

Joseph and Jesus

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

April 14, 2024 AM Sermon

Reverend Peter Jonker

Genesis 44:3-45:9

If you grow up in the church, the Joseph story is one of the first stories you hear. The Joseph story makes the cut in all the children's Bible story books, which is no surprise. It's such a great story! It's got drama, surprises, betrayals, unexpected plot twists and a happy ending. My Kindergarten teaching wife could tell you: Kids love the Joseph story.

One of the potential downsides of hearing a story so early in our life is that we stop expecting it to teach us anything. If you've heard the story since you were 5, you think "Oh the Joseph story, I know the Joseph story. I've heard it a million times! I know what it's about." While that is an honest human reaction, what that reaction effectively does is lock you in your nine-year-old understanding. And while your nine-year-old understanding might be correct, it's also limited. Like all great Bible stories, the Joseph story is a story in which a child can wade, but it is also a story in which an elephant can swim. If we never look past our nine-year-old understanding of this story, we're still just wading. Today I want to dive. I want to dive into the deep sea of the Joseph story. And as we descend into the depths of this familiar story, here is what you will see: We will see that the Joseph story foreshadows the whole of God's way with us. The Joseph story is in the first book of the Bible, but already here, so much of what God will do later, so much of what God will reveal about himself is already foreshadowed here.

I will explain later, but for now, let me go back and review the story. Joseph and his brother Benjamin were favorite sons of the patriarch Jacob, favorite because they were the sons of Rachel, the wife whom Jacob loved best. Jacob's favoritism to Joseph (and to be fair Joseph's pride) enrages Joseph's other brothers. They decide to get rid of him. They throw him down a dark well and leave him there in the darkness, ultimately selling him into slavery. Joseph spends years as a slave and they are miserable years. He's falsely accused of harassment by his master's wife. He ends up being thrown into an Egyptian dungeon for a crime he didn't commit. He languishes for years, in the darkness.

Eventually, by a strange (and providential!) turn of affairs that have to do with his ability to interpret dreams, Joseph is released from prison. He successfully interprets Pharaoh's dream. Pharaoh makes him second in command of the whole land. He rises from the bottom of that well, he rises from the darkness of the dungeon, and ends up on a throne, supervising a food collection that will end up saving the whole Middle Eastern world from 7 years of famine.

While in his new post, Joseph runs into his brothers again. They haven't seen him in years. The text doesn't say how many, but I would say a minimum of 15 years possibly more. The brothers don't recognize Joseph, but Joseph recognizes them. They tell their Egyptian looking brother that they've come to buy food because of the famine, but Joseph points an accusing finger at them and says, "You are spies!" "No," they say, "we are just here for food for ourselves, our Father and our younger brother Benjamin!" Joseph responds, "Unless you go back and bring to me your younger brother Benjamin, I will not believe you! And until you return one of you must stay here as my prisoner!" So the brothers go back to get Benjamin, and Simeon stays behind as a prisoner.

The brothers go home and tell Jacob that they must bring Benjamin to Egypt. Jacob is distraught. He says 'my grey head will go down to the grave in sorrow if I lose Benjamin.' But they beg and beg and beg and finally Jacob consents to let his favorite son go to Egypt with them. The brothers return and bring Benjamin to Joseph. Joseph is deeply moved at the sight of his brother. He weeps, but he still conceals his true identity from them. Joseph gives them a feast and he showers special affection and attention on Benjamin. Benjamin gets 5 times more food than anyone else.

The brothers head home with their grain figuring that everything is OK, but here's where things take a turn. Joseph orders his servants to take his royal cup, a valuable cup made of fine silver, and secretly put it in Benjamin's grain sack. So the next morning, the brothers saddle their donkeys and head for home. Without

knowing it, Benjamin looks like a thief, riding away with royal treasure in his grain sack. And that's where we pick up the story. Read Genesis 44:3-45:9

What we just read is really the climax of this story, a beautiful moment that God has orchestrated. Jacob's family is a dysfunctional mess. If you are here this morning and you come from a complicated family, a broken family, a dysfunctional family, take a look at Jacob's hot mess of a family and you will see that you are not alone. A father who shamelessly loves two of his sons more than the others, who shows favoritism in a way that would damage any family. A son, Joseph, who at the beginning of the story comes off as spoiled and full of himself, bragging about his dreams. And the rest of the boys who do this murderous thing to their brother. And this isn't just the dysfunction of an ordinary family; Jacob's family is the founding family of God's people! His 12 sons become the 12 tribes! Israel will bear the name of this dysfunctional Father and his messy sons!

And yet God takes this mess and he works it in to not just a reconciliation for Jacob's family, but into this thing that saves the world from famine. God does this through three central features of this story. These central features foreshadow the way God will work throughout the Bible and throughout his history with his people. These three things are still central to our lives.

First, God places mercy at the center of this story. I think we can all agree that Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers is an act of grace, and an act of mercy. They have been cruel to Joseph. Their cruelty has caused Joseph enormous pain. Joseph has them in his grasp and he could easily have avenged himself on them and no one would have blamed him. The Egyptian courtiers would have nodded their head and called it justice. But instead, Joseph saves their life and embraces them.

The grace of this ending would have stood out especially in comparison to the other stories of the ancient world. The stories of pagan gods were not centered around grace. Here's an interesting parallel story. I wonder how many of you know the story of the return of Odysseus? It's from the *Odyssey* by Homer.

