

Sermon – August 30, 2020  
“I Am Joseph!”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Genesis 45:1-15

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these Words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and be with us and astonish us with your word. Amen*

Good morning! It is great to be back with you and to worship God together this morning. I greatly appreciate Judy Mooers filling in for me and all who helped make it possible last weekend for us to attend our daughter's wedding. The wedding was a great event and an unexpected time in our lives to give away another treasured daughter, to welcome a son-in-law into our family, and to marry them before God. People ask how the wedding was and I think the best answer I can give is that we were greatly blessed.

It is that time of year when the church plans for 2021. Expect calls asking you to prayerfully consider using your gifts to serve the church in the coming year. Please pray about how God is calling you in the coming year to serve, and then respond accordingly to requests to be at work in the church's life. And thanks to many of you who have already responded.

As we begin to look at our scripture text this morning, if you have your Bible with you, open it up and find Genesis 45. There are verses in this chapter that you will want to mark if you have not already done so. When we last left Joseph and his brothers, Joseph disappeared over the horizon, most likely tied to the tail of a camel. He begins a journey to Egypt. His brothers watch him go, hear his pleas with them not to send him away, and then go about the rest of their plan. They take Joseph's robe, put the blood of an animal on it, and take the robe to Jacob. Jacob's heart is broken and his mourning for Joseph is consuming. He grieves to the point that the brothers are moved deeply by the depth of his grief. The brothers for their part begin to seek to bear the guilt of what they have done and live as if the dream is ended. Joseph is gone. There will be no ruler over them who rises in Israel. All is as it should be in their family. Joseph is not forgotten, but is pushed out of their minds. There is no way to recover him and so they seek to deal with their guilt and the consequences it brings.

Joseph has a very different experience. He is bought as a household slave. He serves his master faithfully and declines his master's wife's advances for her sexual pleasure. His response to her leads to his being placed in prison where he again works diligently to care for the prisoners. There he meets Pharaoh's cupbearer and accurately interprets his dream. When Pharaoh dreams dreams that cannot be explained, Joseph is remembered, interprets the dreams, and makes a recommendation for how to deal with the coming events the dreams foretell. Joseph is raised to second in rank in Egypt, put in charge of collecting and distributing grain, marries an Egyptian woman, has two sons, and forgets his family and life in Canaan. Seven years of plenty have gone by, and now the years of famine have come, and there is no food in the land other than what Joseph has stored away, an amount that is said to be without measure. Joseph has been diligent in preparing for famine. There is also no food in Canaan, and so Jacob sends all of his sons but Benjamin to Egypt to buy food to sustain them.

On the brothers' first trip to Egypt, Joseph recognizes his brothers as they come and bow before him. The dream is remembered and Joseph must confront the emotions that seeing his brothers bring to him. The brothers are all put in prison for three days, and then one is retained and the rest are sent with grain and their money back to their homes. They are to bring Benjamin on their next trip in order to release the detained brother and to be able to buy more grain. They come with Benjamin, but Joseph's cup is found in his sack when they leave, and they are all brought back to Joseph to hear his ruling.

Joseph decides to detain the one with the cup, Benjamin, and let the rest go free. Judah makes a plea for Benjamin on the case that their father will die if this son does not return, and then he declares that he will trade his own life for Benjamin. In this plea, Joseph finds assurance that his brothers have changed. Before they had no concern for their father; nor did they worry about his grief. Before they had no concern for the youngest brother. Now they are willing to die in his place. God has worked a transformation in the hearts of Joseph's brothers, and Joseph realizes that they are not the same. This background brings us to today's text.

I hope that you will take time to mark this text (Genesis 45:4-8) in your Bibles. It is a key text in the story of Joseph and the story of our ancestors as they grow from those who have received God's covenant promise to those who will be a nation through whom God will bless all people of the earth.

