

Genesis 45:1-15

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me; do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there, since there are five more years of famine to come, so that you and your household and all that you have will not come to poverty.' And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them, and after that his brothers talked with him.

Matthew 15:10-20

Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false

witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.” (586)

What got us to this moment: it’s a long story.

Joseph was the first born of his father’s favorite wife. In all there were four women with whom Jacob, now known as Israel, had children—two wives and two servants. And the one he loved best was Rachel, so the sons he loved best were Joseph and Benjamin.

Joseph seemed doubly blessed, though, because he also had charisma, that mysterious power that comes from who-knows-where. It makes for a compelling leader. It makes for a wise interpreter of things. Authority, that mysterious quality: it seems to flow from charisma, a capacity for inspiring trust and confidence.

He wasn’t wise, though, in how his charisma might affect others, like his brothers. Like, once, when Joseph had had two dreams that indicated he’d lord power over his brothers, he went ahead and told his brothers about it—though, of course, he was free not to. People only know your dreams if you tell them. This is the mystery of the human mind, it is an astonishingly free and private realm. And it’s yours to share with others, or not. You can just keep yourself to yourself. A secret closet of your soul, as spoken of in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a realm for encountering God.

In the age of social media it might be hard to imagine: you can just keep yourself to Yourself.

In Joseph’s case, this divulgence only inflamed his brothers’ envy all the more, so much so that they soon decided to kill him—or most of them did. Reuben urged, and at last persuaded, them not to. He suggested they just abandon him in a pit. He implied that he’d eventually die there, and that should satisfy. But he actually intended to go back for Joseph to deliver him safely back to his father.

The ten agreed to the pit-plan, so they lowered him into one and left him there. But then they thought of something even better: to sell Joseph into slavery and then to fake his death, which they did. They sold him to some Ishmaelites on their way to Egypt, and they took his coat that their father had made special for him. It was a coat with sleeves misunderstood once as a coat of many colors or a “Technicolor dreamcoat.” Little matter: they dipped it in goats’ blood to make it appear as if he’d been killed by a wild animal in the

wilderness. They brought the coat to their father, Jacob-now-Israel who was devastated—all of which happened without Reuben's knowledge, so when he returned to rescue Joseph from the pit he despaired to find him gone and suspected his brothers of the worst.

And it worked. Jacob-now-Israel was fooled, and terribly aggrieved. And the brothers were free of their awful envy. Meanwhile, Joseph was brought to Egypt and made a slave in Potiphar's household—he who was a captain in Pharaoh's palace guard.

And he did well there, earning the respect of his master.

He also earned the notice of his master's wife.

When he refused her advances, she accused him of trying to force himself on her, which landed him in prison.

Some time into the indefinite sentence, two other servants joined him there, and both had dreams that puzzled them. So Joseph interpreted the dreams, this which he trusted as a portal to God. And his interpretations proved true. But this was a fact forgotten until two years later when one of those men, restored now to service, learned that Pharaoh had had a dream that puzzled him, even worried him. That was when the servant recalled Joseph in the dungeon. He told Pharaoh about him, and Joseph was sent for.

He was cleaned up, for who knows how long he'd been in the dungeon, with tangled hair and long, dirty beard? Now clean, he was brought before Pharaoh, and he listened as Pharaoh told him the dream. Without hesitation, he explained its meaning—that Egypt would enjoy seven years of plenty, but then would have to endure seven years of drought and famine. For this, Pharaoh would need to plan, to store up and ration out grain for the people. And so he would also need someone to organize the effort.

Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of the Pharaoh, king of Egypt. And he managed by the time those plentiful seven years were up to store grain in such abundance—like the sand of the sea—that he stopped measuring it; it was beyond measure.

Egypt, however, wasn't alone in the time of famine. All the region suffered it, not least the land of Canaan. All the region also knew that grain could be found and bought in Egypt. So Jacob sent ten of his sons to Egypt for food, but he kept Benjamin home with him

out of fear that harm might come to him. And when the ten arrived in Egypt, it was Joseph they dealt with.

Joseph recognized them, but they didn't recognize him. So he treated them as strangers, testing them as to why they'd come, interrogating them as to who they were and what family they'd come from, imprisoning them for three days on trumped-up charges, and finally freeing them only on the condition that they go home and then return to Egypt but this time with their youngest brother, this only remaining beloved son of Jacob. To guarantee their return, he would keep one of the ten—keep Simeon as a slave for collateral. Then he loaded their donkey with grain, but also with the money they'd used to buy it, so it would appear that they'd stolen this load.

They only realized this when they were back home, and they were terrified by it. It only made the idea of going back with Benjamin—Benjamin to free Simeon—even more unimaginable. So they stayed where they were for as long as they could until they were all out of food again. And when at last they ventured out, they brought him not just Benjamin but also the payment they owed and a few gifts besides.

Having arrived, they were told they would dine with the master in his house. So they prepared themselves for when Joseph was to come along, at noon.

When he did, according to the story, he asked about their welfare, and said, "Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?" They said, "Your servant, our father is well; he is still alive." And they bowed their heads and did obeisance. Then he looked up and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, "Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!" With that, Joseph hurried out, because he was overcome with affection for his brother, and he was about to weep. So he went into a private room and wept there. Then he washed his face and came out; and controlling himself he said, "Serve the meal."

Later on, when the donkeys were loaded once again and all eleven sons of Israel were to return to Israel, Joseph planted his silver cup in Benjamin's sack. And he sent them off. And then he sent off his steward, telling him to follow them and to search their sacks for the stolen item—which he did, finding it in the last sack he searched, Benjamin's, while the other brothers went from confused at the accusation to terrified that the accusation proved true. And they wept and tore at their clothes.

