

“Betrayal and Redemption: the Story of Joseph”
Genesis 37 – 50
October 7, 2007

The Rev. Christine Chakoian
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

Introduction

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and made humankind in his image, male and female, and it was very good. Then people chose to take what was not theirs, and try to hide it, and blame one another. And violence came into the world, and evil, and the goodness of creation was corrupted, and it grieved God’s heart. But God kept providing a way for his beloved world: making clothes for Adam and Eve to hide their shame, marking Cain with a sign to protect him, telling Noah to build an ark to shelter the remnant of creation.

Then God chose a new strategy: to redeem creation through a chosen people. God made a covenant with Abraham – the promise of descendants and land; the calling to be a blessing to the world. Last week we saw the covenant pass from Abraham’s son Isaac to his son Jacob; and we saw God use Jacob to press the promise forward, in spite of Jacob’s manipulations, family dysfunction, and struggles, even with God. We saw God name him Israel – no longer one man, but the archetype of the chosen people: Israel.

This is the story of Israel’s children. Now Israel had twelve sons, but Rachel, his favorite wife, bore only two of them. Her first was Joseph; her second – Jacob’s youngest – was Benjamin. And Rachel died in childbirth bearing Benjamin.

Now Jacob loved Joseph best, and all his other sons knew it. It didn’t help when Jacob gave Joseph a splendid coat of many colors, and Joseph ratted on his brothers when they slacked off, and Joseph dreamed of his brothers bowing down to him. So when Jacob sent Joseph to Shechem to check on his brothers, they seized the chance to get rid of him. They sold Joseph to Ishmaelite traders passing by, for twenty pieces of silver. They returned to their father with Joseph’s colorful robe dipped in goat’s blood, and when Jacob saw it, he grieved bitterly.

Now the Ishmaelites took Joseph to Egypt, and sold him to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh’s guard. The Lord made Joseph successful, and he became the overseer of Potiphar’s entire household. But Joseph was handsome, and Potiphar’s wife determined to have him. When he repeatedly rebuffed her advances, she accused him of assaulting her; and Potiphar threw him in prison. But the Lord blessed

Joseph again, and soon he was overseeing the whole prison. One night two of the prisoners had disturbing dreams, which Joseph interpreted for them. Pharaoh's baker dreamed of birds eating from baskets on his head; Joseph predicted he would be hanged. Pharaoh's cupbearer dreamed of pressing grapes into Pharaoh's cup. Joseph predicted Pharaoh would restore him to office – and he asked him to petition Pharaoh to release him from prison. So it came to pass for both men; but the cupbearer did not remember Joseph.

Two years later, it was Pharaoh's turn to dream: he was standing at the Nile, and out came seven sleek cows, followed by seven thin cows, which ate up the fat ones. He dreamed again of seven plump ears of grain, then seven blighted ears, which swallowed the good ones. Then the cupbearer remembered Joseph; so Pharaoh summoned him. Joseph told him, "God is revealing what he was about to do. Seven years of plenty will be followed by seven years of famine, and the famine will consume the land." So Pharaoh appointed Joseph lord over the land, and it came to pass: for seven years the earth produced abundantly; and Joseph stored up grain beyond measure. Then famine came, consuming every country; but in Egypt there was bread. And the world came to Joseph to buy grain.

Scripture:

Now when Jacob learned there was grain in Egypt, he sent ten of his sons to buy grain. They came and bowed down to Joseph, and he recognized them; but they did not recognize him. He questioned them, accused them of spying, imprisoned them, and would not release them unless they went to get their youngest brother. Though they objected that it would kill their father, Joseph insisted. Speaking in Hebrew, they repented for what they had done to Joseph, and counted his demand as a reckoning for his blood. They did not know Joseph understood them; and he turned away and wept. When they returned home, and told their father of the demand, Jacob refused to let his youngest son go, for Benjamin alone was left of Rachel's children. But the famine was severe; so when they had finished the grain they had brought, Jacob told them to go again to Egypt. But Judah stepped up, insisting they had to bring Benjamin. If they delayed any longer, they would all die from hunger, they and their little ones. So their father let them go, sending gifts, and a double portion of money, and his blessing ... and his son, Benjamin.

