a journey of

transformation into the person God created him to be, into the person God called him to be.

In this story, we discover that it is the journey that is the miracle. Joseph didn't take this journey alone. He traveled with his God, allowing God's grace to guide him and in doing so, God transforms the possibility of retaliation into renewed relationships and reconciliation for Joseph and his family.

This is the journey that Joseph takes. This is the same journey of faith that we find ourselves on as we find the courage and the strength to transform, transform from being who we are, people who are broken, people who are hurt, people who let hate to guide us to the person that God created us to be. This is what we are talking about when we mention Biblical hope. This is what gives us the courage to share God's healing and wholeness with all of God's creation. It is our faith journey that allow us to understand that God is in the process, using what this world intended for evil to bring around good. It is the faith journey that we find ourselves on that allows us to be grateful that God is God and we are not.

And as we continue this journey of faith, May we always find ourselves asking, "Are we in the place of God?" Amen.