

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
"The Joseph Story"
By Eric Howell
Genesis 45:4-14
June 20, 2010

Hello, Greetings,

I have come a long way to be with you and I am so happy to be here. I come from a place called ancient Egypt. It's very different from this place, but you would be surprised at the ways that Ancient Egypt and this place are similar. Oh, I didn't introduce myself. I am the one they call the "Wise One."* The main way they are similar is that there are people there who believe in the One True God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I met a lot of them this week in the marketplace. Most of them are kind of short, but they sing and dance very well. They are people who believe in the One True God, who live among a lot of people who don't. I think that's something in common with the way things are today also.

Life presents challenges for followers of the One True God, just like everyone else; sometimes, even more so. This week the followers of the One True God in Egypt met a very powerful, very special, very angry man named Joseph. I knew all about Joseph, being the Wise One and all, and I knew what kind of hard decision Joseph had to make, whether to forgive or not, some people who had hurt him terribly. But not even I knew what Joseph was going to do about it.

To really understand Joseph's problem you have to start at the beginning of his story. Joseph was not originally from Egypt. He was from a place a long way from there. His great-grandfather Abraham had moved to that land. He and Sarah had Isaac. Isaac and Rebecca had Jacob. Jacob's family was a complicated one. Do you have mixed families, blended families here? I bet you don't have one like Jacob's. You can read in Genesis about Jacob's family. It was quite a deal with four moms of all these kids --- mostly boys. They had more boys than the Suttons, Buras', and Kreys put together. The boys' names were Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulon, Joseph, Dan, Naphthali, Gad, Asher, and the youngest was Benjamin. Joseph was the first born of Rachel, Jacob's beloved beautiful wife, and he was the favorite in his daddy's eyes. Jacob loved that boy. His brothers . . . not so much. Joseph was, well, you wouldn't have liked him either. He was a tattle-tale, and then he had these dreams. You wouldn't believe the dreams. He dreamed of the sun and moon and stars bowing down to him. And then he went and told everyone about his dreams.

Now it's one thing to have a dream and try to accomplish it. I hear you have something here called American Idol. Sounds a little fishy to me with the idol and all, but I understand it has something to do with people trying to live their dreams, and that part I can understand.

Joseph's dreams and everything about him ticked off his brothers. One day they were all out working hard except for one. Guess who wasn't working? You got it. But, Daddy sent Joseph out to check on his brothers—not help; he might get his beautiful coat dirty, but check on them. When he got there, some of the brothers were so mad they decided to kill him. But some of the brothers weren't ready to do that so they did the one thing they could all agree on—they threw him in a pit. Then they had to discuss what to do with him. This was the first committee in the Bible. And you see how well this went. About that time, a travelling salesman came through and they decided not to kill him, but sell him.

After all, why kill him when they could get rid of him just as easily and make a little profit. This was the first corporation board meeting decision in the Bible. So they sold him and killed a goat instead. A scapegoat, I guess. They dunked his coat in the blood so that daddy back home would buy the story that a wild animal attacked Joseph and killed him. This wasn't the first lie in the Bible.

So, at this point, Joseph's brothers have gotten rid of him. Joseph is headed off through the desert toward Egypt with these travelling salesmen. They won't keep him, they'll sell him to someone else. Daddy Jacob is about to get some really sad news about his favorite son.

It's amazing how God uses the most desperate kinds of situations and brings good out of them. Just when things look most hopeless, good this way comes. We often say the key is to be faithful. But in this story, who was faithful? Not the brothers. Even though they were believers in the One True God, they didn't act like it. Not Joseph. He had been a twerp. Though he didn't deserve what happened to him, he hadn't done much to distinguish himself so far. Not Jacob. Jacob is not winning Father's Day Daddy of the Year awards. By favoring one child over the others, and by his ahem, family values, he helped set up the rivalries that would bring his family to a crisis.

And yet, God still had something wonderful to do. God uses our faithfulness, and sometimes God uses the messes we create to bring about good. There's an argument, or discussion that some people have about how much the One True God controls everything. It's about whether we have free will and can make choices—good or bad—or whether God just predetermines everything. Even though I'm the Wise One, I don't have the answers to all those kinds of questions. The apostle Paul said, "Human wisdom is foolishness compared to God, but I have been around long enough to see this: God has a way of bringing something out of all of those choices which is greater than the sum of our choices." Paul also said, "All things work together for good for those who love God." Someone much later, a woman named Julian of Norwich said, "All shall be well. All manner of thing shall be well." Sometimes that's hard to believe. But, wait until you hear what happened to this whole story. And I mean all of it. Joseph, yes; but not just Joseph --- Joseph, and his brothers, and their dad, and all of Egypt, and all the world. It is as if God has a guiding hand on us. Here's what happened.

