

Proper 15, Year A
Good Shepherd, Berkeley
August 17, 2008

Genesis 45: 1-15
Romans 11: 1-2a, 29-32
Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

It is so good to be home. And here's a wonderful thing, to stand at this pulpit and at this altar, celebrating God's presence among us and within us in the gifts of Word and Sacrament shared with you, I do feel this as coming home – coming home to you and the community we are, coming home to our work together in ministry. I was so grateful to be anchored here in Good Shepherd, during the swirl of Lambeth Conference. What a gift of perspective that provided. I'd be glad to talk about all that more at coffee hour.

Even though I haven't been with you on Sundays to know what you've been talking about homeliterally, I have been reading the Sunday scriptures along with you. One of the things that must be noted right up front is that between last week and this week there occurs a huge gap in the story of Joseph. I would remind you of something I said several times in the inserts when we undertook this attention to the Hebrew Scriptures post-Pentecost in our hearing and preaching. I said, pay attention to what is left out. This gap between last week and this week is one of those occasions. It does an injustice to this magnificent narrative about the progenitor of the twelve tribes of Israel to leap from an introduction to Joseph last week into the climax of his story this week. For one thing we don't get to see the development of this character from the spoiled nearly youngest of Jacob's children to a mature man who has suffered a rollercoaster of betrayal, abandonment, treachery, slavery, a rise to power, then unjust accusations of lechery, imprisonment, and finally an even greater rise to power. So let's take a moment to fill in some of the blanks.

At the end of the last week's lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures Joseph had been sold into slavery to a passing band of traders by his jealous and envious brothers. The left-out part begins with the deception the brothers cook up for their father Jacob in order to explain Joseph's disappearance. Jacob is inconsolable in his grief, which couldn't have helped the brothers' jealousy. The brothers show him the multi-colored coat that was the icon of their jealousy. They have smeared it with animal blood and supposed to Jacob that Joseph was killed by a wild animal out in the wilderness. What they don't tell him about is the wild animal of their own jealousy.

Meanwhile Joseph arrives in Egypt with the caravan of traders and sold as a slave to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's court. Joseph rises to a position of great trust and responsibility in Potiphar's house but his fortunes take a nose dive when Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him. Joseph resists, she falsely accuses him to Potiphar and Joseph ends up in jail.

Eventually two other notable prisoners arrive – Pharaoh's cupbearer and his chief baker who had offended Pharaoh for reasons undisclosed. They had dreams which Joseph interpreted for them: the cupbearer would be restored to Pharaoh's favor and the baker would be beheaded. Joseph asked the cupbearer to remember him when Pharaoh restored him to his position, but he failed to do so.

Two years go by and Joseph still languishes in prison. Then Pharaoh has some bad dreams of his own, about 7 fat cows and 7 lean cows, 7 plump ears of grain and 7 scrawny ears. None of his sages can interpret the dreams and it is then that the cupbearer remembers Joseph's ability to interpret dreams and Joseph is brought forth from prison. The outcome is that Joseph is given high office and put in charge of Pharaoh's entire household including the collection of food in order to avert the predicted future famine. He is given an Egyptian name and the

daughter of a priest of one of the local gods as a wife. Two sons were born named Manasseh and Ephraim. (One commentator pointed out to that this is a reminder of diversity in Israel from the beginning since some of the tribes of Israel are descended from mixed nationality.) As a result of Joseph's careful administration the lean years that followed the seven abundant years did not result in famine for Egypt, though it did spread across the Middle East. Jacob learned there was grain to be bought in Egypt and so he sent ten of his sons to buy grain.

When they came before Joseph they didn't recognize him and he didn't make himself known. He played games with them initially, insisting they leave one brother behind and the remainder return to Jacob and bring Benjamin to Egypt. When they arrive home they find that all their money which they had used to buy the grain was sitting in the top of the sacks. This frightened them because they thought they were being set up – and they were!

The famine persisted and the brothers reminded Jacob that the Egyptian official who sold them the grain told them to come back and to bring their brother Benjamin. Jacob initially refused to let Benjamin go with them but his extensive family (and God's promise of a great nation) were about to be extinguished by hunger so Jacob gave his permission reluctantly. On their arrival back in Egypt a feast is given for them. Joseph wept privately when he saw Benjamin. Yet he set them up again by having his own silver cup put in the Benjamin's grain sack and discovered when Joseph sent his steward in pursuit of them. Dragged back once more Judah makes an impassioned appeal for Benjamin's freedom offering himself in as a slave in Benjamin's place because their father Jacob could not survive the loss of the second of his favored sons. That brings us up to today's lesson when Joseph can no longer restrain himself and must disclose his identity to his brothers. Then the brothers return to Jacob with the news that

Joseph lives and in response Jacob agrees to bring the family down to Egypt where they will thrive and become a great nation.

But you see, if we didn't know all of the intervening story we could never appreciate the sense of God's hand guiding Joseph's destiny or how suffering matures and deepens him. We wouldn't get to see Judah's journey from jealousy of Joseph to self-sacrifice for Benjamin. All of that is so essential to the core message of today's lesson, a message of human forgiveness and reconciliation as well as a message of hope engendered by God's sustaining grace. Joseph says to his brothers, "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.*" As Walter Brueggemann points out, since he was in a position of such power Joseph could easily have vengefully punished his brothers. Instead he gives them a theological understanding of their behavior – it is all God's doing. God is the reason for all that has happened. God was behind all their actions in order that they and all their families would survive the terrible drought. And just so that the listener gets the point, this is repeated three times in the narrative.