The idea of masquerade is still an attribute of this family. We have seen Jacob put on the skins of goats to deceive his father Isaac. We have seen Laban masquerade Leah as the younger daughter Rachel, and we have seen the brothers use a coat covered in blood to hide their actions with Joseph from their father Jacob. Joseph has been masquerading as an Egyptian ruler before his brothers, but now the moment has come for him to reveal himself to them. He cries out and sends away the Egyptians. They are not to hear the words in this moment of exchange, but we as members of this family are invited into this moment. What is spoken is only for the people of God. Joseph has heard Judah speak and offer himself willingly in exchange for his brother's life. Judah, who sold Joseph into slavery and then sat down to eat without remorse, has been transformed into a new person. Through his words, Joseph realizes that the time to make himself known has arrived, and he steps out of his masquerade and speaks to his brothers. We should remember that Christ also tells his disciples that he was sent only for the people of Israel. Those outside of the kingdom of God only get to hear the Good News when their hearts are open to God's work in their lives. Joseph will save the empire and its ruler through the wisdom that God has given him, but more importantly he will bring redemption to his family. The Egyptians and Pharaoh hear Joseph's weeping, but do not hear his words. We as believers in Christ hear his words in the Gospel and allow them to transform us into members of his family, the body of Christ.

It takes a moment for Joseph to be able to speak, so great is the emotion that wells up within him. What had been forgotten is remembered. The dream that was ended, forgotten, and set aside is about to be fulfilled. When he is able to speak, we hear the words "I Am Joseph!" This is a key phrase that we will hear again from God, when he reveals Himself to Moses with the name, "I Am!" And then from Jesus, in John's Gospel, we will find the seven "I Am" statements where Jesus tells us more completely the attributes of the Messiah. Here Joseph is about to tell his brothers that he is the fulfillment not only of the ruler in the dream, but that the bowing sheaves of grain in the dream mean life. Joseph steps out of the masquerade of an Egyptian ruler and addresses his brothers in their own language with the words they had long forgotten, a name they never expected to hear again, a dream they thought they had killed, but is now found alive.

Now for most of my Christian life, when I have read this part of the story of our people, I have always taken this moment to be the ultimate example of fear and terror. Can we imagine

what occurs within the brothers in this instant? The text says, “But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.” The dream they denied has come alive. They have now bowed down to their brother. He is a ruler who holds their lives in his hand. At his whim they could be subject to untold torture, pain, and even death. All they have worked for in their lives ends in this moment. They are dead men and they each know it. I can find no words for what occurs in their hearts at the moment they hear “I Am Joseph.” When Christ is proclaimed into the lives of the lost, this is also their state. When their hearts begin to open and they realize that in their sins they face the wrath of the ruler of the universe, they are also filled with terror or denial of his existence. Joseph tells his brothers that they sold him into Egypt, something only they would know. This information eliminates the denial and gives them proof that he is Joseph. They cannot speak, so Joseph invites them to come to him. There is more to this moment than the brothers’ fear. Joseph has realized and interpreted the dream and God’s work in his life at last in full, and he invites his brothers into something new, something unimaginable, something beyond their thoughts or hopes. They are dead men invited to come closer to a ruler. And they come forward still expecting the worst.

Hear again Joseph’s words to these dead men, “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.’” Did we catch what Joseph just did? Did you hear, “God sent me before you to preserve life.” This is something new, not revenge, not vengeance, not the just reward for their evil deeds, not payback, but redemption, forgiveness, and abundant life. This is not the action of a ruler in Egypt with power to do whatever he chooses, but the grace of God working through a man, extended to bring life.

Let’s jump forward centuries in time to an upper room in Jerusalem three days after Christ died on the cross, a room where the disciples have gathered in fear after Jesus’ death and are anticipating their own deaths will soon follow. There in that room Christ appears. Hear his words to them and to us from Luke’s Gospel account (24:36-38), “While they were talking about

this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, ‘Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself.’” Christ comes to them when they think the dream is dead and brings something new, something unthinkable, life. Something new is brought to them and they have Good News to share with the world. The blessing has come, Christ is risen! Abundant eternal life is poured out on all who will accept it!

