

Joseph: The Promise Bearer

“Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don’t be afraid.”

Genesis 50:19-20

Genesis was designed to inspire our commitment to stay in the story. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob calls us out of our nothingness into a life of faith and trust. We receive God’s blessing in exchange for our barrenness and God’s salvation replaces the illusion of our self-sufficiency. We give up on the vain attempt to make a name for ourselves and we depend upon the covenant-keeping God. With the Lord’s help we distance ourselves from the restless pursuits of Cain, the violence of Lamech, and the greed of Lot. We are drawn to the examples of Abel, Enoch and Noah. We are challenged to accept God’s radical call of faith as did Abraham and Sarah. We were meant to learn from the example of Jacob that the measure of life is not in what we achieve, but in what we receive. Only God in his love and mercy can give us what we truly need. Only God can save us from the mess of the human condition. The story focuses our attention on the promise of God as the only true beginning for living. There is only one genesis that leads to life and new possibilities. Everything apart from the promise is a dead end.

The promise of God is not as neatly packaged as we might have imagined. The story is more complex and gritty than we expected. God’s insistence on bloody sacrifices and circumcision gives cause for reflection. From the beginning, God really wanted us to see the Cross of Christ looming large, “towering o’er the wrecks of time; all the light of sacred story gathers round its head sublime” (In the Cross of Christ I Glory). We were meant to feel the passion of God who sacrificed his one and only son, when we think of Abraham called by God to sacrifice Isaac, his one and only son. God made himself known in concrete relationships and acts of redemption. Those who have grown up with their religion tied to a few conceptual propositions will find the true story of Genesis disturbing. From the beginning, faith was hardly a matter of mental assent or emotional hype. It was far more radical and embracing than attending religious services. As we’ve seen, the

heavenly message is earthy. People responded to God in ways which were deeply personal and down-to-earth. Abel built an altar, Noah built an ark, and Abraham built a family. God's word shaped their existence and called them into a holy vocation.

The way the story unfolds in Genesis is similar to how faith takes root in our lives. Like Jacob, the promise of God comes to us in spite of ourselves. We don't deserve to be a part of the story and often we seem to do everything we can possibly think of to frustrate God's work in our lives. We don't trust God, we test God; we don't obey God, we disobey God. God is forever patiently and persistently reminding us that our little stories only have significance and meaning as they share in his story. In fact, apart from our family history in the Faith we have no story worth sharing. Jacob's eleventh son, Joseph gives us a different picture of the life of faith. Both men lived frustrated lives, but unlike his father, Joseph was not the cause of his own frustration. He didn't bring it upon himself. He didn't suffer for his faithlessness, but for his faithfulness. It was Jacob's disobedience that was always getting him into trouble, but with Joseph it was his obedience to God that made life difficult.

The Dreamer

The transition in the story from Jacob to Joseph is abrupt. The scene is sketched with a few telling facts. At the age of seventeen, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers and he gave his father a "bad report" about them. Was Joseph a man of integrity or an informant, a tattletale or a truth-teller? Was he a smartalecky teenager or an honest son? Then we hear that Jacob (Israel) "loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him" (37:3). How did this preferential treatment affect Joseph? Did it spoil him or strengthen him? We know it made his life more difficult, because his brothers "hated him and could not speak a kind word to him" (37:4). A third fact caused them to hate him all the more. Joseph had a dream. "Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it" (37:6-7). The brothers reacted predictably, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" This much is certain, Joseph grew up in a large family where there was a lot of hate directed against him. The ratio of hate to love was ten to one, but that didn't stop Joseph from sharing a second dream. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and

this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me” (37:9).

How we interpret the first three paragraphs of Joseph’s story may say more about us than Joseph. Sometimes we can’t help it, our story gets tangled up with the gospel story and we impose our reactions on the story. If we were raised in a family where our brother or sister received preferential treatment we may find ourselves sympathetic with Jacob’s sons. After all, Joseph’s dreams do sound very egocentric. Even his father rebuked him, “What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?” (37:10). Judging from their reaction, Joseph’s family interpreted his dreams in a manner consistent with modern psychology. Perhaps the ultimate meaning of the dream could be found in Joseph’s wish to be superior. Was he unwittingly exposing his unconscious desire to be above everyone else? Or maybe his dreams were compensation for inferiority feelings brought on by his brothers’ animosity. No doubt the brothers had analyzed Joseph and concluded that he was either a foolish brat or boastful fool.

