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Genesis 45: 1-28 – The Reveal

This week we finished the book of Genesis in the E100 Bible reading plan. And I think it is important that we understand where we have gone thus far. Genesis answers for us several questions. It tells us how we got here and who created us. It tells us about when sin entered the world. And it tells us about how God began to communicate with us.

One of those primary ways of communicating that is very clear early in the story of God in Genesis, is that God intends to reveal himself uniquely to a line of people and he begins in a sense with Abraham. And Abraham becomes the first of the 3 biblical patriarchs. Isaac, Abraham's son is the second. The third is Isaac's son, Jacob. The God of Abraham becomes the God of Isaac and then the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This provides a theme that became crucial in God's revelation to the Hebrews in Egypt, on their journey to the promise land, and is often repeated in the rest of the Old Testament.

Now this is important as we get to our passage this morning concerning Joseph because though it seems that these chapters are just about Joseph, they are in reality about Jacob and how Jacob ends up in Egypt. These chapters are designed to bring the details of Jacob's life, the third of the great patriarchs, to its conclusion. Throughout the story there is an underlying emphasis on matters relative to Jacob's approaching death and events related to it. Details about the death and burial of both Jacob and Joseph, together with their requests to carry their remains back to Canaan, eventually provide closure to the narrative.

All that said though, the story of Joseph is a fascinating story. One clear theme throughout the story of Joseph is divine providence. God is in charge. Joseph tells Pharaoh that it is God that can interpret dreams through him. Even amidst all the bad things that happen to Joseph at the hands of his brothers, he tells them more than once that God has been directing the entire situation. Over and over again, despite what happens, Joseph acknowledges that God is in control.

Ultimately though, this is a story of forgiveness that moves Joseph and his family along in God's story.

Read Genesis 45:1-28.

There are really three brackets that help us to understand the context of our passage this morning and they are all trips to Egypt. Joseph's brothers take a trip to Egypt to get some food during the famine. The brothers return to Egypt with their brother, Benjamin responding to Joseph's request. And finally our passage ends with Jacob saying that he will go to Egypt and he does.

The story of Joseph begins with a brief description of Jacob's family and his sons where the text says that Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons. It appears that this is the case because Joseph was born to Jacob after he was very old and because Joseph was his long-awaited son of his favorite wife, Rachel. Jacob treats Joseph differently than his brothers and this treatment is most clearly demonstrated by his giving Joseph a robe that is said to be beautifully adorned.

To top off his fancy clothes, Joseph has a dream about sheaves of grain where all of Joseph's brothers' sheaves are bowing down to Joseph's sheaf of grain. As if Joseph's brothers were not already frustrated enough that Joseph was Jacob's favorite son, it is as if Joseph is rubbing it in their face when he tells them that in his dream they are all bowing down before him. Even Jacob seems to think that Joseph's dream is ridiculous because it depicts him bowing down to Joseph as well.

One day Joseph is at home with his father while his brothers are off in the fields working and Jacob asks Joseph to go out and see how his brothers are doing. He is probably wearing his fancy tunic and I always picture Joseph as a pretty boy with soft hands approaching his rough and rugged brothers who are actually working . . . and as he walks up to them the brothers say, **“here comes that dreamer.”** They have had enough at this point and they decide they are going to kill their brother. They eventually decide otherwise, tear off Joseph's tunic, throw him in a pit and later sell him into Egyptian slavery. They then dip his fancy robe in goat's blood and give it to Jacob, telling him that his son is dead.

The brothers expected that this would be the end of the story, but God enables Joseph to prosper amidst all that his brothers did to him. Potiphar, Joseph's Egyptian master takes a liking to Joseph and gives him important responsibilities. Unfortunately, Joseph's success is a roller coaster, because Potiphar's wife falsely accuses Joseph of putting the moves on her and Joseph ends up in prison. But there too he prospers and is given responsibility for his fellow prisoners. He eventually interprets a couple prisoners' dreams and then the Pharaoh's. As a result, Pharaoh makes him prime minister. When

the story began, Joseph was given a special tunic from his father, now the Pharaoh gives him a ring, and dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck.

Things are better than ever for Joseph in Egypt, so the biblical story shifts back to Canaan. A horrible famine has begun, and Jacob's family has decided that they must seek food in Egypt. The story is set for Joseph to confront his brothers after years of separation due to what they did to him.

The brothers go to Egypt and meet Joseph, but don't recognize them and Joseph doesn't say who he is. Instead he plays a game of cat and mouse with them. He keeps Simeon and tells the remaining brothers to return to their father Jacob and to return with Benjamin. Joseph gave them grain and also snuck their money and silver cups into their sacks. They are really confused by this, but eventually return to Egypt with their brother Benjamin.

When they go back Joseph plays some more games with them . . . but then he can't control himself any longer and our passage begins, "Then Joseph could not longer control himself . . ." It says that "he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him . . ."

Then the reveal. **"I am Joseph."**

And the brothers were in shock. What? The text says, **"his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence."**

And Joseph goes on to say, **"do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you."**

Joseph forgives his brothers and the whole family is transformed. Joseph explains to them that God had preserved him and raised him to this position of power in Egypt, during this famine, **"to preserve a remnant on earth and to save their lives by a great deliverance."**

The remarkable thing about Joseph is his ability to see beyond his particular circumstances to the work of God. Here he is standing before his brothers, the same guys that thought about killing him, through him in a hole in the ground, and sold him into slavery . . . and he is standing before them with ultimate

power. He can do anything to them. He can imprison them. He could send them away to die in the famine. Joseph chooses to embrace them. The text says, **“he kissed all his brothers and wept over them.”**

Joseph finds the will of God in his struggles. Hollywood handles these situations differently. At that moment when the hero has transcended all the awful things that his enemies have done to him . . . and stands before them with new power . . . he pummels them, he gets his revenge . . . he shows them the consequences of what they did to him.