So they came again to Joseph with their gifts, and bowed before them, and he welcomed them. Then he saw his brother Benjamin and said, 'Is this your youngest brother? God be gracious to you, my son.' He was so overcome with affection for his brother, he hurried out to a private room and wept. When he gained control, he washed his face and came out; and they drank and were merry together. Then Joseph privately commanded his steward to fill their sacks with food, and their money, and to put his own silver cup in the top of the sack of the youngest. At dawn, they went on their way.

But Joseph sent his steward after them to search their bags. Starting with the Reuben, the eldest, he searched them; and the cup was found in Benjamin's sack. So they returned to Joseph, bowing before him, and Judah offered penitence on their behalf. Joseph forgave them -- except for Benjamin, whom Joseph would keep for his slave. But Judah again stepped up, saying, "Our father told us, 'My wife bore me two sons; one has been torn to pieces, and I have never seen him again. If you take this son from me too, you will bring down my head in sorrow to Sheol.' His life is bound up with the boy's life; when he sees the boy is not with us, he will die. Please let me remain as a slave in place of the boy, and let the boy go back. I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father." Then Joseph could control himself no longer, and he wept so loudly that even Pharaoh's household heard it. And Joseph revealed himself to his brothers: 'I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?' But his brothers could not answer him, they were so dismayed. Joseph said again, 'I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here. For God sent me before you to preserve life. For two years the famine has been in the land; and for five more years there will be no harvest. God sent me to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God. Hurry to my father and tell him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. Settle near me, you and your children and your children's children. And I will provide for you.'" Then he fell upon Benjamin's neck and wept. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and his brothers talked with him. So they went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, and told him everything that had come to pass, and the spirit of their father revived. And the sons of Israel carried their father Jacob, their little ones, and their wives, in the

wagons that Joseph sent to carry him. Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, and they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly.

Jacob, we saw last week, is much more than one man. When God renames him Israel, we are getting a first glimpse of the nation, the people that bears his name. Every Jew born since then is an Israelite, a child of one of his twelve sons. When we are baptized, we become a member of his offspring too, engrafted into the family through Jesus. So when we hear the story of Jacob and his twelve sons today, we are, once again, hearing our story, our story as Israel's children. And it should come to no surprise that the very traits we saw last week in Jacob now repeat themselves again: cunning and hubris; family dysfunction; wrestling with identity, wrestling with God's will.

What's radically different this week is this: the stage on which the story unfolds expands dramatically. No longer is this strictly one family's drama ... the whole world is affected by the actions of Israel's children. But for that to happen, three profound shifts need to be successfully made. Any one of them could derail God's plan. That was true then ... and it's still true now.

First: the shift from an individual to the whole community. It's striking to me that until this moment, God's agenda played out through individuals alone: *Abraham*, and his one son *Isaac* – but not through his other son, Ishmael. *Isaac*, and his one son *Jacob* – not through his other son Esau. Now suddenly it's not just one son who inherits the promise, but all twelve sons of Jacob. These twelve sons – the twelve tribes of Israel – together become a nation. So as much as this story is the story of Joseph, it is even more the story of Israel's family emerging as Israel, the people of God (Terence Fretheim, “Genesis, *New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 1* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), p. 592). That's why it's so essential, so absolutely crucial, that Joseph manages any way that he can to get his whole family together – not only his ten brothers, but all eleven of them, and not just his brothers but his father too – no matter how painful the road to make them one again. The success of God's covenant depends on them all, working together, as one.

So it is for us. We are never just individual believers; God's covenant with us is anchored in community. Each of us is accountable to our Christian brothers and

sisters regarding our faith, integrity, and actions. Each of us is accountable for their well-being. And all of us are mutually dependent, which is symbolically played out in worship week after week in churches around the world. My friend and mentor John Buchanan once said it so beautifully. Explaining why we bother coming to worship instead of skipping church altogether – or watching worship at home on a TV – he says:

“I think we come here because we know ... religion has to do with other people as well as my personal relationship with God. ... I believe that when we put our voices to the task of singing, we are helping those who have no heart for singing; and when we put our spirits and voices to the work of praying, we are helping those who this day are feeling too weak or [sad] to pray for themselves. And I believe that when we stand as one at [baptism] and say “I believe in God the Father Almighty” we are speaking for friends who may be standing but are paralyzed by doubt or guilt and who don’t this morning believe much of anything.”

And, John adds, he has a mystical picture of communion: that when we serve communion to each other in the pew, we are helping those who might not feel ready or worthy to claim God’s deep grace; all of us giving and all of us receiving, “not only from ordained hands, but from the hands of the man or woman or child sitting beside us” (“What Are Good Friends For?” preached June 2, 1991 at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago).

