

Genesis 50:15-21 9.14.23 16 Pentecost Bill Uetrict

I closed my eyes, drew back the curtain
To see for certain what I thought I knew
Far far away someone was weeping
But the world was sleeping, any dream will do
I wore my coat with golden lining
Bright colors shining, wonderful and new
And in the east the dawn was breaking
The world was waking, any dream will do
A crash of drums, a flash of light
My golden cloak flew out of sight
The colors faded into darkness
I was left alone
May I return to the beginning
The light is dimming and the dream is too
The world and I, we are still waiting
Still hesitating, any dream will do.

(This song was sung.)

If there were ever a Biblical narrative designed for Hollywood, the story of Jacob, Joseph, and his nasty brothers would be that narrative. It's so Hollywood-esque, so designed for a Broadway play, so in keeping with the optimism of America. Walter Brueggemann believes that this story might have had its origins in the time of King Solomon, when

Israel was large and in charge, when the economy was good. The state of the economy often shapes our stories, our moods, our views of what is possible. Happy endings in stories are quite common when life looks good.

We have the happy ending in the Joseph story today, the kind of ending that many of you like when you go to see movies or plays. Sinister plans are overcome by the power of good. People, especially family members, are reunited. It all feels good. And in many ways, it is good. We rejoice that sometimes it does all come out in the wash. And the Joseph story does make us feel good, which is why **Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat** is one of the most popular Broadway musicals of all time.

But a close look at the ending of the story may cause us to see more than what a tear flowing down the cheek, or the warming of the heart may reveal. This story may be closer to home, to real life, than we realize. Let's look at it verse by verse:

"Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?'" Isn't it interesting what the death of a loved one does to family dynamics? Death often unveils so much. The boys don't go before Joseph with some kind of confession until dad is dead. These are ancient people. They live with a preoccupation with the father, a deep sense that their lives are accountable to the authority in their world. They, therefore, have all kinds of father issues.....as do many of us. They confess *after* dad's dead. Oh, that is convenient! Just avoid the big issue, which is what a lot of us do. We can specialize in avoidance. We're afraid. But Dad's dead. Let's confess now.

Some Hebrew scholars suggest that the words in the text "what if" would probably be better translated "If only," words which generally are not used in the Bible to anticipate an outcome that is not wanted,

meaning the boys probably want Joseph to still be holding a grudge. It's strange, but this is how it works too often. It is not unusual for some people to seek absolution (forgiveness) through punishment. Make me feel really bad, and then I will feel better. But Joseph must know a bigger, more life-giving story.

"So, the [brothers] approached Joseph." There is some evidence that the better translation of these words is, "They commanded Joseph." Some behaviors are hard to leave beyond. In the earlier part of their lives, the brothers bossed Joseph around; they had him tossed in a pit. Now I realize that Joseph probably was a bit of a pain. He was Dad's favorite. But tossing him in a pit, leaving him for dead? That was way over the top. But that is what the brothers did. They controlled Joseph. And here, at the end, they are trying to control him, too. "They *commanded* Joseph."

"They commanded Joseph saying, '*Your father* gave this instruction before he died, 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.'"

Oh, the psychology of guilt! *Your father*. We're not here because we are feeling really bad. That would be entirely too vulnerable to admit. Dad told us to do it. And dad is the authority. Sometimes it is just much easier to deal with our sin, with how we have violated others, by distancing ourselves from the situation. It's not our vulnerability that brings us here. It is Dad's instruction. We like to practice distance. And so we say, "Forgive the crimes of your *brothers*." Not forgive *us*, or forgive *me*, but forgive your *brothers*. If we distance, the guilt won't have to feel so bad. If we distance, we won't have to do the real hard work of getting over ourselves and our pride.

"Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." The *servants* of the God of *your* father? Not brothers, not us, not me, but servants. *We're just nothing but servants*

(spoken facetiously). Maybe if we pile it on thick, we won't have to deal fully with the awful stuff we have done to each other. And maybe if we start sounding quite pious (and religious people are really good at this), we won't have to feel the depths of the brokenness that is our lives. Getting intimate with that is too hard. It's why you say, "the servants of the God of *your* father." Isn't he really *our* father? But sin and guilt distance us from intimacy. It's *your* child who is causing all these problems. Well, isn't he yours, too? Distance! Distance! Distance!

"Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him and said, 'We are here as your slaves.'" Human brokenness and the pain it causes is enough to make you weep. Division, separation, alienation—they rightfully bring about gut-wrenching, tear-causing pain. But tears flow not simply because of pain, but because of joy—the joy of re-connection, the joy of reconciliation. The pain of separation can weigh heavy for years, for some people a lifetime. But when separation gives way to reunion, oh the tear-saturated joy!

To understand the Joseph story fully, you need to grasp the power of Joseph's dreams. In the early part of the narrative, Joseph becomes known for his dreams. And one of the dreams reveals that his brothers will eventually bow down before him, and not him before them. Here in today's reading, the dream is fulfilled. The brothers are bowing down before Joseph. And from what it appears, this bowing down is not for Joseph a matter of na-na-na-na-boo-boo, "you are finally getting what was coming to you." No, Joseph, the dreamer, seems to know a dream larger than the ones he himself dreamed, a dream bigger than normal human dreams.

"But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?"

The question doesn't assume an answer. He is a big-time leader, being able to do almost anything he wants. He could cast them aside. He could refuse to help them. He could call in the agents of the state and bring upon them the violence that the state often imposes upon people who have done horrible things.

But Joseph seems to know a different dream than the dreams of the power-mongers. He seems to know a dream that is rooted not in retaliation, but in mercy and grace.

"Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.'"

Joseph knew a bigger story than the pain that was inflicted on him by his brothers. He knew the dream of God, which is not limited by the horrible actions of human beings. God is able, the story is telling us, to use the awful things that people do to one another and that simply happen in life for far greater, life-giving purposes. You thought that what was done to you is the only story. You thought that what you did to others is the only story. You thought that it all ended in the pit. You thought it all ended in pain. You were wrong. The dream of God is much larger than your tiny dreams.

When the powers-that-be put Jesus to death, they thought they had taken care of him, taken care of this wild dreamer—the dreamer who trusted in a different dream than the ones dreamed by those in control. His was a dream that welcomed the left-out, the forgotten, the sinners, the poor. His was a dream of a turned-upside-down where money didn't rule and oppressive power didn't reign. The crucifixion was an attempt to extinguish the dream. But God transformed the death of the dreamer into a resurrection. The story is never over when the God of resurrection is at work. Pain, while real, isn't the last word. The story isn't over yet.

“So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones. In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.”

When you know a dream bigger than your own that is rooted in resurrection, when you know something larger than the pain, you don't have to hold back. You don't have to make sure the score is even. You can just be generous and give. When you know as the Psalm writer says that “the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,” you can be merciful, gracious, and slow to anger. You can give. You can *forgive*. God's generosity can lead to your generosity. And trust me. That generosity, that kindness will reassure a whole lot of people, including yourself.

Now, I am not sure that “*any* dream will do.” The real dream that will do is the dream of God. And the dream of God is of a world saturated by love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness. Dream it. Live it. And be generous because of it.