After a long exile, Odysseus returns home to Ithaca to reclaim his kingdom. No one in Ithaca thinks he's alive anymore, no one except his faithful wife Penelope. Penelope is tormented by a large group of men who call themselves her suitors. They are vying for her hand because they think Odysseus is dead and they want his kingdom. These suitors are living in his palace and eating his food and harassing his wife. So when Odysseus returns he is furious with these suitors, and he makes a plan. Penelope, has scheduled a banquet for the suitors. At the banquet she tells the suitors that whoever is strong enough to string her husband's bow will win her hand. Odysseus comes to the banquet disguised as a beggar. One by one the suitors try and none of them are strong enough. But then this ragged beggar comes into the banquet and asks to try. The suitors mock him, but when the beggar bends the bow and strings it they all realize that it's Odysseus. He's alive! He's returned. Odysseus proceeds to use the bow to slaughter these no good suitors. Sweet vengeance.

That's pretty much how the *Odyssey* ends. It's meant to be a satisfying ending. As a reader you're meant to think, 'Yeah! Good for you Odysseus!' We love a good vengeance story. Read the stories and the myths of the cultures around Israel, and those stories are everywhere. Vengeance. Retribution.

But that's not Joseph's story. That's not God's story. That's not our story. Grace and mercy are at the center of our story. You see that already in Genesis. This story of Joseph's mercy ends the book of Genesis; think back to the beginning of Genesis where you have the same grace in God's treatment of Cain. Cain kills Abel and God catches him. What's the penalty for murder in the Old Testament law? Death. It's very clear. But God doesn't demand Cain's life. God marks him and rebukes him, but he allows Cain to live. God shows mercy. Genesis is framed by these acts of grace.

Genesis foreshadows the grace and mercy of Jesus who will come to his brothers and sisters who have hurt him, brothers and sisters who will ultimately turn on him and try to get rid of him. But our brother Jesus will not consume us in his anger or consume us in his revenge; he will embrace us with his mercy and give us a feast of his grace. What Joseph does with his brothers foreshadows what Jesus does with us.

So God brings Jacob's family back together with Grace, he also brings Jacob's messy family back together with sacrifice. Sacrifice is a central feature of God's story. To get at that, let's ask this question: why did Joseph have the cup put in Benjamin's sack? What was his purpose? Was he just messing with his brothers? Or was there some specific purpose behind it and if so, what was that purpose?

I think when Joseph put the cup in Benjamin's bag he had a very specific purpose in mind. He was trying to recreate the conditions of that day years ago when his brothers chose to sell him into slavery.

Remember how that went; his brothers were going to kill him, but then they decided to sell him into slavery instead. Making their brother a slave got them out of their predicament. Here's a tough Bible knowledge question for all of you who think you know the Joseph story: Whose idea was it to sell Joseph? It was Judah. It was Judah's idea to sell Joseph as a slave.

By putting the cup in Benjamin's bag, Joseph gives his brothers the same chance they had all those years ago. This time they could walk away free if they give Benjamin up as a slave. Allowing their brother to be a slave could once again get them out of their predicament. But this time they don't do that. Instead, one of the brothers steps forward. Which one? Judah. This time he offers to sacrifice himself for the sake of his brother. He is willing to lay himself down for the happiness of his Father and the freedom of his brother. God has changed his heart. God has brought him to repentance and change. He is willing to take his brother's sin upon himself so that others can live.

And did you notice that when Joseph sees his brother's sacrifice, when Joseph sees how Judah is changed, when he sees Judah's sacrifice he breaks down and reveals himself. It's not just Benjamin who is set free by Judah's offer, it's Joseph's own heart that is freed from its anger and pain.

Here's another Bible knowledge question. Which of the twelve brothers is the ancestor of Jesus? Who is Jesus descended from? Judah. Do you see how Judah's sacrifice for his brother foreshadows the sacrifice of Jesus? Jesus who sacrificed himself for all of his brothers and sisters. Jesus who set all our hearts free.

So this story foreshadows the grace of Jesus Christ. This story foreshadows the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This story also foreshadows the resurrection. This is a resurrection story. Think I'm exaggerating? Well let me ask you this: How much did the Midianites give the brothers when they sold Joseph into slavery? 20 pieces of silver. He was betrayed for twenty pieces of silver. And where did the brothers put Joseph before they sold him? In the darkness of an empty well.

Now who does that remind you of? Jesus betrayed for 30 pieces of silver. Jesus placed in the darkness of a tomb. But the tomb couldn't hold Jesus and he was raised up and seated at the right hand of God, he was clothed in glory and honor, he became the savior of his brothers and sisters. Kind of like Joseph who was raised from the darkness of the well, freed from his slavery, raised to the right hand of Pharaoh, clothed with glory and honor. At the end of our passage Joseph describes God's purposes to his brothers by saying, "God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and save your lives by a great deliverance." He could just as easily be describing God's purposes in the resurrection. This is a resurrection story.

When it comes to the living God, this story is very much on brand. It bears all the marks of "the God who brings life from the dead and calls into being things that are not. (Romans 4:17). And so ultimately this story doesn't just foreshadow the story of Jesus; it foreshadows my story and your story. You might be in a dark place personally, like Joseph in the well, or Joseph in Pharaoh's dungeon, you might be in a place that feels like there is no way out for you. That you will never find your way to joy again. Or you may look at your family, or this family and all its fights and struggles and betrayals and dysfunction and from your perspective it may look beyond saving, beyond redemption. But in the Joseph story we can see already in the first book of the Bible, that's not how this is going to end for us. Someday, we will find ourselves standing together around the throne of our brother, and there we will experience a reconciliation we never thought possible and we will taste joy that we never thought we'd feel again. Because that's our God and this is our story. ©Rev. Peter Jonker