On the surface, the case against Joseph seems so strong that some biblical commentators agree that Joseph was at best naïve and at worst egotistical. However, we have to be careful not to impose our slant on the story. The rush to psychological judgment can be stopped short by a single line that immediately jogs our memory about another revelation. “His brothers,” we are told, “were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind” (37:11). We were meant to hear this about Jacob as a clue to the significance of Joseph. Jacob knew that the covenant-keeping God of his fathers was quite capable of communicating in highly unusual ways. He himself had been on the receiving end of some of God’s provocative communication. We read this line and think of Mary’s response to the testimony of the shepherds about her new born son, Jesus. The parallel is worth noting. “Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Lk 2:19). There is more here than meets the eye or ear. But even if the dream was not an inner monologue, but a revelation from God, was Joseph being immature and naïve to share the dream with his family? I believe the story teller meant for us to see the obvious contrast between Jacob and Joseph. For most of his life Jacob was a clever manipulator, always conniving and striving to turn situations in his favor. He was a self-serving political character, who cleverly calculated every move on the chess board of life. He weighed the pros and cons and covered his backside. Not so with Joseph, a truer opposite would be hard to find. The seventeen-year-old shepherd was not a chip off the old block. He was cut from different stock.

His open-faced honesty and his ability to speak the truth simply alienated him from his family. Yet these qualities of integrity, sincerity and trustworthiness proved invaluable in Joseph's success, first in Potiphar's house and then in prison (39:6, 22).

Joseph's vulnerability resulted from his character, not his naivete. Although on the receiving end of considerable hate, nothing is ever said about Joseph hating his brothers or seeking revenge. Another point in favor of Joseph was his willingness to be sent by Jacob to visit his brothers. Given the tensions in the family, this was probably the last thing that Joseph wanted to do, but he traveled the fifty miles from Hebron to Shechem in search of his brothers. Instead of giving up and returning home, when he didn't find them in Shechem, he followed a stranger's lead to Dothan, another fifteen miles away. It is ironic that we should read the story of Joseph and feel the need to defend his character, especially when we consider how blatantly evil his brothers were. When his brothers saw him in the distance, they plotted to kill him. "Here comes the dreamer!" they said to each other. "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams" (37:19-20).

All Joseph had done was to share the dream that God had given to him, and for that his brothers sought to kill him. They remind us of the Pharisees and scribes who condemned Jesus. Joseph could have said the same thing Jesus said, "I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word...You are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God" (John 8:37,40).

Judah convinced the brothers that they were better off selling Joseph for eight ounces of silver to a passing caravan of Ishmaelites than killing him. They stripped Joseph of his "richly ornamented robe" and dipped the robe in the blood of a slain goat (37:32). We hear the story today and we are reminded of Jesus' innocence and the events that led to the cross. He too, was stripped of his robe and beaten. The slaughtered goat and the robe dipped in blood, pointed forward to Christ's sacrifice once for all (Heb 10:10). For years to come, this tragic episode defined Joseph's family. Father Jacob was grief stricken. He refused to be comforted, and his ten older brothers were forced to live a lie. Grief and deception shaped this family's future. They were no longer bothered directly by Joseph, the dreamer, but we cannot say "out of sight, out of mind," because Joseph's life

continued to haunt his family. Jacob clung to the memory of his son and no matter how hard Joseph's brothers tried to forget, they could never forget the dreamer and the dream! Their conspiracy of deception constantly reminded them of the dreamer.

The Dream

We can never hear Joseph's story again for the first time, which means we cannot forget Joseph's dream either. Because we know the ending, we know that the dream was fulfilled. The dream was not from Joseph's repressed feelings or deep insecurities, but from God. It was not a monologue with himself, but a dialogue between Joseph and God. The distinction between divine revelation and human reflection is absolutely crucial in understanding God's salvation history. Throughout Genesis the voice of God calls creation into existence, reality into being, and life into meaning. Apart from the Word of God, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have no enduring significance nor destiny. The Word of God made them, blessed them and gave them a future. The Word of God was and is their salvation and ours.

Even though Joseph was sold into slavery and ended up in Egypt, he was neither grief stricken like his father Jacob, nor totally screwed up like his brother Judah. There was an air of freedom and confidence about Joseph. In spite of serious frustrations and major setbacks, Joseph lived by faith in the Word of God. He never forgot the dream. He reminds us of Jesus' promise, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:32).

The story of Judah leaving his brothers and going down to Canaan parallels Joseph going down to Egypt (38:1-39:22). Taken together they illustrate the mess of the human condition and the mystery of God. Both leave home and make their way in the world. Judah's story is void of the blessing of God; Joseph's story cannot be told apart from the blessing of God. Although Judah was free, he was a slave to sin, while Joseph, in spite of his slavery used his freedom to do what was right. Judah deceived his daughter-in-law Tamar; Joseph respected his Egyptian slave master, Potiphar. Judah slept with Tamar, thinking she was a prostitute; Joseph refused to sleep with Potiphar's wife, in spite of her persistent seduction. Tamar used Judah's seal and staff to expose the truth; Potiphar's wife used Joseph's coat to establish a lie. Judah admitted his guilt, yet remained in power; Joseph was falsely condemned and sent to prison.