Taken once again to Joseph, they were overwrought. But Joseph explained that only the one in whose possession the cup was found would be made to stay as a slave; the rest were free to return home.

This didn't do much to relieve their dread. Judah was the one to speak: "Our father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons; one left me—torn to pieces—and I have never seen him since. If you take this one also from me, and harm comes to him, you will bring down my grey hairs in sorrow to Sheol.' Now therefore," Judah pleaded with Joseph, "when we come to our father and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy's life, when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die... Now therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy; and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father."

It was then that Joseph could no longer control himself, as we read in the story this morning. It was then, which point was a long time coming, that Joseph, once the braggart, then the victim, then the manager, and then the manipulator, now made himself known to his brothers and that he wept so loudly everyone in the household could hear it. This man who seems never before to have lost control, this man whose charisma apparently gave him special access for understanding God but never himself seemed subject to God: now he would submit himself in humbler terms, even humiliating terms, so out of control that he was heard throughout the house.

There's an interesting distancing of God over the course of events told in Genesis. God is less and less in conversation with the human characters, less and less active in their moment-to-moment lives. With each passing generation of the patriarchs, God seems further removed, from Abraham, directly addressed from time to time, to Jacob, who encountered in the wilderness some being of mysterious provenance, to Joseph whose best access to God was through dreams and otherwise whose storied twists and turns takes on the ironic quality of providence, the movement of God in time, the providing of God to those trapped in history, provisions sometimes abundant, provisions sometimes but sufficient.

This irony is, as Marilynne Robinson notes in her book *Reading Genesis*, "that [providence] is served by just those steps that are taken to defeat it." Which is how Joseph

would come to sense it, though never committed to the promise that this people would persist and abound, though not even committed to the wellbeing of his brothers on whom the promise collectively rests. Revealing himself to his brothers, he explains, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life...So it was not you who sent me here, but God.”

Walter Brueggemann personalizes this for preaching purposes. Old Testament scholar and occasional preacher, Brueggemann wrote of Joseph in his book *The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power and Weakness*, that Joseph was “...willing to host the hidden, inscrutable, unresolved purpose of God for his life that is beyond his control....He was willing to trust a purpose for his life that is larger than his own horizon.” And he imagines Joseph saying, “I became aware that my life was more than the sum of my little fears, my little hates, and my little loves. My life is larger than I imagined, and I decided to embrace the largeness that is God’s gift for my life.”

Just so, this deep personal faith that Brueggemann imagines for Joseph takes on the humanistic quality that the later stories of Genesis encourage. When it comes to Joseph and his generation, God isn’t walking around in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, talking to his human creatures and sewing them clothes. God isn’t telling one favored man to build a big boat and then divulging to him God’s plan for making creation over again. God isn’t even speaking word for word a promise, repeating it from time to time over the course of many years. As Genesis unfolds, God becomes no less real, only less easily sensed by human senses, and it asks for trust in God as no less present, just present in ways not so plain, so apparently obvious.

Robinson encourages a reading of Genesis that takes note of this, which since reading her book I’ve come more and more to appreciate. She enjoys Genesis as a sacred text but one that encourages humanism. She sees here testament to an eternal God but one who encourages the material realm, and who makes good and gracious use of creation on its own terms, the material and the time-bound. As a point of contrast, she mentions an Egyptian text that resembles the story of Joseph and his brothers. “The Egyptian story,” she notes, “features self-mutiliation, the killing of the faithless wife, resurrection, the creation of semi-divine woman, metamorphosis...” which she brings to light for its “draw[ing by

contrast] attention to the rigorous realism of Genesis. [Here] Human beings come into existence only through birth. Men do not become trees or rise up from drops of blood.”

Which rigorous realism then reveals as all the more wondrous the brothers’ simple, earth-bound move to reconciliation, Joseph setting aside his totally understandable desire for revenge in favor of renewed relations, Joseph putting away further chance to torment his brothers (as they so richly deserve) and perhaps also setting aside, if but for a moment, his insufferable self-regard (making him deserve a little comeuppance himself), setting all such things aside in favor of eating together, weeping together, and talking together.

And it’s worth noting that this moment of reconciliation, undeniably beautiful, merges once again with the contingencies of history. It’s worth noting that this moment of reconciliation, which feels like it’d be the perfect conclusion to an epic story, will rather go on in far distant years to create conditions that will become woeful. Joseph will encourage his brothers to stay where there is food, to send for Jacob-now-Israel that he might join them where there is food, and that all the nation Israel might follow as well. For now, they will eat. For another generation, they shall survive. Yet this move will also create the conditions for enslavement. A century or so later, the people Israel will suffer in continued desperation, slaving for food, laboring for security amidst empire, conditions that will have them crying out to God.

As Robinson notes of this humanising sacred text, it’s also one that problematizes righteousness and sin, that complicates questions of good and evil, right and wrong. Moments of grace will not prohibit future falls into suffering—for Genesis is far too willing to see history as contingency. Indeed, here is sacred text to reveal manifest entanglements even following moments where God seems so clearly to have touched down.

All of which gives permission to how faith comes to us to live—or at least it does to me, to live with and to live within. We are more likely, I imagine, to experience God as providential than as fully revealed. We are more likely, I imagine, to experience God in trust rather than as plainly spoken directive, indeed to witness God in hindsight rather than in foresight and to glimpse God as the flow of life that brought us to now rather than as some clearly revealed instruction of what’s right and good and is to come next.

Faith is a bewildering prospect. Walking with God is a bewildering prospect, which our astonishingly enduring sacred texts are willing to admit—which is likely why they

endure. Because, see, what got us to this moment, what has brought us to this moment in this place of prayer and peace: it's a long story.

And it's a good one.

Thanks be to God.