One of the wonderful things about this story is the clarity the ancient writers had about the human condition. The outcome may be reconciliation between the brothers, but not before Joseph has done a little terrorizing of them on his own with the trick of putting his cup in Benjamin's sack and hauling them all back to Egypt. Is this payback? Certainly anyone listening to this ancient tale might derive some vicarious pleasure in the nefarious brothers getting their comeuppance and still be glad that everything comes out well in the end.

One of the other wonderful things about this story is its timeless applicability; most recently illustrated at the Lambeth Conference. A true gift for me was the opportunity to hear the chief rabbi of the United Kingdom, Rabbi *Sir* Jonathan Sachs, address the Bishops, Spouses and ecumenical guests in a plenary session on the evening of July 28th. In one of my letters to you I mentioned his talk and gave the online link to its text, which I commend to you for deeper reading. This was a momentous event, first of its kind, for a Jew to be invited to address the bishops of the Anglican Communion. Rabbi Sachs charge, I'm guessing from the Archbishop of Canterbury, was to offer the bishops some perspective on the ancient Hebrew notion of "covenant". It was quickly apparent from his first presidential address that the Archbishop is very keen on the idea of an Anglican Covenant, and so his invitation to Rabbi Sachs to talk to us about the relationship between the people and God understood through the Hebrew notion of "covenant" was germane to bishops' topics in their *indaba* groups. Toward the end of his talk, Rabbi Sachs referred to the story that we read in our first lesson today, the occasion when the now successful Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, the same brothers who sold him into slavery.

Rabbi Sachs' message was a compelling one in the Lambeth context. As an outsider who knows in the Holocaust the worst betrayal and suffering that the 20th Century had to dish up, he could say to the gathered bishops (and one hopes to the bishops who chose not to attend) that the lesson of today's story in the Joseph cycle is not only about forgiveness, but it is also a message of hope – out of bad has come good, and God always does this. Let me read you this section of his talk:

“Friends, I stand before you as a Jew, which means not just as an individual, but as a representative of my people. And as I prepared this lecture, within my soul were the tears of my ancestors. We may have forgotten this, but for a thousand years, between the First Crusade and the Holocaust, the word 'Christian' struck fear into Jewish hearts...

I could not stand here today in total openness, and not mention that book of Jewish tears.

And I have asked myself, what would our ancestors want of us today?

And the answer to that lies in the scene that brings the book of Genesis to a climax and a closure. You remember: after the death of Jacob, the brothers fear that Joseph will take revenge. After all, they had sold him into slavery in Egypt.

Instead, Joseph forgives -- but he does more than forgive. Listen carefully to his words:

You intended to harm me,
but God intended it for good,
to do what is now being done,
to save many lives.

Joseph does more than forgive. He says, out of bad has come good. Because of what you did to me, I have been able to save many lives. Which lives? Not just those of his brothers, but the lives of the Egyptians, the lives of strangers. I have been able to feed the hungry. I have been able to honour the covenant of fate -- and by honouring the covenant of fate between him and strangers, Joseph is able to mend the broken covenant of faith between him and his brothers. (This play between the covenant of fate and the covenant of faith was the core of Rabbi Sachs' presentation.)

In effect, Joseph says to his brothers: we cannot *unwrite* the past, but we can *redeem* that past – if we take our tears and use them to sensitise us to the tears of others.

And now we see a remarkable thing. Although Genesis is about the covenant of faith between God and Abraham, it begins and ends with the covenant of fate: first in the days of Noah, and later in the time of Joseph.

Both involve water: in the case of Noah, there is too much, a flood; in the case of Joseph, too little, a drought.

Both involve saving human life. But Noah saves only his family. Joseph saves an entire nation of strangers.

Both involve forgiveness. In the case of Noah, God forgives. In the case of Joseph, it is a human being who forgives.

And both involve a relationship with the past. In the case of Noah, the past is obliterated. In the case of Joseph, the past is redeemed.”

Rabbi Sachs’ interpretation of this story is an important one. It would be too easy to slip into a facile and erroneous, I think, assumption about God’s activity in human history using the Joseph story. It’s the “God-found-me-a-parking-place” school of thought, the notion that all that happens is foreseen and predestined by God and human beings are simply puppets going through the dance steps. I believe this offends both the mystery of God and the human capacity for free will. I appreciate Rabbi Sachs’ more nuanced notion that out of the worst that can happen to us, God *can* create good. History cannot be undone but history can be redeemed and God’s activity is in that – not to obliterate evil but to overcome it. This doesn’t just happen by magical intervention; it requires the willing cooperation of human action. Covenants can’t transform unless both parties to the covenant are open to transformation.

For Christians, of course, this is the meaning of the cross, isn't it? In speaking of Jesus the writer of Colossians says "in him all things hold together." The Greek word for *hold together* means something more like *co-inhere*. In other words, **all** things, both good and bad, are part of the mix of the mystery of God. The tragedies of our life or the sins we have committed don't disappear but they are redeemed. And God uses it all – both good and bad in God's continual dance with humankind and in the redemption of the world.