From now on, Israel’s children have to work together. Not just in worship, but throughout the church – in small groups and Stephen Ministry, in conflicts on committees and in denominational feuds. To work out our less savory inheritance from Jacob – all the things we talked about last week, like our weaknesses, our cunning and hubris and family dysfunction and wrestling along the way. To lean on each other and hold each other up. To live out God’s promise together – whether or not we like each other, any more than Jacob’s sons did – simply because that’s how God designed it. To fulfill God’s covenant together.

So, that’s the first shift: God’s covenant gets played out in community. The second shift is like it: the shift from the personal to the political. No longer is the stage restricted to family squabbles – important, yes, but contained nonetheless.

Now the scene is broadened to include economic and governmental policy decisions *as a means of grace*.

One scholar notes how much of the story is dependent on human political power. The famine doesn't have a predetermined effect; wise political and economic planning ameliorate its impact. The brutal consequences of food shortages, economically-motivated migration, and natural disasters are substantially reduced because of Joseph's wise use of power (Fretheim, p. 623).

Notice that Joseph does not preside in a Judeo-Christian nation. Ancient Egypt is not exactly a secular nation – no country would have been in ancient times – but neither is it governed by Biblical values. Yet Joseph is able to function in accordance with God's will. His faith and his political life are not separated from each other. Instead, without beating Pharaoh over the head with it, he expresses his faith and uses his role to do what God would have him do: preserve life.

It would be a mistake to consider Joseph's use of power as a case of individual heroism. Perhaps he is no choir boy, but he is a realistic model for what responsible public leadership could look like. His resistance to Potiphar's wife invites us to consider what it means for us to pay the price of ethical conduct, when it would be far easier to give in to pressure. His hard truth interpreting the baker's dream encourages us to give tough messages even when they're unwelcome. Above all, his unabashed use of power urges us to use our authority to its full effect: to consider our full range of economic, political, and relational influence without apology. It could not have been comfortable for Joseph to convince the leaders and people of Egypt to make do with less in the seven years of obscene abundance. But without his insistent and likely unpopular approach, the nation and the world would have starved.

And it's not just Joseph that shows up as a leader. Potiphar, the jailer, and Pharaoh all entrust great responsibility to this Hebrew, Joseph, at a time when immigrants were reviled. The chief cupbearer – a man of very modest power – connects Pharaoh with Joseph at a crucial juncture. And Judah – not the first-born, Reuben – Judah steps up not once but twice to speak truth to power; first, to his father, when it's crucial that the sons return with Benjamin in hand, and second, to

Joseph, when their father's life depends on it. That is the kind of leadership we need – that's the kind of leadership we need from *ourselves*.

These are the shifts at work in Joseph's story: God's covenant expands from individuals to the whole community; God's arena expands from the personal to the political. Which leads to the third and crucial shift: God's *agenda* expands – from the preservation of Abraham's family, to the redemption of the world. Now it becomes clear: God's covenant people are not chosen for their own sake; they the vessel through which God will bless *all* people.

So it is that these closing chapters of Genesis pick up the threads from the opening chapters of creation. The beginning and ending share this theme: that God, who created the world and called it good, seeks its goodness still -- not just for his chosen ones, but for all creation (Fretheim, pp. 595, 672). Joseph is the first embodied link between the chosen people and the rest of God's children: he feeds the world on God's behalf.

It is easy for us to become parochial here – to keep our gaze on our own concerns, and forget the needs of the rest of the world. In part because we are preoccupied with our own issues ... in part because we find the problems of the world so overwhelming ... we are tempted to keep our eyes close to the ground. And it is understandable. But what we know is this: God has chosen us – yes, us – the children of Israel to feed the whole world, to care for creation, to offer goodness and life far beyond our horizon, so that *no* children starve for want of bread; so that no people starve for want of hope, or love. It is a sacred privilege. And I believe that as God showed Joseph, God will show us how.

It is so appropriate that we hear this word today, on World Communion Sunday, when we celebrate our unity with all of our brothers and sisters in faith around the whole globe ... when we acknowledge that faith is much more than a personal matter, but gets played out in politics and economics and use of whatever power we have ... when we offer our gifts, not to be used just for ourselves, but so that all of God's children are fed. so that all of God's children, from east and west and north and south, are invited to the joyful feast, the joyful feast of life. Amen.