Why did the story teller compare Judah and Joseph? I believe it was because he wanted us to see the difference between believing in the dream and trying to kill the dream. Although a son of Jacob, Judah lived in the tradition of Cain and Lamech. He tried to shape his own destiny and make a name for himself, but it only led to a dead end. It always does! Joseph, on the other hand, lived in the tradition of Abraham. Wherever he went, he remembered the Lord. Like his grandfather before him, he raised an altar, figuratively speaking, whether he was in Potiphar's house or in prison.

The carefully told story of Joseph in Egypt keeps the dream alive. Joseph is a picture of the believer in the world. We refuse to read his story as some "rags to riches" tale. Joseph's dream has nothing to do with professional advancement and secular power. We haven't come this far with Joseph to make worldly success the measure of the man. Perhaps it is best to see Joseph's faithfulness from prison to Pharaoh's court, in the light of Jesus' faithfulness before Pilate or Paul's faithfulness before Caesar. The Lord was with Joseph in prison; "he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden" (39:21), and the Lord was with him before Pharaoh.

The impressive quality about Joseph was that he was truly God-centered. He never hesitated to position himself in the world as a person who humbly feared God. He did this simply, without any awkwardness or artificiality. We see this in the way he framed his conversation with the Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker: "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams" (40:8). Two full years later, when he was summoned to interpret Pharaoh's dream, Joseph said, "I cannot do it, but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires" (41:16).

Joseph honestly communicated God's Word, whether he was delivering good news or hard news. He was as dispassionate and objective with the Word of God as he could be. "This is what it means," Joseph said to Pharaoh's cupbearer and proceeded to give him the good news; "This is what it means," Joseph said to the baker and proceeded to give him the bad news (40:12,18). Joseph spoke with authority, but he never assumed that authority for himself personally. We hear the authority of the Word of God in his response to Pharaoh: "The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do . . . The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon"(41:25,32). Because Joseph stood behind the Word of God, to respond to him was to respond to God. Pharaoh

understood this when he put Joseph in charge of his palace and said, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you"(41:39). May it be true of us as it was with Joseph, that our work in the world is shaped by our God-centeredness and faithfulness to the Word of God.

Joseph was thirty when he entered Pharaoh's service. By the time he was thirty-seven, he had prepared the nation for famine, married an Egyptian woman, and had two sons. Even though he was exceedingly successful and his father-in-law was a priest of the sun god Ra, Joseph's focus on God remained strong. He gave his sons Hebrew names: Manasseh meant "made to forget," which Joseph explained this way, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." Ephraim meant "God has made me fruitful," and Joseph explained, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering" (41:51-52). These two names offer great insight into Joseph's walk with God. In order to remember the dream, he had to forget the past. He had to put aside all bitterness and hate and remember God's faithfulness. Long before the apostle Paul gave his spiritual admonition to forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead, Joseph was pressing toward the goal to win the prize for which God was calling him (Phil 3:13).

Joseph remained faithful throughout his life but it may have taken a long time for him to come to terms with the delicate balance of forgetting and remembering. This can be true in our lives as well. Joseph's waiting was not punishment, but preparation. As the years went by and his relationship to the Lord deepened he was prepared for God's fulfillment of the dream.

The Fulfillment

Meanwhile, the impact of the famine was being felt back in Hebron. The tone of Jacob's voice tells us that nothing has changed between him and his sons. "Why do you just keep looking at each other? I have heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us, so that we may live and not die" (42:1-2). A good twenty years of grief and deception takes its toll on an extended family.

In a literal sense, Joseph's dream was fulfilled the moment his ten brothers (Benjamin remained with Jacob) were presented to the governor. They "bowed down to him with their faces to the ground" (42:6), just the way it was in his dream. But the dream was never about vindication. It was always about

predestination. The issue was never sibling rivalry, but the destiny of God's people. The dream was about the blessing of Abraham, not the birth order of Jacob's sons. God in his wisdom kept the promise alive by sending Joseph away from his family. Of all Jacob's sons, Joseph was the only one whose life was shaped and guided by the Lord God. At the end of his life, Jacob pronounced a blessing on each of his sons. What is significant about the patriarch's assessment is that only Joseph's success and strength is attributed to God. Joseph's life could only be understood "because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, because of your father's God, who helps you, because of the Almighty, who blesses you with blessings of the heavens above, blessings of the deep that lies below, blessings of the breast and womb" (49:24-25).

