

Year A, Pentecost9, Proper 15
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Genesis 45:1-15

Joseph's Healing Journey

I was disappointed when I discovered that the lectionary immediately moves us from Joseph sold into slavery, to Joseph, chief administrator under the Great Pharaoh, revealing himself to his stunned brothers. We don't get to hear about how Potiphar, an officer in the army and the captain of Pharaoh's guard, bought Joseph when he arrived in Egypt as a teenager. We don't learn that Joseph soon demonstrates his remarkable administrative ability and quickly advances to the captain's personal assistant, managing all his domestic affairs. Nor do we hear of how Potiphar's wife, who desiring the handsome and dashing young alien, repeatedly tries to seduce him and each time he refuses her. His refusals frustrate her desire until it turns vengeful. She grabs his coat as he makes his escape and uses it to prove to her husband that his slave has violated her. Potiphar believes her lie and in a rage has Joseph thrown into prison.

We, the reader of the story, know that **he is innocent and falsely accused**. This, of course, reminds us of another story. Yes, the crucifixion of Jesus, the son of Joseph, several centuries down the road. In this, the **Bible is unique**. Usually the **ancient stories hide the victim's innocence and justify their death at the hands of the crowd** like Oedipus in Greek mythology. But the Bible starts from a different place. It reveals the victim's innocence. This theme, sprinkled throughout the Old Testament, reaches its apex in the crucifixion of an innocent man on a cross outside Jerusalem. In the Bible as a whole, this theme is **more than a story**, it is the unveiling of a mechanism that humans both depend on and are ashamed of—this is the mechanism revealed at the crucifixion. But back to our story!

In Pharaoh's prison Joseph again quickly demonstrates his remarkable leadership capacities. Everything he touches turns out well and soon he is running the whole

prison as a prisoner! A scandal erupts in Pharaoh's inner circle and the cup bearer and baker are both thrown into prison. These are *two of the most important positions in government* because both were in charge of *poison protection*; one of the principle threats to ancient kings. The cupbearer protecting the king's drink and the baker through protecting what he ate.

Both of the jailed officials have a dream and wonder about their future. Joseph interprets their dreams and *correctly predicts* who will be vindicated and who will be condemned. Two years of jail time later, when *Pharaoh* has a dream, the *vindicated cupbearer remembers Joseph* and Joseph is quickly summoned before the throne. Using the Pharaoh's dream, Joseph predicts seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. That's the story most of us remember from our childhood. Pharaoh accepts Joseph's interpretation and immediately releases him from prison and places him in charge of gathering food during the good years in readiness for the coming famine.

Again we can see how Joseph is a precursor to Jesus. The text says that Joseph was **thirty years old** when he entered the service of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. How old was Jesus when he began his ministry?

Next, Joseph's miraculous interpretation of dreams functions like Jesus' miracles **confirming his relationship to God**. They show that Joseph is not an imposter.

Third, just as Jesus always pointed beyond himself to his Father, Joseph, even in front of the fearsome Pharaoh, tells him that **it is not he who makes these interpretations possible but God** who exists beyond and above them all.

Finally, there is the theme of **Joseph's improbable authority**. Can you imagine an *alien slave* becoming like the "father to Pharaoh" the most powerful human on the face of the earth? Impossible! **It is a faint echo foreshadowing Jesus who, though born in a barn in an out of the way place, becomes the King of**

Glory and the bringer of our redemption, the hinge pin upon which all history pivots. Clearly God has upset the normal course of things and provided a way through our human entrapment that we have brought upon ourselves!

With all of this as background we move into this morning's Hebrew scripture text. "Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him." After all these years the eleven brothers who betrayed him into slavery stand before him and he has changed so much that they don't recognize him. The childhood dream that had caused so much dissention had come true. The brothers who hated him were now bowing down before him and absolutely in his power. He has all the cards and they have none. They didn't even know who he was. **Could there be a more perfect opportunity for revenge?** What should he do? How should he play out his hand?

The first thing he does is to **disarm himself before them**. He removes all the sources of threat from the room by sending all guards, soldiers and officials out. Now it is just Joseph and the brothers. Then he lets his emotions show, weeping so loudly that everyone off stage heard it. They must have wondered what in the world was going on in there. And then through his tears he says "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" The eleven brothers do not say a word. Joseph still doesn't know whether his father is dead or alive. They are dumbfounded but the emotional wheels are turning. In their minds they each are thinking "Oh no—are we in trouble! We are in deep trouble. The brother we tried to get rid of now has us in his grasp and we are helpless to do anything about it! The underlying lie of our life has been exposed and we are the guilty. Wait till Dad hears about this. This is huge! This will change everything."

Joseph realizes that their guilt and shame-laden terror has rendered them speechless and so he says, "Come closer to me." *That is the last thing they want to do*. "Are you kidding, come closer?" Everything in them wants to run. But what choice do they have?

He again tells them who he is but this time references his identity to them. **"I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt." I am Jesus whom you**

crucified says Jesus when he meets his disciples after the resurrection. *Do you see the parallel?* In the crucifixion humanity is caught condemning an innocent man—who turns out to be God’s Son. And this turns out to be what we have done since the beginning of time—namely, temporarily keeping the peace between us by shifting the blame to whomever is vulnerable.

This is why many years before, when the eleven brothers first threw Joseph into the dry well, they were able to eat together in peace. In fact, **it is the next sentence after they have done it**, in the text of Genesis. **Their peace was built on excluding Joseph.** Temporarily all of the tensions between them had been thrown into the well with Joseph. In this world there are only two ways of having communion. We will either commune around excluding some victim or we will commune around the Excluded Victim—and it is the *latter* that we did last week in our worship.

“I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.” He knows what they have done. He remembers. He is fully aware. This is **not** going to be swept under the rug!

And then Joseph makes the same move that Jesus made. “And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.” This is the same as Jesus, after his resurrection saying “do not be afraid. It had to happen this way. It is all part of a bigger plan wherein God changed what you meant for evil into something creative for good. **God sent me before you to preserve life.**” “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:17) Jesus’ mission was to preserve life, not destroy it. *Do you see the connection?*

Does Joseph show us the character of God? Is Jesus like Joseph? Is the Gospel of Jesus contained and hidden in this first book of the Bible? Are we in the position of the eleven brothers who are both exposed and forgiven like Joseph’s brothers or the eleven disciples?

Joseph's only desire was to provide for his family in the land of Goshen. The land of Goshen was a place of provision, welcome and abundance. Joseph wanted his brothers to hurry back to their father, their wives and families and bring them all to this place of plenty in the middle of the famine that was destined to continue five more years. Is that God's desire for his people? We have a home in Goshen. It is a place where our cravings find satisfaction and we can settle down knowing we are children of God.

The famine that is our contemporary culture will continue. We are not half way through it. **But relief has come and it comes from outside our selves. It comes as grace, as food that satisfies, as reconciliation and as forgiveness.**

There is a kind of baptism that ends today's text. It is the sprinkled water that **convinces** Benjamin and the eleven that Joseph has forgiven them. "Joseph fell upon his Brother Benjamin's neck and **wept**, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and **wept upon them**; and after that his brothers talked with him." They reconcile!

Joseph baptizes them with his tears and they believe. Is God like that? Amen.