Joseph's brothers tell their dad their story. And while he's sad that his son is dead—he thinks, a long way from there Joseph was being sold in Egypt as a house slave to someone named Potiphar. One thing leads to another and Joseph ends up in prison and it looks like his goose is cooked—do you have that phrase here? But then Pharaoh, the king of Egypt starts having these very strange dreams. And no one could help him understand the meaning of the dreams. But remember, Joseph knows a thing or two about dreams and word gets to Pharaoh that he's got a prisoner who can help. So he calls for him. Joseph gets all ready to go see the king. He shaves his face and his head. He takes a bath. And he goes to see him. The dreams were strange—about seven fat cows being eaten by seven skinny cows. And, seven heads of grain being eaten by seven sickly heads of grain --- troubling dreams. Not even all the other wise ones like me could figure it out. But Joseph had prayed to his God—the One True God—to help him. And God did. Joseph immediately understood what the dreams meant. Seven good, plentiful years were coming. Then a terrible famine would follow. A seven-year famine. There would be good times followed by terrible times. So Joseph advised the Pharaoh to store up some grain during the good times so there would be enough during the bad times. I think your pharaohs on Wall Street and in Washington

could learn a few things from Joseph. And maybe we all could, about saving and prudence. But this isn't really a story about careful finances. It's a story about how God guides history. Pharaoh is so impressed with this guy that he puts him in charge of the whole program. They saved 20% in the good years to get ready for the bad years. When the bad years came, they had enough food for everyone in Egypt and not only that, the whole world came to buy grain from Egypt. And Joseph has gone from the pit to prison to the palace.

The End. What a great story. God used an unlikely imperfect servant to save a nation, and maybe the world. That sounds familiar somehow. I have a feeling we may see that same theme again in the way God works through a humble person to save a nation and the whole world in good times and bad times.

But, there's a footnote to the story; and it's a really cool one. Back up in the north, nine years after selling their brother into slavery, Joseph's brothers were some of the people going hungry in the famine. Their dad, Jacob, heard that there was food in Egypt, so he sent all the brothers down to buy some food—all the brothers except one --- Benjamin. With Joseph gone, little Ben became the favorite. So all the brothers go down to Egypt to beg to buy some food from Pharaoh's Chief-in-Charge of the food, who is none other than . . .you guessed it—their own brother. They don't recognize him, but he recognizes them. Your Hollywood would love this story.

What would Joseph do? What would you do if someone who hurt you very badly now needed your help? We all know the right answer, right? We all know what we should say, but in real life that's a hard decision. The first thing Joseph wanted to be sure of was that his little brother Benjamin—Rachel's other son, was ok. He told them that he wouldn't sell them any grain unless they returned and brought their little brother back with them. They didn't like this idea, but they didn't have much of a choice. Daddy was very unhappy about this, but he didn't have a choice either. But he warned them—don't let anything happen to your little brother.

They returned this time with Benjamin. Joseph decided to do something that looks like a dirty trick, but it really was a test. He wanted to see if they were trustworthy, and if they had changed. True repentance is being in the same situation you were in before and not doing what you did before. It's not enough to just say you are sorry when it benefits you. True repentance is changing. He wanted to see if they had changed. So he sent them all back home with sacks of grain but had his special silver chalice placed in one of the bags—Benjamin's bag—to look like he's stolen it. After the brothers had left down the road, the guards rode after them to arrest the one who had stolen the chalice. The one who had stolen it, not all of them, just the one would be kept as a slave in Egypt. The rest would be free to go, free to abandon the one left behind. The guards overtook them, opened their bags, and to the brother's astonishment and dismay, found the silver chalice in Ben's bag. What they did next probably surprised even themselves. Instead of leaving their brother, abandoning him, they said, "if you are going to take him, then take us all as slaves. We can't go home without him. We won't leave him here." When they were all dragged back to Joseph's palace and told him this, Joseph knew their hearts had changed, and his heart changed too. And there were tears. He told them, "I'm your brother. I'm Joseph." They didn't believe him at first, but then they did, and they hugged and apologized and loved each other as a family. Pharaoh heard about all of this and invited Jacob and all the brothers to come and live in Egypt as his special guests. And they did. Something bad turned into something good.

There's more to the story. I said this part was just a footnote to the famine, but sometimes what seems like a footnote is the real story. Jacob's whole family moved to Egypt as the guest of Pharaoh and they lived happily, but not ever after. The Pharaoh died and the new Pharaoh didn't think so much of this growing family—these followers of the One True God. They were all made slaves. For 400 years, the descendents of these brothers made bricks out of mud and straw in Egypt until one day another single, imperfect son of these followers passed by a bush that was burning but not consumed and heard a voice, "Moses, Moses," here I am." Take off your sandals, you are on holy ground. I have chosen you to set my people free." "Who shall I say has sent me?" "I Am Who I Am. I am the God of your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

And that's a story for another day. But it goes to show how back then and today have so much else in common. God uses the gifts of imperfect people to do great things and sometimes we have to forgive when it's hard and when it hurts, like Joseph. The One True God didn't give up on those brothers, or on their descendents. In fact, if you follow that family long enough, through all of their good times and bad times, their faithfulness and their wanderings; if you follow them through enough generations, you find yourself in Bethlehem peering over the shoulder of another man named Joseph as he, with his wife Mary, is gazing in wonder at a newborn baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And this time, God uses a single, perfect Son to save the world from its spiritual famine and spiritual slavery and to invite every single person in all the world into the Family of God.

* The "Wise One" is a character in our Expressions Vacation Bible School Journey to Egypt from this past week. I am in an amazing costume (complete with headdress) stitched by one of our church members.