

Genesis 45.1-15

Before we hear this morning's reading from the book of Genesis, I need to provide some back story. Last week, Mark Tibbles reflected on the next instalment of the story of the patriarchs with which we've been engaging for a couple of months now, re-telling the beginning of Joseph's story. Jacob's favorite son. He of the 'technicolored dreamcoat,' the gift from his father that set him apart from his brothers. Joseph, he of the psychedelic dreams, which he just couldn't keep to himself, thus leading to the doubling down of his brothers' resentment of him. We left Joseph in the hands of some Midianite traders, to whom his brothers had sold him into slavery. Leaving them with his special coat, which they covered in goat's blood, and took back to their father, saying, "Look what we found: do you think it might be Joseph's?" Scripture says, "And Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. 'No, I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave.' So his father wept for him." And there we leave Jacob and his family, to follow Joseph's fortunes. Or ill-fortune, as the case may be.

We rejoin Joseph's story to discover he has been sold to one of pharaoh's officials, Potiphar. Somehow the Midianites who bought Joseph in chapter 37 have now become "Ishmaelites," which evokes a much earlier part of this whole story. Family drama spread over generations – to be honest, I'm amazed the major studios haven't put out half a dozen movies or TV series by now! At least musical theatre recognizes a good story when it sees one. Anyway, back to Joseph. We learn that "the LORD was with Joseph so that he prospered." So much so, that Potiphar puts him in charge of his entire household, "and entrusted to his care everything he owned," leaving *his* only concern "the food that he ate." Next we learn that Joseph was "well fit" as Keeley Jones might say for you Ted Lasso fans. Joseph was shredded. Jacked. "Dishy," as my mum would have said. And he caught the eye of Potiphar's wife, who said, "Come to bed with me!" Joseph gives what must be the longest explanation by any adolescent in history for why he's going to decline her offer. But she kept asking him, he kept refusing, and started to avoid being around her. Finally, when the house is empty, she grabs his cloak and demands he come to bed. He pulls away again, leaving her holding his cloak, and ran out of the house. She then calls the household slaves in and accuses Joseph of trying to force himself on her, and repeats that story to Potiphar when he gets home, who promptly had Joseph thrown into prison. Where he finds himself in the company of some of pharaoh's officials. Are you with me so far? Good.

"But while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him... and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden." Once again Joseph finds himself in charge of everything in his new home, as the warden makes him responsible for all that was done there. "And the warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did."

If you haven't noticed by now, the narrator wants us to understand that this spoiled boy hasn't been abandoned by the God of his ancestors. The next episode involves two highly

placed court officials who have also fallen out of favor with *their* master, pharaoh, both of whom have a very strange – but different – dream. Their faces betray their concern about what the dreams might mean, and Joseph asks them to tell him their dreams, saying, “Do not interpretations of dreams belong to God?” They tell him their dreams, and he tells one that *his* dream means pharaoh will restore him to his former position. And Joseph says to him, “When you’re restored, please remember me. And when you’re pouring wine into pharaoh’s cup again, perhaps put in a good word for me? Tell him I was falsely imprisoned?” But the other hears these words: “within three days pharaoh will lift off your head and impale your body on a pole. And the birds will eat away your flesh.” Apparently Joseph still hasn’t learned to discern just how much of a dream he should share voluntarily. Well, sure enough, his interpretations are proved true. One is restored. One is impaled. But pharaoh’s cupbearer promptly forgot all about Joseph.

Two years pass.

Then the pharaoh himself has a series of disturbing dreams, and he sends for the wise men of Egypt, but none can interpret the dreams. And *then* the cupbearer remembers Joseph. He tells pharaoh that a fellow prisoner correctly interpreted his dream and maybe he could do the same for pharaoh. Pharaoh sends for him, and says, “My cupbearer tells me you can interpret dreams.” Joseph – who must surely have been tempted to say, “Why, yes. Yes, I can,” – instead says, “I cannot do it. But God will give pharaoh the answer he desires.” Pharaoh tells Joseph his dreams, and Joseph tells him they mean this: the next seven years will bring bumper harvests, but then will follow seven years of famine. Terrible famine. So terrible, people will forget about the previous seven years altogether. Joseph goes on to say, “So, pharaoh ought to appoint someone to manage the years of abundance. Put a lot of that grain up to prepare for the years of famine.” And guess who pharaoh chooses to do that? Joseph – of course. But not only that, he puts Joseph in charge of the whole of Egypt! Just like that. Making Joseph second only to himself. And so Joseph becomes the most powerful person in the whole of that region. Pharaoh gives him an Egyptian name. Gives him an Egyptian wife. They have two Egyptian children. And as things play out just as Joseph said, he makes the pharaoh very rich indeed.

Well, the famine is region-wide, and Jacob’s family find themselves on the edge of starvation in Canaan. They have assets, but there’s no food to buy. Jacob sends his sons south, to Egypt, to try and secure grain for their family. And guess who’s in charge of selling the grain to foreigners? And so, almost two decades since they last saw him, looking down at him in a *pit*, they now stand in the presence of their brother, who is looking down at them from a *throne*. And what do you know, they bow down before him, and ask to buy food. Joseph recognizes them immediately – but they have no clue who he is. He asks them where they’ve come from, and they tell him.

