

JOSEPH, PART 2

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One of my favorite authors, Barbara Brown Taylor, tells the story. She was walking on the beach with her husband one day when they came upon a giant loggerhead turtle, marooned on the sand. They quickly went in search of a park ranger, who brought back a jeep and some rope, and soon they had worked together to flip the turtle on its back and loop the ropes around its shell to drag it back to the ocean. The turtle struggled as they made their way closer to the water, and when they finally got there, the three of them again worked together to flip her back over. The turtle laid motionless in the surf, but, (in Taylor's own words), "Every wave brought her life back to her, washing the sand from her eyes and making her shell shine again. When a particularly large one broke over her, she lifted her head and tried her back legs. The next wave made her light enough to find a foothold, and she pushed off, back into the water that was her home. Watching her swim slowly away after her nightmare ride through the dunes, I noted that it is sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down." (Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 66).

I have to imagine Joseph felt something of this over the course of his young life, who we learned last week was sold into slavery by his own brothers. At first his fate seems purely tragic, but as he grows up, his life changes. Not only does he rise to a public position of incredible power and influence, but inwardly he changes. He is no longer the selfish teenager who flaunted his favoritism in front of his brothers; he's started to act like a grownup. At some point he must have wondered to himself, "What would my life have been like if my brothers had never thrown me into that pit?"

There's an interesting detail in that story about the turtle. Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that the turtle got stuck on the beach because, after laying its eggs, it mistook a streetlamp at the head of the beach for the moon, and went the wrong way. Ironically, it got lost by going toward the light. This isn't just something that turtles do; people do it too. Many of us are deeply committed to avoiding pain or fear; figuratively speaking, we avoid the darkness at all costs—to the greatest extent possible, we stay in the presence of the light. We dull pain with substance abuse, the distraction of shopping, and pretend everything is ok—we keep the lights on. But just like the turtle, it is often true that the salvation we need isn't found in the light, but in the

darkness. And that's what Joseph finds. Only when his brothers throw him into that pit does he really begin to find out who he is—who God created him to be.

It is without a doubt one of the greatest plotlines in the Bible, complete with dramatic swings between incredible success and total failure. We met Joseph last week in his teenage years, the spoiled-rotten favorite son; his arrogant dreams and bad behavior toward his brothers results in his first dramatic fall—he is thrown into a pit and sold into slavery. The slave caravan carries him to Egypt, where he is sold to the pharaoh's official, Potiphar. Apparently, the journey was long enough for Joseph to have done some serious thinking and he cleans up his act. He works so hard that he is quickly promoted to the management of the entire estate. In addition, he developed enough character to resist the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife. Unfortunately, he now learns the important lesson that good behavior is not always rewarded, for Potiphar's wife frames him and Joseph loses it all again—this time he is thrown into the royal dungeon. Joseph now proves his character by keeping up the good work ethic even in prison, where he earns the respect of his fellow inmates. In the next twist of the plot two of Pharaoh's officials are thrown into jail, the chief baker and the chief cupbearer. Each have mysterious dreams, which Joseph correctly interprets—the baker will hang, but the cupbearer is returned to Pharaoh's side, where he promises he will remember Joseph...and then he promptly forgets, leaving Joseph in the dungeon for another two years. One day, Pharaoh has his own mysterious dream, and the cupbearer remembers Joseph. He is brought up from the dungeon, gets a bath and a shave, and arrives in the throne room to interpret pharaoh's dreams about seven sleek cattle and seven beautiful ears of corn, consumed by seven starving cattle and seven dry, weedy ears of corn. As we know from this morning's reading, Joseph correctly foretells that Egypt is about to have seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Joseph's wisdom is rewarded, and Pharaoh sets him in charge of the whole land of Egypt.

A group of our Knox youth joined me in studying these texts last week—let me tell you about a few of the observations they made.

First, they noticed that God, who was not mentioned at all in the first parts of the story, joins the story when Joseph gets to Egypt. As soon as the slave caravan arrives, we are told that God is with Joseph, and he prospers. Our young people asked a few questions about this. They wondered how God's favoritism works. They noticed that Joseph's rise in Potiphar's house is short-lived. They also noted that there are plenty of good people in our own time who do not prosper, but who struggle terribly. And they wondered if perhaps that statement about God's favor is supposed to trouble us.

