

“Preserve Life”

Genesis 45:1-15

And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. — Genesis 45:5

These words Joseph speaks are among the most extraordinary in all of Scripture — because they’re terrifically difficult for him to say. Joseph has traveled from near death to life, and becomes a life preserver for his brothers.

There are a number of Josephs in the Bible, but only two of them can be called leading characters: Joseph the earthly father of Jesus, and this Joseph, son of Jacob. This Joseph is one of 12 sons Jacob had by four different women. Jacob was married to Leah and Rachel simultaneously. Zilpah and Bilhah were concubines or slaves of Jacob’s two wives.

According to the custom of the day, it was acceptable for a wealthy tribal chieftain like Jacob to have more than one wife, and to use his wives’ servants, if need be, as surrogate wives — just in case there weren’t enough children already. This resulted in one big, not-so-happy family.

If you know anything about families today — especially step-families — you know how incredibly complicated relationships within the family can become. These complexities are multiplied exponentially in a patriarchal, polygamous family like Clan Jacob.

Among his two wives and at least two concubines, Jacob has a favorite, the one called Rachel. Among his 12 sons and an unspecified number of daughters, Jacob also has a favorite: Joseph. Not so coincidentally, Joseph is a son by his favorite wife, Rachel.

Most any Sunday school child can tell you about Joseph and his coat of many colors, and how his 11 brothers get sick and tired of their father's favoritism. When Jacob sends Joseph out one day to check on whether they're doing a good job as shepherds, his brothers' resentment boils over. They decide to beat some humility into him. But things rapidly escalate out of control — as they so often do when mob rule takes over. Before his brothers realize what they're doing, they've thrown Joseph into a pit and sold him to some passing slave traders. As a cover-up, the 11 brothers dredge Joseph's coat through some animal blood and take it back to their heartbroken father as proof that wild beasts have killed his favorite son. How's *that* for a dysfunctional family?

Fast-forward, now, a decade or two. Joseph is, by now, only a memory to the family he unwillingly left behind. Everyone assumes he died long ago, both those who believe the wild-animal yarn and those who know the truth.

A terrible famine has come upon the land. Desperate times call for desperate measures, so Jacob sends his sons packing off to Egypt in a last-ditch attempt to broker a grain deal with the Pharaoh's chief of staff.

Little do they know. This high-and-mighty Egyptian official, Pharaoh's number-one advisor, is none other than their brother Joseph. Against all odds, he has survived.

More than merely surviving, he has prospered. Through an incredibly unlikely series of events, he has gone from slave to dream therapist to butler to prime minister. Joseph had plenty of time over those long years to brood over what he might do to his lousy, back-stabbing brothers if ever he got the chance. And now — quite unexpectedly — that day has come.

Joseph finds himself face-to-face with all 11 of them. They're on their knees, prostrating themselves before him, and he has all the absolute power of an oriental potentate in his hands.

“Revenge,” according to the familiar proverb, “is a dish best served cold.” If that’s true, the emotional atmosphere in that Egyptian audience hall is freezing. All Joseph has to do is call for the palace guard. Without questioning why, they’ll convey this Palestinian riffraff to Pharaoh’s torture chambers, or to the slave market — or maybe they’ll just lop off their heads — whatever is the whim of the mighty Joseph, mouthpiece of the divine ruler of all Egypt.

Joseph examines the faces of his brothers. They still don’t recognize him. Those faces are so much more aged and wrinkled than when he last saw them. Reuben’s losing his hair. Simeon’s brow is a mass of wrinkles. Issachar walks with a limp. Funny, but Joseph never thought of himself as aging very much. But when he compares these faces with the face that gazes back at him each morning from his jewel-encrusted looking-glass, he realizes how many years have passed. And he feels — unexpectedly and against all odds — the tie that binds them all together.

Back when he was a teenager, all Joseph could think about was how much distance he could put between himself and his brothers. *He*, Joseph, was his father’s favorite. *He* was too good to go tramping off to the high pastures, with sheep and goats trailing behind. *He* was the one who wore the elegant robe, emblem of their father’s favor. But now, after all these decades, all Joseph can think about is how much they have in common.

Those brothers he has long imagined as prideful and powerful now seem pitifully small and weak — and *old*. All of them have worry lines cut deep into their faces. They’ve all had more than their share of troubles.

Enough of anger and revenge! Joseph realizes that if he doesn't break that grim cycle — and if he doesn't do it *today* — no one ever will.

