

Last week, our scripture ended with Joseph, great-grandson of Abraham, on his way to Egypt after being sold into slavery by his brothers, who despised him because he was their father Jacob's favorite, the oldest of two sons born to Rachel. Joseph would often tell his brothers about dreams that he had and in each one of them, all of them even their father were bowing down to him. They wanted to make sure his dreams never came true. Joseph is sold to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officers, and God blesses him with wisdom and a mind for business and soon Potiphar puts him in charge of his entire household. All is well until Potiphar's wife wants Joseph for herself. When Joseph refuses her advances, she accuses him of the same, landing Joseph in prison. Again, God is with Joseph and it doesn't take long for the jailer to recognize Joseph's leadership abilities and he puts him in charge of the other prisoners.

Then Pharaoh's cup bearer and baker are put in prison. They both have dreams they don't understand, but Joseph does and he interprets the dreams, signifying that the cup bearer's life will be restored and the baker's life soon will end. When the cup bearer is restored to Pharaoh's service, he quickly forgets Joseph in prison. Two years later, Pharaoh has dreams he doesn't understand and that no one can interpret. The cup bearer remembers Joseph and Pharaoh calls him out of prison. Joseph tells him his strange dreams about cows and corn both mean the same thing – there will be seven years of wonderful harvest followed by seven

years of devastating famine. Joseph's advice to Pharaoh is to make the most of the harvest to be ready for the famine. Pharaoh can see that God is with Joseph and so makes him his second in command and authorizes him to act with his authority in all the land, preparing for what is to come.

All of Egypt understands that only Pharaoh has more power than Joseph and they comply with his every command. For seven years, the abundance of grain is stored in every corner of the land. When the famine strikes, it strikes not only Egypt but all the surrounding areas including Hebron where Jacob, the brothers and their families live. When their grain supply runs out, Jacob sends his sons to buy grain in Egypt. When they arrive, Joseph recognizes them, but they do not know who he is. Joseph accuses them of being foreign spies and questions them about their family, learning that his brother Benjamin, Rachel's other child, is still alive. He orders them to return with Benjamin as proof. When they do so, Joseph has his silver cup placed in Benjamin's sack so that he would be returned to him for stealing. When they are brought back to the palace, his older brother Judah whose scheme led to Joseph's slavery begs to take Benjamin's place in prison.

Today's scripture is what happens next: Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. 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.

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. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 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. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 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. 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. 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. 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 now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him. (Genesis 45:1-15)

Joseph’s story is full of blessing and betrayal, advantage and injustice, mercy withheld and mercy shown. Can you imagine the terror that runs through the brothers’ hearts when they realize it is Joseph? They are completely at his mercy

with no power. Nothing can justify what they did. They acted out of pure jealousy and selfishness. They sold him into slavery to stop his dreams from coming true. Now here they are – twenty years later in a foreign land—bowing before him, begging for their lives and the lives of their families, the lives of their children who are without food in the midst of the famine.

Even though the brothers had not shown Joseph mercy, God had. Even though the brothers could not see the benefit of Joseph in power over them, God could. Even though the brothers had acted to end Joseph's life, God made a way for a new life. It is too easy to say that Joseph's story is proof that everything happens for a reason. That might give us comfort on some days but on other days, believing that everything happens for a reason, turns God into a cruel monster. There is much in this story that does not originate with God – the brothers' decision to sell him, Potiphar's wife to frame him, Pharaoh's cupbearer to forget him. Joseph doesn't deserve any of that. In every situation, God works in the horrific circumstances and creates a new way forward.

At every point along the way, Joseph knows God is with him, strengthening him in wisdom and in patience, to meet the challenge in front of him. When Joseph's story begins, he is the favorite son of a wealthy livestock owner in Hebron. No one would have looked at him and thought, "One day I bet you'll be

Pharaoh's right-hand man in Egypt." Impossible, crazy, unthinkable, but possible with God.

On the other hand, would anybody have believed that day Joseph is sent by Jacob to check on his brothers would have ended with him as a slave in Egypt? That is probably far beyond what anyone could have imagined they were capable of. This decision does not come from God but it was also not so final, so insurmountable that God could not overcome it and redeem it. Throughout, we learn that God is not just with Joseph in his father's house, but in the caravan headed to a strange land, in Potiphar's house, in the darkness of the prison, and in Pharaoh's palace. However great the injustice or betrayal, God's power is greater to redeem it.

So when Joseph looks at his brothers trembling before him, he does not see his opportunity to finally act against them, to get his revenge. Instead, he sees the grace and the mercy of God that had been at work all along, bringing them to this place where he could forgive them, becoming their brother once again and providing all that their families need. The power of God to heal and to redeem is far greater than our power to harm and to tear apart. God's power to resurrect is always greater than our power to crucify.

I think we are in a place we need to be reminded of that. In Joseph's story, the people are facing the impact of a widespread famine and the impact of poor

choices and selfish decisions, both causing harm and suffering. We are facing a global pandemic and the impact of a wide array of decisions many of which the negative consequences are being felt and the fear that more is to come. Here is what I have heard so many times over the past few weeks: “There are no good options,” signaling that we are in a place where every decision has some potential negative consequence. This is true for every aspect of school in the Fall for every level of education. This is true for every business and every worker. This is true for every level of government from the local level to the national.

We are not sure what the right decision or the right path is, but we can tell you what is negative and costly about all the possibilities in front of us. It is a discouraging place to be. It leaves us more distrusting and anxious than confident and assured. Because of that, our words are sharper these days and our accusations more pointed. Everything feels more polarizing, more divisive. We certainly will look back at this time and acknowledge that a global pandemic and an election season are not a helpful or good combination. It certainly has not brought out the best in us. Instead of this time drawing us together, it seems to be driving us further apart. I was thinking about the powerful forgiveness Joseph offers his brothers and how we will not leave this painful season without the need to forgive and the need to be forgiven, if we want to move forward together.

Every step along Joseph's journey, no matter how bleak or dark his world became, God always had a plan to lead him back into the light. Joseph never lost faith that God would stay by his side and guide him to that better tomorrow. God didn't give Joseph a preview of what was ahead, but he did give him the gifts that allowed him to rise up and meet the challenges of each day. Joseph learned to trust in those gifts and work for the good of everyone he had the power to reach. That is what he did in Potiphar's house, in the prison, in Pharaoh's palace, in all of Egypt. Joseph kept using the gifts God had given him for the good of all, trusting the future to God. When he saw all of his brothers, especially his brother Benjamin, he knew only God could have restored his family and brought healing to all the harm that had been done.

In the days to come, may the story of Joseph play on repeat in your heart, reminding you who God is and the power of God to work things together for the good, to heal and restore, to resurrect and redeem. May we trust God in all things and commit our days to work for the good of those around us, using the gifts we have been given to be a blessing to all.