Our youth also observed that Joseph's depth and character, while not perfect, seem to be growing. When he begins interpreting dreams as a child, God never enters the discussion. But as he matures, interpreting for the baker, the cupbearer, and finally

pharaoh, he does not take the credit himself, but clearly states that God gives him this power of understanding. He is becoming more humble as he matures. We're starting to like Joseph a little more.

The youth also noted two things about today's reading. First, they asked questions about the names Joseph gives to his children. More than a decade after leaving the home of his birth, ruling over the whole land of Egypt, Joseph starts a family there, and he gives his children strange names. His first he names Manassah, "For God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." And the second he names Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes." The two names clearly describe Joseph's journey—and they are clearly over the top. Joseph is successful, but to be sure, he's got some lingering issues about his family back in Canaan.

Finally, our youth talked about the plenty and the famine in the land. Sometimes you can hear a Bible story over and over, and miss things that are staring you in the face. According to the text, because of Pharaoh's dream, during the years of plenty, Joseph gathers up all of the food, brings it to the cities and stores it up until it is beyond measure. At this time, the people of Egypt all have their own land and property. There's no indication that Joseph tells anyone else about the dream. Then, when the famine spreads throughout the land and the people are famished and cry to Pharaoh for bread, Joseph opened the storehouses and sold the food back to the Egyptians. Did you get that? When they were desperate and starving, he *sold* them the food they had produced (for more on this, see De La Torre, *Genesis*). After this, the famine continues for seven years—it takes about five chapters of scripture to tell the story, but let me read for you the way that it ends in chapter 47.

"Now there was no food in all the land, for the famine was very severe. The land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. Joseph collected all the money to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, in exchange for the grain that they bought; and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house. When the money from the land of Egypt and from the land of Canaan was spent, all the Egyptians came to Joseph, and said, "Give us food! Why should we die before your eyes? For our money is gone." And Joseph answered, "Give me your livestock, and I will give you food in exchange for your livestock, if your money is gone." So they brought their livestock to Joseph; and Joseph gave them food in exchange for the horses, the flocks, the herds, and the donkeys. That year he supplied them with food in exchange for all their livestock. When that year was ended, they came to him the following year, and said to him, "We cannot hide from my lord that our money is all spent; and the herds of cattle are my lord's. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our lands. Shall we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land in exchange for food. We with our

land will become slaves to Pharaoh; just give us seed, so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate.”

So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. All the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them; and the land became Pharaoh's. As for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other.” (Genesis 47:13-21)

Who was this Joseph, this man who claimed that the Lord was with him, who seemed to be blessed, who many of us learned in Sunday School knew how to save and to plan for the future, but who the story tells us is responsible for how the people become slaves? Who is this Joseph, whose children's names demonstrate unresolved grief over his own lost family? Who is this Joseph, who seems to begin as a shrewd and wise businessman, but becomes a ruthless slave master of the very people who made him rich?

This is one of the most intriguing plotlines in all of the Bible, and not just because of Joseph's heroics, but because people who choose to read closely meet a complicated and deeply troubled person. We're supposed to see something of ourselves in Joseph's struggle, for we are complicated people, too. So we think back to the day those brothers sold Joseph into slavery and remember the story of the turtle: "...it is sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down." Like that turtle on the beach, Joseph got his people in deep trouble by chasing the light, and often underwent his most heroic times of growth when he struggled for his own life in the darkness. God is trying to teach us something in our hearing of this story; something about struggle and about grief, about taking care of those in need, and remembering where your blessings came from when times are good, and having endurance in the darkness, knowing that God is with us.

God is with Joseph. The story says that much. I think the more interesting question is, when does Joseph know it? Is it in the times of light, when Joseph has it easy and life is good, when he amasses great wealth, returns to the fine clothes of his childhood and oppresses the people? Or does God seem closer when Joseph is in the darkness; when he struggles to find goodness and build character; when he is forced to ask what he is really made of?

Who is this Joseph? My hunch is that this story is supposed to cause us to ask ourselves, who are we? Who will we become? Do we believe God is with us in times of our own darkness? Can we remember who God is calling us to be even when life is easy and we are walking in the light?

Next week we'll talk about how it ends.

Amen.