

**February 20, 2022. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis**

Let us pray,

Gracious and Loving God, through your Holy Spirit open our hearts and minds to your transforming word in scripture that we may experience anew the height and depth and breadth of your love and be inspired to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our scripture for today is from the book of Genesis, Chapter 45, verses 3 through 11 and 15. Listen now for the word of the Lord. **3** 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. **4** 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. **5** And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. **6** 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. **7** God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. **8** 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. **9** 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. **10** 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. **11** 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 he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

**The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

The story of Joseph is a remarkable narrative that closes the book of Genesis. You could even call it a novella because Joseph’s story stretches out over 9 chapters and among the lifespan of its characters the story takes up more than 300 years.

This is quite a contrast from the short narratives that largely comprise the book of Genesis.

When the story of Joseph is retold in the Qur’an, it is justifiably called ‘the most beautiful of stories’.

And our scripture for today is the climax of that story. Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers and reconciles with them. But to truly appreciate this short excerpt, we need to know the whole story.

Joseph is the son of Jacob, who is the son of Isaac, who is the son of Abraham. Joseph is one of the 12 total sons of Jacob, and Joseph is the favorite whom Jacob loves the most. His father's blatant favoritism for him makes Joseph arrogant and his brothers jealous.

The tipping point of it all comes when Joseph tells his brothers he had a dream that they all bowed before him and he would rule over them.

In jealousy, the brothers sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt, and dip his coat that Jacob gave him in blood and give it to their father Jacob, leading him to believe that his favorite son was killed by a wild animal.

Despite many trials and tribulations over many years, Joseph does well for himself in Egypt. After correctly interpreting the Pharaoh's dream which predicted a 7 year famine, he rises through the ranks and becomes a high official, second only to the Pharaoh.

Eventually, famine does hit the land. Not only in Egypt, but also in Canaan, where Jacob and Joseph's brothers and their families live.

Because Joseph correctly predicted the famine, Egypt stored food in preparation, and thus was the only country with enough food to survive the famine.

The Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of distributing it.

Word reaches in Canaan that Egypt has food so Jacob sends his sons to buy grain. When they reached Egypt, the brothers were brought before Joseph and they bow down to him, thus the dream comes true. They don't recognize him, but Joseph does.

And here we reach our scripture - when Joseph reveals his identity to them. After this, everything changes.

The brothers go back to Jacob and they all move to Egypt where Joseph provides for them and the family and family lineage lives on.

It's a long, complicated, complex story of a family plagued by betrayal and grief, but also a story of reconciliation and forgiveness.

But as we see this story of a familial betrayal turned into reconciliation and forgiveness, restoring a family, saving an important family lineage - we must do so knowing and acknowledging the universal truth of our world at any age in humanity - that not every story gets a happy ending.

Forgiveness and reconciliation in the face of suffering and betrayal are incredibly powerful, but also deeply complex - and they work in many diverse ways that reflect that diversity of each lived experience.

We should approach this story with intentionality - seeing Joseph's story not as a one size fits all solution to reconciliation and forgiveness, but taking it for what it is: Joseph's story.

But in holding that truth, what's perhaps the most remarkable thing about Joseph's story is how it reflects with intentionality, compassion, and care the nuances, the pain, the grief, the joy that betrayal and reconciliation and forgiveness bring - and thus we can see glimpses our own experiences reflected back in the careful details of Joseph's story.

The climax, the turning point of this story is when Joseph reveals his identity: I am Joseph.

The brothers don't get it, they're afraid. And so again he says "I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into slavery."

Reconciliation begins when we claim our identity.

It was because of who Joseph was - the arrogant favorite son - that they cast him out. They hated him for who he was.

And so Joseph had to become someone else to survive - a slave, a prisoner, an Egyptian official.

All along the journey, God knew who he was, his true identity - but no one else.

But now it's precisely because of who he is - I am Joseph - and his brothers acceptance and affirmation of who he is - that reconciliation can take root. The reclamation of his identity is the vessel for God's reconciliation.

We see this take root in the beginning, turning point in Joseph's story.

Jacob sends Joseph out to check in on his brothers and the flock, which is when the brothers throw him in a ditch and sell him.

Jacob sends him out by saying "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock? Come, I will send you to them." and Joseph responds "Here I Am".

