

JOSEPH, PART 1

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AUGUST 6, 2017

One of the oldest church jokes in the book goes like this: It was time for the children's sermon, so the minister invited the children up, and began by saying. "I'm thinking of something, and I wonder if you can tell what it is. It lives in Africa or you can see it at the zoo. It's got light brown fur and black spots, four legs and a tail, it's taller than all of the other animals and has a long neck that reaches into the air." Well, the kids sat there in silence for several seconds and the minister started to wonder what she did wrong, when finally, one confused-looking child sheepishly raised her hand and said, "Well, it sounds an awful lot like a giraffe, but I know the answer must be Jesus."

There are a lot of things about church and especially about the Bible that work this way. We expect that because it's church or because it's the Bible, things must be a certain way. People in the Bible are virtuous and moral, they learn from their mistakes, they are boldly faithful and unwavering in their belief. When they trust God, good things happen. All of these things must be true, otherwise, why are they in the Bible? As it turns out, though, many of these expectations are not true, and the story of Joseph is one of the best examples.

Joseph does not fit our expectations; he is a man of many failings that begin in his family, even before he is born. You may remember that Joseph is the son of Israel, or Jacob. Jacob was the brother of Esau, and was the favorite son of their mother, Rebekah, and that favoritism shapes a whole series of bad events in Jacob's life. Instead of learning from that unfortunate situation, Jacob repeats it when he becomes a parent; we learn right away that Joseph is Jacob's favorite son, and everyone knows it because Jacob gives Joseph a special coat.

Many of us are used to hearing that it was a coat of many colors. That's the version found in an ancient Greek translation of the Bible called the Septuagint; that translation is familiar to most western Christians because it is carried over into the King James Bible. The version we read this morning, is instead translated from the Hebrew, and you might have noticed, calls the coat a "long robe with sleeves." In the Hebrew culture, long sleeves were reserved for those who did not need hands and arms free for labor; from that we may speculate that it's not just a nice coat that Jacob's favorite son is given, but permission to supervise while his brothers did the work. It's no wonder they hated him.

Joseph doesn't help himself. Aware of his own superiority during waking hours, he dreams about it at night too. He has a dream that he is in the field with his brothers and Joseph's sheaf of grain stands up straight while the sheaves of his eleven brothers bow down to it. Joseph has a second dream that the sun and the moon and eleven stars, symbolizing not only his brothers, but his mother and father as well, are bowing down to him. These dreams are present in the story as a means of foreshadowing where the story is heading, but also to tell us more about the kind of guy Joseph is. We all dream dreams we wouldn't want people to know about, but Joseph tells everyone about his.

By now you should be convinced that this Joseph isn't an exemplary character on his own, and he's going to need help. So if we continue with the expectations many of us carry about the Bible, you might assume that God is actively at work to make up for Joseph's shortcomings. But according to what we've read so far, that isn't true, either. While God appears to Moses at the burning bush, or calls the prophet Samuel who responds "Here I Am, Lord," or comes to the disciples when Jesus says, "I will make you fish for people," none of this happens to Joseph. Throughout this story, God will never speak directly to Joseph as God did with some of the others; and up to this point, there's been no mention of God at all.

So, who is this man Joseph, and why is the Bible wasting our time teaching us about him? Joseph is far from perfect, he carries a family background that sets him up with challenges from the start, and he makes mistakes of his own. And neither is God doing the work for him; Joseph is going to need to find his way in the world, and if he's going to find God's presence in his life, he's going to have to look for it. Given all of this, my hunch is that the reason we're being told about Joseph is that, at least in some respects, Joseph is very much like many of us. No voice from God, plenty of flaws of our own, and even still dragging around a few burdens passed on to us by our parents...here we are.

The conventional wisdom about this story says that Joseph is the favorite son, that he has the beautiful coat, and that his dreams seem to foreshadow greatness, but we also learn that Joseph has a dark side. Outwardly things are good. Joseph had some visible advantages. But that is not all. Joseph is surrounded by people but has few if any friends he can really trust. He may wish to be good but he often behaves very much like a spoiled and isolated teenager, because that's exactly what he is. As he grows up, we realize that the most difficult and contentious relationships in his life are with members of his own family. Outwardly Joseph has many material advantages but inside he is an insecure and unhappy person. And things do not always go well for him. Many of us would say, most of the time, we are blessed, God has been good to us, how could we complain. But inside there are things that hurt—memories from our childhood, and mistakes we have made. We sometimes dream the wrong dreams or puff ourselves up in front of other people, because there is pain inside we have chosen not to deal with. We worry about when life is going to catch up with the wrong things we've done and we're going to be the one thrown into a pit. If you've ever felt any of those things, here you have it, your biblical counterpart: Joseph.

At the end of the introduction we read this morning, Joseph's luck runs out. His brothers beat him and throw him into a pit, and they see a caravan of slave traders going by and they sell him into slavery. That's how Joseph ends up in Egypt. Faced with this significant turn for the worse, it stands to reason that even someone who seems to have been rather shallow up until now might have started to ask some deep questions. Why has God let this happen to me, the God who was so present with my father? Sure, I may have flaws, but I'm not as bad as some other people—my brothers tried to kill me. Are they going to get what they deserve? What did I do to deserve this, and can I start over? Far from some conventional moral story suggesting that if you believe and are good, God will be with you, Joseph's story tells us early that life doesn't always make sense. Sometimes bad things happen to people who behave well; sometimes good things happen to people who behave poorly; and sometimes things seem to happen for no reason at all.

It is not until all of these things in Joseph's early life have passed; it is not until that long slave journey and it's series of "what-if" questions is over. It is not until Joseph finds himself living in Egypt, a slave to the official Potiphar, it's not until this moment that we get an amazing cliffhanger for the remainder of the story. Out of nowhere, we are told at the beginning of chapter 39 that through all of this, God was with Joseph.

Now, we have a question we can apply to all kinds of real world situations. Can God work for good in the midst of human evil? Biblical scholar W. Sibley Towner suggests:

"Let [Joseph's story] simmer in your mind while you conjure up pictures of the slave trade and the Indian wars, Auschwitz, and atomic explosions [ISIS, the Syrian crisis, domestic violence]...Can one and the same event be both evil and, in God's hands, good? Can that be?...[Consider that with Joseph,] God does not want the brothers to do what they do. God does not order them to do what they do. Yet, when they do it, God does not walk away and leave Joseph alone... God is not defeated by what [the brothers] do. They do it; God uses it." (quoted from De La Torre, "Genesis," *Belief Commentary Series*)

You'll note that this in no way excuses the evil, nor does it make the hurt of it go away. But it does raise a question for us, one that brings me back around to that observation about the kind of stories we expect to hear in the Bible. Could it be that much of God's most profound work actually done in the midst of human failure?

It is, without a doubt, bad pastoring for me to meet with one of you in the midst of personal crisis and suggest that God is working for good in your life. And at the same time, I have met with many of you who have told me, looking back on a difficult time, that God was with you. That however it was that the bad came about, somehow God stuck around in ways you may not have realized at the time. As one pastor I know has described it, "I have learned things in the darkness that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again..." (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*).

This is one of the meanings of Communion. We share and remember the execution of Jesus on the Cross by human hands, in part so that we will sit here in church and struggle with the idea that, out of something absolutely awful, God might seek to bring about good. Can that be possible? Are there things we learn in the darkness that we never could have learned in the light, things that save our lives over and over again? Joseph's story is just beginning, and is going to put that question to the test.

Amen.