When he sees them bowing down, the narrator tells us, “then he remembered his dreams about them, and said, ‘You’re spies! Come to see where our land is unprotected.’” They protest their innocence at this grievous accusation, then let slip that they’ve left one brother in Canaan with their father, Benjamin, Joseph’s full brother by Rachel. Joseph demands they

return and bring Benjamin to him to prove their story, which is a pretty weird way to prove you're not spies, but there it is. Then there's a lot of drama involving payment being hidden in sacks of grain, Jacob refusing to let them take Benjamin: "I've lost his brother. I won't lose him." Until the grain runs out again, and finally Jacob relents, and the brothers return to Egypt with Benjamin. They buy grain as before, leave, there's a chase, accusations of theft of a silver chalice, a dramatic confrontation, and then we finally arrive at this morning's assigned reading.

Genesis 45.1-15

If Hollywood were to adapt this story, I suspect here's where they'd take some serious 'dramatic license' with the narrative. Because this story is crying out for those climactic six words:

"You don't recognize me, do you?"

And we lean forward in our seats, eager to see the villains get their just desserts – finally! Because *vengeance* is entertainment gold, apparently. Schadenfreude sells. When the brothers realize this is not Zaphenath-Paneah the Egyptian, second only to pharaoh, but is, in fact, their brother Joseph, who has the literal power of life and death over them, they must have been trembling in their sandals. And *our* guilty pleasure is that we kind of want them to pay for what they did to Joseph. Maybe just a little. Because while we believe in grace, we're also kind of drawn to karma. "What goes around, comes around." And these brothers are about to find that out. They sold Joseph into slavery, and surely he's about to return the favor.

The story began with a dream, to which his brothers responded, "Will *you* actually rule over *us*?" And now, eight chapters and more than a decade later, here is Joseph, "ruler-lord-father" of Egypt! How will he exact his vengeance upon the brothers who sold him into slavery? Because that would be the Hollywood ending.

But not the Gospel ending.

Because – as we heard – Joseph makes this remarkable speech, in which he claims not once, but three times, that all of this has happened so that God can preserve their lives, *not* so that their cruelly treated brother can *end* them. He proclaims that – as Walter Brueggemann puts it – "in, with and under these sordid human actions the purposes of God have been at work."

Instead of acting out the *past*, Joseph opens an entirely different *future* to them. The one who long ago dreamt of *being* a ruler over this family, is now the ruler-lord-father of the most powerful nation in the region. In order that God can be faithful to the covenant God made with their ancestors, and with them. Did Joseph know this all along? Or – in this dramatic moment in which he sees his adolescent dream fulfilled as his brothers kneel before him – does he suddenly understand his life in a completely new way? The narrator has been telling us all along that God was with Joseph. But did he realize that – caught up in the events of his own life? There's no way of knowing – nor do I think it's important to try. There's a glorious reunion of the father and the son he had mourned for years, then at the very end of the book

of Genesis, after Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers fear that Joseph will *now* enact his vengeance upon them. But he reassures them, with these well-known words: "Don't be afraid... You intended it for harm, but God intended it for good." "You intended to end *my* life, but God intended to save *all* our lives."

At the heart of this story is one of the great affirmations of our faith: the sovereignty of God at work within the context of human freedom. When humans seek to harm and destroy, God insists on life.

We want vengeance – God provides redemption.

We expect malice. God desires mercy.

We enjoy schadenfreude. God gives grace.

Note that nowhere in the story does it say that Joseph actually forgives his brothers, just that he sees God's hand at work in everything that has happened to him. Perhaps he does forgive them. Perhaps he had done so a long time ago. The narrator chooses not to make that explicit for us: perhaps to offer us an opportunity to ponder what we might have done in Joseph's place. Because it's difficult to get through life without someone hurting us in a profound way. Or hurting someone we love. Betraying us. Causing us harm, sometimes great harm. We may wish they come to suffer themselves in some way, because of what they've done to us. Certainly, that's the major plotline in so many of the books, movies and TV shows we enjoy.

But it's not the major plotline of scripture.

As Mark reminded us last week, because when the story reaches its climax, with Jesus crucified, he says, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing."

"You intended it for harm. But God intended it for good."

NOT that the thing itself was good. Make no mistake – this is not God orchestrating evil acts for God's good purposes. This is God's purposes being fulfilled *despite* human acts. It's important that *Joseph* declares, 'You intended it for harm, but God intended it for good.'

We don't get to speak those words to people who've suffered: they must choose them for themselves. Neither is this an "every cloud has a silver lining" theology. This is God insisting on life for us, even when we choose the exact opposite. That is the very heart of this story.

That is the very heart of the Gospel.

So, when we come to the table this morning, we come as a mixed bag of motivations, emotions, and actions. We come as those who sometimes *want* vengeance, but also, sometimes, as those who want to be able to forgive. We come as those wondering why bad things happen to good people, but also as those who want bad things to happen to bad people. We come to the table to be reminded once more that when we had done our worst to Jesus, God still insisted on life for us. So, let us come as imperfect, vengeful, fearful people, and let us leave having experienced God's grace and mercy once again. To bear that into the world to carry it to those who share our own need of them.

Amen.