But Joseph’s response is uniquely biblical. Joseph’s unwillingness to seek revenge is in line with one of the noblest qualities of a wise person.

Proverbs 24:29 says, “Do not say, “I’ll do to him as he has done to me; I’ll pay that man back for what he did.”

It really is a radical model of life. It goes against our instincts. I can remember growing up with my brother and fighting over everything. We would be sitting in the backseat of the car and the second my mom turned her head we would give one another a little tap on the leg or a punch to the side. And if my brother did it to me, I remember this deep sense that I must return it. And no matter what my mom said I always had to get my shot in at some point. Maybe it was in a few house, but it always had to get done.

We have this deep sense in us that we cannot stand to be wronged as we see it. It is not strong to take it and to forgive. Strength as we see it is not demonstrated in Joseph’s weeping and kissing and embracing. That is soft.

But repeatedly this is a biblical model for dealing with hardship and pain . . . for dealing with situation where we are trampled on.

Romans 12 gives us the reason why the biblical model is different from our world’s model. **“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: “If your**

enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

The reason ultimately that Joseph can forgive is because he knows that vengeance is not his role. If it is to be sought, it is the work of God and not him.

We don't like to wait for God. It seems too uncertain, so we take matters into our own hands. We make underhanded comments meant to punish. We get even.

But in the midst of Joseph's deep deep struggles. His being stuck in that hole. His being sold into slavery. His being imprisoned under false accusations . . . Joseph was not thinking about how to get even, but about his God . . . and he wasn't thinking about vengeance but about never giving up and doing the best with what he had been given.

Romans 8:28 says, **"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."**

This week I heard the story of Frederick Buechner as told by the Reverend John Claypool in a sermon (http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/claypool_4523.htm). Claypool says of Buechner (and I am going to read all of what he says):

He did not grow up in a churchgoing family. His ancestors had come over to this country in the 1850s as German radical freethinkers. They were very successful financially and socially, but religion was simply not something that was of interest to them.

When Frederick was 10, on a Saturday morning in November of 1936, he had expected to go with his father to Princeton where the father had graduated a few years before as a very esteemed honor student. However, because of the Great Depression, his father had not been able to keep the kind of employment that he had wanted. Unfortunately, he had begun to rely on alcohol as a way of covering his disappointment. That only exacerbated the problem. So on this particular day when they were to go back to see the old classmates, the elder Buechner got up before anybody else in the family, dressed, went down to the garage, carefully closed the garage door, turned on the ignition of the old Chevrolet, sat

down on the running board, and was asphyxiated before anybody in the family realized what was happening.

Years later, people used to ask Buechner, "How did your father die?" He would always say, "He died of heart trouble." Then he said, "That was at least partially true. You see, he had a heart and it was troubled." And at the depths of that trouble were no spiritual resources on which to depend. The Buechner family lived on as best they could. Young Frederick went on, as his father had, to Princeton, went back to the Lawrenceville Prep School where he was a junior teacher of English, and he published a novel that was greatly acclaimed critically. It looked like he was going to have a very bright future. In fact, so bright that he resigned his teaching post and began to write full-time.

Then he had that mysterious malady that often happens to writers. He hit a block where nothing seemed to come. He became very, very despondent because nothing was working for him. At that juncture one of his friends said, **"You might like to go to Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. There is a wonderful minister there named George Buttrick. He bequeaths hope, he gives energy. You might find what he is doing to be helpful."** And all of this is not something Buechner had ever done before.

He began to go to this church and sure enough this distinguished Englishman did begin to speak home to his heart. One Sunday in the midst of a sermon, Buechner had a genuine religious epiphany. God happened to him, if I can use that metaphor, in a profound sense that there was something beyond us on which one could rely. Because the experience was so powerful, young Buechner made an appointment to see Dr. Buttrick the next week. As they talked the grand old minister sensed the potential of this young writer. At that time the Rockefeller Foundation had a series of grants that they were giving to people just like Buechner. People who were interested in the ministry and, therefore, perhaps would like to consider preparing for it. Even though he had not been in church over a dozen times in all his life, to his great amazement, he matriculated at Union Theological Seminary in New York City and for the first time in his life encountered Holy Scripture. It was a completely unknown realm to him before.

He says as he began to live into this great document he was amazed by two things. First of all, the utter honesty of Scripture, even the greatest heroes were depicted with all of their strengths but also their flaws. But he said even more significant to him was a motif that he began to discover as we worked his way

through the pages of Scripture, that with this God called Yahweh, **the seemingly worse things were never the last things**. God always seemed to have something else that God was able to do. In fact, the image of an ingenious alchemist is the image that came to Buechner. Alchemists, you remember, were those ancient scientists who tried to take lead and somehow transmute it into gold. Well he began to trace through Holy Scripture how again and again, when it seemed like people were at the absolute end of their ropes, that this Alchemist God had a way of doing something even with the worst that human beings had done, and bring out growth and bring out redemption.

Joseph took the worst of things and made them the best.

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