

June 6, 2010  
Genesis 37:1-4  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
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## The Story of Joseph

Remember the Smothers' brothers comedy team— Dick and Tommy. Probably their most familiar tag line was Tommy's whiny comment to Dick, "Mom always liked you best." Even though we knew it was coming, you couldn't help laughing. But some of that laughter was nervous laughter because we know the painful realities of such situations.

Such a reality is central to the story of Joseph, which unfolds in the last quarter of the book of Genesis, although in his case it was "Dad always liked you best," which in fact his dad, Jacob, did. Yet, Jacob had been formed by a similar experience because his mom liked him best. But we're getting a bit ahead of ourselves.

For the next three weeks we are going to consider the story of Joseph, which at one level is telling about a stage in the formation of the people Israel and the realities of their lives in Canaan and in Egypt. Yet it tells the story primarily through the lens of the spiritual biography of one character – Joseph. It is an epic tale including parental favoritism, vicious conflict among siblings, sexual harassment, unjust imprisonment, dream interpretation, and the work of forgiveness and reconciliation. Next week we will focus on dreams and visions. The week after we will focus on forgiveness. Today I decided to tell again the overall story of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat as Andrew Lloyd Webber put it.

The stage for Joseph's story – the favored one - is set in the generation before him, as is true for all of us. His father Jacob was a trickster, who with the encouragement of his mother, who loved him best, cheats his older twin brother, Esau, of his blessing. We often think that in ancient times the oldest son always got the best of things. The official customs said that was the case, but the stories of the biblical patriarchs are full of twists where the youngest or younger son is favored.

Fearful for his life, Jacob heads off to his mother's homeland to be with her people. There he meets Rachel whom he loves. He contracts with her father, Laban, to work seven years for him in order to marry Rachel. After the seven years, Laban, with painful irony, tricks Jacob on his wedding night, substituting Leah, Rachel's older sister, as the bride. When Jacob awakes the next morning and realizes what has happened he makes another agreement with Laban to marry Rachel as well and he will work for Laban for another seven years.

So now sisters Rachel and Leah are both wives of Jacob, but it is clear that Jacob's heart is with Rachel. However, it is Leah who bears the children – Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah. Rachel, in frustration, gives her handmaiden Bilhah, to Jacob, to bear children for Rachel. Bilhah has Dan and Naphtali. Leah figures two can play this game and gives her handmaiden Zilpah, who bears

Gad and Asher. Then Leah has two more sons, Isaachar and Zebulun. Finally she also has a daughter, Dinah, but that's another story.

After much despair and heartache, Rachel bears a son, Joseph, whom as our reading today says, "Israel (Jacob) loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age." And because he was Rachel's son. Later Rachel has another son Benjamin, and she dies giving birth to him.

These are the twelve sons of Jacob, the twelve tribes of Israel.

Which brings us to today's reading, when Joseph is seventeen years old. He must have been quite a sight in that special coat of many colors – young, strong, handsome (as the story says), and sure of himself, with his father's special treatment. The world was his oyster, or so he thought.

Joseph had dreams where his brothers bowed down to him, and he was foolish enough to tell them about the dreams.

Once when they returned from a time of shepherding, Joseph tattles on his brothers to their father. That generally doesn't go over too well in families, especially among young adults, and it didn't in Joseph's situation either. His brothers are furious and they soon have a chance for revenge when they are out in the fields again. With raging hearts, some of them plot to kill him. Reuben suggests they throw him in a pit, hoping to come back later to rescue him. In the meantime the other brothers sell Joseph off into slavery. They dip Joseph's coat and in goat's blood and bring it to their father, who is distraught at Joseph's supposed death.

Joseph is taken to Egypt where is sold into the household of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. Over time, Joseph found favor in Potiphar's sight. Apparently he had great management skills. He is eventually put in charge of Potiphar's household and is overseer of all Potiphar has. The problem is that Joseph has also found favor in the sight of Potiphar's wife. She seemed to be more interested in the fact that along with being a good manager, Joseph was also handsome and good looking. She was not subtle in her interest. Her harassment is intense but Joseph keeps refusing her, until one day with a raging heart she falsely accuses Joseph of harassing her. Upon hearing this Potiphar becomes enraged and threw Joseph into prison.

You probably won't be surprised to hear that over time Joseph found favor in the jailer's sight. The jailer put all the prisoner's into Joseph's care. Two of the prisoners were the chief cupbearer and chief baker, who had dreams, which Joseph interpreted correctly – one indicated release and the other execution. The cupbearer had promised to remember Joseph when he was released, but it seemed to slip his mind until two years later, when Pharaoh had two dreams that had him greatly disturbed. The dreams were about cows and grain. In one there were 7 robust cows and 7 lean cows. In the other were 7 full ears of grain and 7 blighted ears. Pharaoh called together all his advisors, but none of them knew what the dreams meant. The cupbearer remembered Joseph and he was brought to the Pharaoh.

When Pharaoh asks him about his gift for interpreting dreams Joseph responds that it is God who interprets the dreams.

He proceeds to tell Pharaoh that his dreams mean that there will be seven good years of harvest, followed by seven years of famine. This means they must store of grain for the time when there will be no harvest.

So, you won't be surprised that Joseph found favor in the Pharaoh's sight and was put in charge of all the land and the storing up of food. He was also given an Egyptian wife, Asenath, and they had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

Indeed there are 7 good years and then the famines begin. The famines are widespread, all the way to Canaan where Joseph's father and brothers still live. Which brings our story full circle. Now Joseph's brothers, all except Benjamin whom Jacob is unwilling to let go, go to Egypt in search of food, which brings them to Joseph, where they must bow down and ask for food. The brothers don't recognize him for he looks like an Egyptian. But Joseph recognizes them.

You won't be surprised to hear that the brothers do not immediately find favor in Joseph's sight.

What will he do?

Who are they to him now?

He is in charge. They are at his mercy.

Revenge could be so sweet.

The story so far has taken five chapters in Genesis. What happens between Joseph and his brothers now takes five more chapters. Forgiveness and reconciliation are not easy acts. Joseph's heart and soul are sorely tried.

At first, Joseph doesn't reveal who he is. He has trials and tests for his brothers. Who have they become in the intervening years? First he puts them all in prison for three days. Then he keeps one brother as collateral, while the others return home with instructions that they must return with their youngest brother. He hides their money back in their sacks to test their honesty. When they return with Benjamin he has his silver cup hidden in Benjamin's pack and then accuses him of stealing it. It is only when Judah steps forward and offers himself in exchange for Benjamin that Joseph, with loud weeping, reveals himself to his brothers, and the process of reconciliation begins.

In time, Jacob and the whole clan settled in Egypt with Joseph. There they were fruitful and multiplied over the generations, until there was a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. But that's another story.

In Joseph's story we see interwoven various threads - the threads of an extended family's life, an individual's life, the political and religious sensibilities of different communities, and the ecological realities of the earth.

As you think about your own spiritual journey how are those threads woven together in your own story?