The story is told in such a way as to emphasize that Joseph was in control. He was in control of Egypt and he was in control of his family. After all these years he was calling the shots! In spite of terribly famine conditions Joseph preserved life and order in Egypt and in spite of festering family guilt and personal grief Joseph pursued life and reconciliation for his family. His methods may not be our methods, but the story teller doesn't care about our sensitivities (47:21). By God's grace and wisdom, Joseph is the promise-bearer and what he says goes! God put Joseph in charge of Egypt and his family not to answer our political and psychological questions, but to save lives. There is a toughness about Joseph that we were meant to commend, not condemn. Joseph took extreme measures to rule and reconcile effectively.

Joseph wisely chose to deal with his brothers' deception slowly and indirectly. By accusing them of spying and holding Simeon as a hostage until they returned with Benjamin, Joseph tested and probed their conscience. He discovered the poignancy of their guilt. "They said to one another, `Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come upon us'" (42:21). Joseph's course of action gave him no pleasure, yet the story presents it as necessary strategy to deal with deception and grief that had hurt his family for so many years. By hiding their money in the food sacks and then concealing the special silver cup in Benjamin's sack, he made them out to be what they were, deceivers. Joseph raised the pressure to the breaking point, when he calmly conceded that only the one in whose sack was found the silver cup would become a slave. "The rest of you, go back to your father in peace" (44:17). The prospects of returning to Jacob without Benjamin were unthinkable.

Once again the story is told with Judah and Joseph placed side by side. This time, Judah eloquently and passionately pled for mercy. He begs to become a slave in Benjamin's place, for the sake of his father Jacob. "Please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come upon my father" (44:33-34).

Joseph, the man who was in control of the state and the man who had orchestrated this crisis moment, could no longer control his emotions. He dismissed his attendants and made himself known to his brothers in private, but he wept so loud it could not be kept a secret (45:1-2). "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" He was overcome with emotion and his brothers were terrified. Before their eyes their brother had suddenly come back to life.

Joseph bore the burden of reconciliation, so that the family might know the blessing of reconciliation. It was by his invitation, "Come close to me," and it was by his reassurance, "Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here." It was Joseph who founded their reconciliation on God's will, "because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you," and on the providence of God: "But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance" (45:4-7). This is the climax of the story and the fulfillment of the dream. The initial picture of Joseph's brothers bowing down pales in significance to this truly remarkable experience of reconciliation among brothers: Joseph "kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him" (45:15).

Joseph's life testifies to the truth of Romans 8 that God works for the good of those who love him and who have been called according to his purpose. He reminds us of the promise that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:28,39). He reassures us that he who began a good work will carry it onto completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil 1:6).

The Promise

Jacob's body was embalmed and his life was mourned by both his family and the Egyptians. Joseph went up to Mamre to bury his father next to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah and Leah. Out of respect for Joseph, the Egyptians honored

Jacob and his family. "All Pharaoh's officials accompanied him--the dignitaries of his court and all the dignitaries of Egypt" (50:7). Years later however, when Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten, he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt. Before he died, he made "the sons of Israel swear an oath" and he promised, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place" (50:25). Right up to the end Joseph was determined to stay in the story.

Jacob's death struck fear in the hearts of Joseph's brothers. "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" (50:15). We are amazed that the brothers would still question Joseph's love. Had he not proven his love in every possible way? Once again the brothers schemed and came up with a plan to deceive Joseph. They invented instructions by Jacob, requesting Joseph to forgive them. Joseph wept when he received their message. His brothers came and "threw themselves down before him." "We are your slaves," they said. Their inability to believe in the grace of God and Joseph's commitment to the will of God reminds us of the apostle Paul's struggle with the believers in Galatia, who were tempted to turn away from the gospel of grace and trust in human effort.

Joseph reassured his brothers, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid" (50:19-20). Joseph's response reminds us of our Lord's words. He often introduced the gospel with these very same words, "Do not be afraid." But Joseph's question reminds us that he himself is not the Promise. "Am I in the place of God?" Joseph, the promise-bearer was a powerful witness to the Promise, but he was not the Promise. He knew full well that he, like his brothers, needed to depend on the grace and mercy of God. The implied answer to Joseph's rhetorical question had been proven throughout his life. From the age seventeen when he shared the dream with his family until he ruled in Egypt, Joseph depended on the providence of God and submitted to the will of God. Joseph's life from beginning to end was a testimony against evil's promise, "and you will be like God" (3:5). The reason Joseph was such a good promise bearer was because he never confused the Promise with himself. The dream was never a monolog within himself, but a dialogue with God. The fulfillment of the dream was always up to God and never under his control. Joseph let God be God and like John the Baptist, the immediate precursor to the Promised One, Joseph knew the Lord God too well to confuse

himself with God. Joseph is a vivid example and powerful reminder of how we are to stay in the story.