“Send everyone away,” he commands, gesturing to the courtiers and guards who are never far from him. “But my Lord,” says his scribe, “have I heard you rightly? These are foreigners, and palace security guidelines dictate ...”

“Send them away,” says Joseph.

The 11 sons of Jacob wonder what *this* is all about. This Egyptian lord on his golden throne, clad in elegant linen garments, his eyes shadowed, and his jet-black hairpiece secured by a circlet of gold, is looking back at them with the strangest expression on his face. Now he's standing up and coming down the steps. Could he possibly be *weeping*?

The Egyptian lord sits on the bottom step of the altar, elbows on his knees, head in his hands. He looks over at the 11 sons of Jacob, and gestures for them to draw closer. When he speaks, his voice is barely a whisper. “I am Joseph,” he says. “Is my father still alive?”

Can you blame the 11 for being speechless?

The next words Joseph speaks are gentle and full of compassion. And that's what brings him to that remarkable line, “God sent me before you to preserve life.”

After all those years of licking emotional wounds and dreaming of revenge, Joseph has caught a higher vision: *the preservation of life*. What's of paramount importance, he now sees, *is* life, and not mere human life itself — for life is cheap in Pharaoh's Egypt — but the life of God's chosen people. Joseph now realizes that his life's vocation — quite apart from all he has done for Pharaoh and for Egypt — is to preserve God's covenant, to be the living instrument by which the promise is passed on to the next generation.

And so, standing there on the mosaic floor of the royal palace — which no one in Egypt would be surprised to see run red with his faithless brothers' blood — Joseph instead pronounces absolution. He all but commands his brothers to lay aside their guilt, and to cherish instead their precious family tie. His carefully nurtured anger has suddenly left him. Blood, he has come to learn, is thicker than bile.

It may have occurred to you that there's a troubling aspect to this story of Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers: *it's not very fair*. For chapter after chapter, the Bible has told how this remarkable man triumphs over every adversity — of his guts and determination and cleverness and, yes, his faith. We fully expect the story to end the way most stories like this do. We look for an ending like Homer's *Odyssey*, when the mighty Odysseus bends back the bow-no-man-can-bend, loops the string over its free end, and sends his first arrow whooshing through the row of battle-axes set up as targets. Then, with the cold, methodical precision of a serial killer, Odysseus sends one arrow after another flying into the living bodies of all those sleazy suitors who've been trying to steal his beloved Penelope when he was away. The end of the *Odyssey* is bloody, but fair. Harsh justice is meted out, under the impassive eyes of the Greek gods.

But *this* story from the Hebrew Scriptures — with Joseph's troubling words about preserving life — is about the last thing we expect, isn't it?

The way of the world is often the way of revenge. Joseph demonstrates a higher way, the way of forgiveness. Forgiving others — especially when the wound is deep — is one of the most difficult things any of us will ever be called upon to do. Yet few tasks are more important, not only for the person being forgiven, but also for the person doing the forgiving.

A wise person has said, “Forgiveness is when you set a prisoner free — and then you realize the prisoner is yourself.”

There’s a story from the Native American tradition that makes a similar point. A boy comes to his grandfather, filled with anger at another child who has done him an injustice. “Let me tell you a story,” says the grandfather.

“I too, at times, have felt great hatred for those who have taken so much, with no sorrow for what they do. But hatred wears you down and does nothing to hurt your enemy. It’s like taking poison and wishing your enemy would die. I have struggled with these feelings many times.”

He continues, “It is as if there are two wolves inside me; one is good and does no harm. He lives in harmony with all around him and takes no offense when no offense is intended. He will only fight when it is right to do so, and in the right way.

But the other wolf, ah, that is a different matter! That one is full of anger. The smallest irritation will set him into a fit of rage. He fights everyone, all the time, for no good reason. He cannot think clearly because his anger and hatred are so overwhelming. It is hard to live with these two wolves inside me, for both of them wish to dominate my spirit.”

The boy’s eyes have by now grown wide. “Which one wins, Grandfather?”

The grandfather solemnly replies: “The one I feed.”

Joseph, too, has long been living with two wolves inside him. When, at last, he looks into the faces of his brothers, the choice he has to make is clear. He must stop feeding the wolf of vengeance. To release that wolf into the wild is not easy; it never is. Over the years, in a strange

way, Joseph has come to love that voracious beast. Now he must disown it, for the sake of his brothers — and for his own.

We, too, can stop feeding the wolf of vengeance and forgive as we have been forgiven.

May the peace of God . . .

#605 – Forgive Our Sins As We Forgive