He brought all of who he was to his brothers, and was cast out because of it.

People who have been cast out for who they are; whether it was their race, their religion, their sexuality, their gender identity. The lists goes on and on of people who have been cast out, hated for who they are.

Reconciliation cannot happen until they are able to claim their identity and be recognized, be seen and affirmed for who they truly are.

Unfortunately, for many, concealing who you are is necessary for survival - and Joseph's story too shows us that in all times - no matter if our true identity is known or hidden - God knows us, uses us, and blesses us.

For even when he was a slave or a high official - Joseph continued to use the gifts God had given him.

As Stacy Duke writes; "Sometimes we can be true to ourselves, even when we cannot be our true selves."

Along with identity, Joseph's story shows us that reconciliation requires facing the past, and then taking action because of it.

I am Joseph - your brother - who you sold into Egypt.

Joseph has not forgotten what they have done. Nor is the purpose of reconciliation to forget the past.

Reconciliation requires the vulnerability and intimacy to acknowledge all that we are - the good and the bad - and all that we have done - the good and the bad - and humbly surrendering it to a greater good.

The brothers face their past right in front of them, surrender to it and take action by doing as Joseph says.

Facing the past head on, claiming your identity - neither are easy tasks.

But neither happen overnight in Joseph's story either. It happens over many verses, over years, over his lifetime.

Even Joseph falters - when his brothers first arrive and he recognizes them - he does not immediately reveal his identity.

For three whole chapters, he uses his newfound position of power against the brothers who wronged him and he tricks and tests them. And for a moment you think he's just going to do just what they did to him, until Joseph finally breaks down, begins to weep, and tells his brothers who he really is.

And in that moment, reconciliation does begin. But forgiveness comes later.

Reconciliation and forgiveness are two different things.

Joseph reconciles with his brothers because of grief - he misses his father -

"I am Joseph, is my father still alive?"

He reconciles with them to save his family's lives, reconciled for the sake of life. "For God sent me before you to preserve life."

But forgiveness does not come until years later - until the very end of the book of Genesis- after the whole family has settled in Goshen and Jacob has lived the rest of his days peacefully.

In chapter 50, after Jacob dies, the brothers go to Joseph and beg forgiveness. Joseph begins to weep, and the brothers begin to weep.

All these years later, all these years reconciled to each other, and forgiveness is still hard.

Joseph answers them: Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?

His answer speaks a universal truth for both forgiveness and reconciliation: Forgiveness and reconciliation come from God.

Sometimes we are vessels of God's forgiveness and reconciliation, but sometimes it is more than we can bear. So in grace and compassion, we lift it to God.

This is the story of Joseph and his family - but its implications stretch further to the future of Israel. For Jacobs sons and their descendants are the 12 tribes of Israel. And to Christ, a descendent of Judah, Jacob's son and Joseph's half brother.

This family lived because they were saved by radical reconciliation and forgiveness - Christlike reconciliation and forgiveness.

So it's the story of Joseph. But also the story of Israel.

The story of Christ. The story of us all.

And in the 9 chapters spanning 300 years filled with betrayal, grief, pain, joy, love, grace, forgiveness.

Perhaps Stacy duke describes it best when she describes this story, these 9 chapters spanning 300 years - as a kaleidoscope: "It invites repeated looks, offers many angles of vision, reveals different patterns and possibilities from the very same pieces. We can come back to it again and again look inside and see ourselves reflected in it anew and in so many different ways."

When the endings are happy, when they are not.

When reconciliation and forgiveness comes after betrayal, and when it does not.

When it takes years, or when it comes quickly.

When we are the betrayer - when we are betrayed.

When we are cast out, when we can claim who we are, and when we cannot.

Each and every time when we can come back to this story - look into this kaleidoscope - and see ourselves reflected in the shining pieces.

And if we look closely, we might just even see God working through those pieces - taking all that we are, are turning it towards good.

For cruelty is a mystery. But if we see the world as one long brutal game, then we bump into another mystery. The mystery of beauty, of light, the canary that sings on the skull... unless all ages and all races of man have been deluded...there seems to be such a thing as grace, such a thing as beauty, such a thing as harmony... all wholly free and available to us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.