

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Genesis 45:1-15, 8/20/2017 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Today, we are wrapping up our summer pilgrimage through the book of Genesis. I hope you've enjoyed delving into these stories as much as I have. On the other hand, I did not want to preach on Joseph and his brothers this morning. While I was at the airport in Seattle on Thursday, sermon-writing day, I downloaded a bunch of articles about the Gospel reading before I got on the plane, and spent time on that, because I didn't want to talk about this story in Genesis.

We began talking about Joseph and his brothers last Sunday, and today, we get the happy ending: kissing and weeping and talking, promises of food and security, union of the whole family. All twelve brothers are back together, after the horrors of our reading last Sunday, when the ten older brothers threw Joseph into a pit, considered killing him, and then sold him into slavery, then went home and told their father he was dead. They have been living with this crime and this lie for a long time.

Life wasn't easy for Joseph as a slave, but his intelligence and gift for interpreting dreams eventually meant that he worked his way up to become one of Pharaoh's most trusted advisors. Now there is a famine in the Promised Land, and Jacob has sent his sons to Egypt for assistance. In today's reading, they find out that the man who can help them is their own brother Joseph, whom they threw into a pit and sold into slavery.

They are so dismayed that they can't speak. Probably a good idea. It's time for these older brothers to listen.

Are you a good listener?

Joseph tells his brothers not to be angry and distressed. He's going to help them. The whole family will be together, and have enough to eat. He and his baby brother Benjamin, the other son of beloved Rachel, the only one of his eleven brothers who did not betray Joseph: they weep on each other's necks. It's a happy ending, right? Then we have our psalm reminding us of how good it is for brethren to give together in unity. Happy ending, amen, wrapped up with a bow.

Yes, it is a beautiful ending, and surely we can see God's hand in Joseph now rescuing the same brothers who sold him into slavery. But I struggle with this story, which tempts me to preach on the Canaanite woman instead. I'd prefer preach about her, about Jesus and persistence and prayer, not this Genesis reading, because Joseph's theology troubles me to my core.

Joseph says, "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."

Joseph, it appears, is not only an interpreter of dreams: he is now interpreting what has happened in their lives. He doesn't just say, well, God was able to bring good out of what you did. Joseph says, it was not you who sent me here, but God.

That's the trouble in this story for me: the confidence in Joseph's assertion. It's a neat interpretation of a messy situation that is full of suffering.

The way our reading is presented today adds to the idea of neatness, of easy answers. It makes it look like Joseph collapses into a pile of love and assurance and forgives his brothers instantly; but in one of the parts we didn't read, this is actually the second time his brothers have journeyed to Egypt, to come before him seeking help from the famine. The first time, they came without Benjamin, because their father Jacob couldn't bear to be parted from the other son of the beloved, departed Rachel, because Jacob had already lost Joseph. Joseph sent his brothers back to get Benjamin. Then, once they returned, Joseph made it look like Benjamin had stolen from him, and then Joseph demanded that Benjamin remain with him while the brothers returned to their families with food.

Perhaps that was Joseph's initial plan, and it was only when he learned that his father was still alive that he changed his mind, revealing himself to his brothers and pledging to help them and bring them to Egypt. Or, maybe he was testing his brothers, to see if they would leave Benjamin behind, the way they left him behind many years before, when they sold him into slavery.

This time, Judah, the brother who first suggested selling Joseph, offered to stay in Benjamin's place, because losing Benjamin would kill their father. Maybe Judah's offer was what softened Joseph's heart. Maybe it was mention of his father. Maybe he was going to help them all along—we don't know. But the story is not as neat and tidy as it may appear, if we just read what was on our inserts last week and this week.

This morning, it looks like we have a tidy ending, making sense of the suffering last week. What about the immense suffering of the intervening years? What about motherless Benjamin not knowing that his brother was alive? What about the heartache Jacob lived with, believing his beloved son to be dead? What about all that Joseph went through, to get to this place, this position of power?

Our sacred Bible stories are not tidy moral tales. If they were, then we could say about this reading, "God has a plan." I know many of you believe that, and it brings you comfort. That's one of the beauties of the Episcopal church: we don't have to all agree about all points of belief and theology.

We could say, based on this story, "Everything always works out in the end." But that is not true. Sometimes terrible things happen, and then more terrible things happen, and no plan ever materializes that makes it all OK. Think of the Holocaust. Think of people you know who keep having bad things heaped upon them. Think of the violence in Charlottesville last weekend.

Personally, and as your priest, I'm not willing to say that God has a plan, and I clench my teeth every time I hear it, especially when I hear it offered in response to something terrible that has

happened. I don't believe that God is involved in every bad thing that happens to us and that it's all part of a plan.

I do believe God has a dream for us, and I believe God is actively engaged in the world, and that God's hand was in Joseph's success in Pharaoh's household. I believe that God helps to bring good things out of bad ones. But I don't believe God causes the bad things as part of a larger plan.

I believe that, as we read much earlier in Genesis, God gave us free will. Many people use their free will to work against God's dream of reconciliation and love for all God's creation.

There's a danger of preaching that God causes things to happen such as causing Joseph to be sold into slavery. For example, some preachers I disagree with have claimed in the past that God caused various natural disasters to happen, like hurricanes, to punish people for certain things. Obviously, a theology like Joseph's, that God sent him ahead, can be taken too far.

This morning, we are presented with a happy and satisfying ending, and I may be wrecking it for you, and I'm sorry for that. Like I said, I really wanted to skip this whole conversation and just preach on Jesus and the Canaanite woman.

Since I didn't, I encourage you to wrestle with this story throughout the week, instead of considering it ended. I invite us to pray this week, asking God why terrible things happen, unjust things. Let's ask God to help us find good in bad things that happen. Let's talk to each other, even offer interpretations; but don't rush to tie a bow on it all and think we have the Bible and this Jesus thing all figured out. We don't. I don't. You don't.

This morning, our journey through the book of Genesis may be over, but next week, we will begin to work our way through Exodus, as well as continue making our way through Matthew. I encourage you to read the readings before you come to church on Sundays, and to keep up when they when you are traveling or sick or unable to come to church. We give you links to the readings in our weekly eNews. (If you're not receiving that, I'm happy to get you signed up.)

I invite all of us to wrestle with the Bible throughout the week, and to read it alongside the news stories we read or watch. Our sacred stories may not be tidy moral tales, but they are a way we can encounter the living God, and try to discern how God is working in our lives and in the world.