We should not miss the parallel between what happens to Joseph and his brothers and what happens to the disciples with Christ. God is a God of life. In the Genesis account, Joseph brings life, survival of the famine, and blessings for Israel. The family from whom a blessing to all people is to come will be preserved not because the brothers have come to purchase food, not because of their evil actions, but because God is at work in their lives, using them to bring about His will to bring forth a nation that will be a blessing to all people of the earth.

All of the issues in the Joseph story are resolved in this moment of Joseph’s message to his brothers. Joseph is still alive and Jacob’s grief can be ended. The brothers’ guilt is erased and years of struggle with their evil actions and its consequences are now set aside with Joseph’s forgiveness. The dream they thought they ended is fulfilled. And a ruler has emerged in Israel. Joseph is alive and will provide the best of Egypt to sustain and protect his family. Vengeance is not the response the brothers receive, but life, life as God’s people! God has worked through their lives to bring about life. God always works for life. The task that Jacob sent the young Joseph out so many years ago to complete was to “Look to the welfare of your brothers.” This task is now fully revealed in the provisions Joseph gives that will allow his brothers and their families to live abundantly in Egypt. It is not clear that Jacob knew the depth of what he asked Joseph to do so many years ago, but here in this moment of redemption it is clear that Joseph understands that God is at work bringing life, and he looks not to some kind of payback for his brothers’ evil actions, but to the welfare of his brothers.

We might recall a question that we asked of the text earlier in our journey through the Old Testament, “Does God use the actions of evil people to bring about His will?” This question is closely related to the question of “How could a loving God allow evil?” This is a question that many nonbelievers and believers struggle with as they search for God in the midst of life. And as we come to the close of Joseph’s story, we need to look again at God’s role in this story. We

should ask ourselves, “Where do we see the hand of God in the story?” While it is difficult to see God working in a supernatural manner, it is also clear that God’s will is accomplished as life is preserved through Joseph and his journey to Egypt. This narrative makes it clear that in the arena of human choices, both good and evil, God’s saving work is accomplished. This narrative makes it clear that God is free to work His will through the actions of humans and to bring forth good from evil. God is in control, but He is not a God who breathes our breath and drives our choices. God is free to work with us when we cooperate, and God is free to work His will even when we choose to not to cooperate with God. While God does not cause evil for His purposes, He does allow our evil actions as seen in the brothers’ envious treatment of Joseph. But God is able to work through the actions people choose that bring life and to work in the evil actions they intend to end life. “God does His own work and at the same time fully honors the work of His creatures.”<sup>1</sup> Joseph and his brothers freely made their choices and God honored them, yet from their actions God brings about life, here the preservation of Israel and the future blessing of all of the nations of the world.

Remember that Joseph’s brothers, before they sold him into slavery, had become so angry with him they could not speak peace with him? Notice how this part of our ancestors’ story ends. Joseph commands the brothers to hurry, bring his father, settle close to him in the best of the land of Egypt, and then his brothers talk with him. Before, his brothers were not able to speak peace with him. Now they are seen talking with him, speaking peaceably with him. They are able to talk with him. This is the Shalom of redemption. May we grasp this idea, hold it deep in our hearts, and let it become our response to others in our lives. Judah is the one who willingly offers to give his life for another. From the line of Judah will come one, sent by God, who will give his life that all of the earth may be blessed. All of the law and prophets are summed up in the idea of loving God and loving our neighbors more than self. Choose Life!

*Pray with me: Jesus, give us a heart like Joseph to choose to return life instead of evil for the wrongs done to us. Teach us to speak the language of forgiveness to all we meet in life, both those who build up the lives of others and those whose choose to tear them down. Teach us, Lord, to love others as you love us. Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. Genesis (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching) (p. 346). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition 2010.