

Joseph, Prince of Egypt

Genesis 37 by Patty Friesen (Mar.26/17)

Joseph's story takes up the last 13 chapters of Genesis. The family conflicts we saw in Abraham, Isaac's dysfunctional families continue into Jacob's family, yet they are God's crazy family chosen for responsibility and promise. Yet within this family, the story highlights the importance of one individual, Joseph and his ability to reject violence and revenge and bring some closure to the snowballing family conflicts. Although no angel himself, Joseph chooses reconciliation over retribution for the good of his family. And once placed in a leadership position, Joseph becomes deeply engaged on behalf of the public good.

The story highlights God's presence with Joseph, blessing him at every turn. Joseph's relationship with God affects his personal life, but moves beyond him to affect wide ranges of public life. The move from his encounter with Potiphar's wife to his wise leadership in community affairs suggests that personal and public life are to be linked for maximum effectiveness as a leader. There are parallels here to King David's story who also rises from shepherd boy to king, from the rural family to the urban halls of power and who also has an episode of temptation to adultery.

This story depicts God in quite different ways from the previous chapters of Genesis. God does not act with miracles but works behind the scenes in prison cells and through dreams. God's presence weaves the threads of goodness, mercy and judgment into ordinary life. God never appears to Joseph; unlike his forebears in the faith. Joseph builds no altars to God, yet God is with him and he is imbued with God's spirit.

The story begins in a familiar way: Jacob as an inept father; the deception of the father by the sons; and the conflict among brothers. Jacob finally settles in the land of promise but in his lifetime will leave it to journey to Egypt. The author introduces Joseph as a teenager and as a shepherd. He is loved by Jacob more than his brothers, a problem of favouritism that we saw between Esau and Jacob. This favouritism takes the public form of an amazing colourful coat that will become covered in blood.

Joseph, like his father, is a dreamer, and also an interpreter of dreams but he errs in broadly sharing his arrogant interpretations. There are two dreams, the sheaves of wheat and the sun, moon and stars. Anytime there is doubling, even in our modern dreams, psychoanalysts tell us to pay attention but no sibling wants to hear that they are a sheaf of wheat or a star that will bow down to a brother. Joseph doesn't have the maturity to realize these are dreams meant for providence not for dominance. They set the stage for violence between Joseph and his brothers who conspire to kill him when he comes to check up on them in the fields of Shechem. By killing him, they think they kill the dreams but then they decide to sell him instead, enabling the dreams to become reality in Egypt.

The eldest Reuben who saved Joseph by suggesting they throw him in a pit instead, returns to find Joseph sold off and they conspire to tell Jacob that Joseph was killed by wild animals. The coat, given to confirm love, becomes a confirmation of death. Jacob laments his son and will do so until his dying day or until miraculously he meets Joseph again in Egypt. The author concludes by noting that the Midianites sell Joseph to Potiphar, a servant of Pharaoh, which gets Joseph closer to Pharaoh but there is a seductive hurdle along the way.

No one in this story emerges innocent. The author tells the story without a single reference to God. But we learn that God has not been absent from these activities. God works in and through even the worst that this family can perpetrate; in everything – even evil – God works for good.

In the next stage of Joseph's journey in Potiphar's house, Potiphar observes how he prospers under Joseph's care and appoints Joseph to a position of authority. This success has been made possible because of God's involvement. The only interest Potiphar has is eating; this reference hints subtly to a lack of interest in anything else, including his own wife. This could explain her interest in Joseph whom scripture is sure to tell us is well built and handsome and aptly played by Donny Osmond in the Broadway musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream-coat!*

Joseph denies Potiphar's wife seeing adultery as an irresponsible use of power and a violation of the trusting relationship he has both with Potiphar and with God. In a dangerous scene, she grabs his cloak but he slips out of it and flees but once again his garment becomes recrimination and once again he ends up in a pit of despair. His dreams of prominence have turned to nightmares in prison. But prison is a turning point for Joseph. Joseph matures in prison and turns from thinking primarily about himself to thinking about God. When Pharaoh's baker and wine tester tell Joseph of their dreams in prison, Joseph says, Do not interpretations belong to God? Joseph has come to realize that dreams are a gift of God and that it takes wisdom and discernment from God to know what they mean. While Joseph's own dreams resulted in his slavery, the dreams of others now become the means for his release from slavery.

Pharoah's baker and cupbearer have parallel dreams on the same night. Sometimes Patrick and I have similar dreams on the same night. It's really weird and usually related to things we are thinking about as we fall asleep. Joseph interprets the baker's execution and the cupbearer's return to favour with Pharoah. We hear for the first time, Joseph speaking openly about his own life – for the first time he becomes desperate about his situation, telling the cupbearer to remember him when he gets out of prison. Although Joseph has the God-given ability to interpret dreams, he still needs human help from a fellow prisoner. But when the cupbearer was released, he quickly forgot about Joseph for two whole years.

Chapter 41 begins with Pharoah's dream of seven fat cows eating grass along the Nile River and seven skinny cows coming along and eating the seven fat cows. The dream was so disturbing that Pharoah called for all his magicians to interpret the dream but no one could. At that crucial moment, the restored cupbearer remembered Joseph's interpretation of his dream in prison. Pharoah sent for Joseph who had to quickly shower and shave. Joseph right away tells Pharoah that it is God who will give the interpretation and proceeds to tell him about seven years of famine represented by the skinny cows devouring the seven years of bumper crop represented by the fat cows. Joseph goes a step further with an action plan for storing up grain during the bumper years for the famine years.

Pharoah astutely recognizes that God has revealed these things and has empowered Joseph with such wisdom to fulfill this action plan. He installs or licenses Joseph for the job – just like we do for chaplains and pastors, except chaplains and pastors don't get signature rings, robes or chariots. Pharoah gives Joseph and Egyptian

name and an Egyptian wife. Joseph is thirty years old when this responsibility comes to him. He names his sons forgetfulness and fruitfulness. What a gift forgetfulness is, to put the past behind and move beyond misfortunes to new gifts of fruitfulness. His personal fruitfulness with two sons parallels the fruitfulness of the land of Egypt. When the famine comes, it hits the whole world but Joseph's wisdom enables Egypt to become the breadbasket for the whole world.

On a historical note: There is some evidence that slaves from Mesopotamia achieved positions of high standing in Egyptian royal circles. Evidence of the rituals of installation in this scripture parallel archeological finds of rings, and chariots. This story more than some has historical believability. More importantly though the story reflects the various levels of life in which God works. In this story, God works in economics, agriculture and government. God's work in the world through wise leaders affects the wellbeing of all people. God's work of blessing in this chapter includes the entire human race, not just the chosen ones. Joseph's wisdom from God has the potential to draw outsiders into conversation about God and God's ways in the world which can, as with Pharaoh, actually lead to their public witness regarding God's involvement in their lives. Joseph stands as a model for the godly life beyond the religious sphere to the public service that God gifted him for. Let us pray...

God of Joseph, thank you for the many ways you speak to us; through the gift of dreams and understanding, through the help of others, through a smart business and political sense. We ask your continued speaking and moving in all our daily lives, in work and volunteering and family for the good of others. Amen.