

Sermon – Epiphany 7 – St Luke and St Matthew, Brooklyn

Luke 6: 27-38

The season of Epiphany is ending and soon we will turn our hearts to the season of Lent, which commences in ten days with Ash Wednesday, a day of personal reflection, fasting and repentance. The mood and feeling of Lent with its somber tones and veiled icons couldn't be more different from the feeling of Epiphany.

In some way, the change of liturgical seasons that we experience each year mirrors the arc of the story of Joseph's life, a part of which is our Hebrew Bible reading for today. The story of Joseph is the longest story told in the bible. It covers the final 14 chapters of Genesis and tells the story of Joseph's life from upstart teenager, to exiled captive, to exalted leader, to humbled brother. It is quite the story, rich in detail and complexity like a good novel.

We only get a small portion of the broad story today and like a lot of texts set in our lectionary, is somewhat lessened by the loss of context afforded by the remainder of the story. So, let me set the scene a little for how we arrive at this part of Joseph's story.

The story starts in Chapter 37 of Genesis. Jacob, or Israel as he is often referred to, has settled in Canaan and has fathered twelve sons. They are an agrarian family so the story starts when Joseph is 17 years old and shepherding in the field. Like most teenagers, he tries to establish his place in the world, not sure of who he is. He finds his brothers slackening off in the field so he reports them to his father. His brothers don't take too kindly to being spied upon.

Joseph becomes the favored son of Jacob who dotes on him. This makes the other children jealous as you would expect and they grow to hate him. No one really likes being treated less than one's siblings. Joseph has a couple of powerful dreams that he recounts to his brothers. Both dreams reveal a similar vision of Joseph rising above his siblings and gaining supremacy. This just annoys the heck out of his siblings and they conspire to kill him.

As the favored son, Joseph is given a beautiful robe by his father, a gift with royal overtones. Joseph of course flaunts his hip new clothes which just drives his brothers mad. They conspire to kill him but through the intervention of Reuben, one of the brothers, they determine that it would be better to sell him into slavery than to let him die at the bottom of a dry well. They do just that and Joseph finds himself stripped of not only his robe, but also his freedom and dignity as a favored son.

Joseph was taken to Egypt as a slave. It was a terribly dark time for him. He was vulnerable and lonely and unsure of what each day would bring. It's a place where he felt the presence of God more deeply than in the past. It humbled him.

As a slave, with God by his side, he prospered and to help his master prosper as well. His master's wife took a fancy to him and tried numerous times to tempt him to sleep with her.

Joseph was wise to the temptation keenly aware it was not what God would want. He resisted her advances and in one final rebuke she accused him of raping her, a likely death sentence. He was again imprisoned.

In prison Joseph met two of Pharaoh's officials – a cupbearer and a bread baker. Both had displeased Pharaoh. In jail, they had dreams that Joseph could correctly interpret. Word of his gift reached Pharaoh who himself had had troubling dreams. After Joseph, correctly interpreted Pharaoh's dreams he was freed and promoted to the head of the household, an honored position. Joseph always acknowledged God's role in his life.

With God by his side Joseph prospered and his wisdom resulted in preparing Egypt for a famine that only he knew was coming. He future-proofed the kingdom by reserving some of the grain from the harvest and storing it away for the lean years that were to come. It was the same famine that brought Joseph's brothers back to Egypt to buy much needed food.

We pick up the story in today's reading after Joseph has encountered his brothers coming for food but they had not recognized him. He had played some games with them testing them to see if they had changed since they had sold him into slavery. Joseph can't stand the tension and tearfully reveals to his brothers that he is indeed alive. His brothers are shocked by the revelation.

It is here that the story could go two ways. The first way is one that would be familiar to us. Joseph extracts his revenge for being sold as a slave. At best, he could banish his brothers, refusing to give them any food, and destining them for starvation. At worst, he could have imprisoned them and then have them killed for their despicable act. He had the power to do to them whatever he wanted. It was the same power that his brothers had exerted over him in the fields many years before.

Joseph was filled with the spirit of the Lord however and he chose a different way. Rather than revenge Joseph acknowledged before his brothers that what they had done, and the subsequent life Joseph lived, was not their fault, rather it was the will of God. He therefore absolved them of any responsibility. Not only did he absolve them but he sought to help them by providing for them life-giving food.

Joseph's memory of what had happened to him was not diminished by his absolution. In fact, his memory was enhanced by the revelation of God that his whole life had been destined so that he would rise at that moment in history to be the savior of sorts for not only the people of Egypt but more importantly for his family and the people of Israel.

It is a fact of our existence that God calls out to us in times of our absolute vulnerability. When we are most low, most desperate, we are, if we allow, most close to God. Many people report that God has shaped their lives, indeed changed the trajectory of their lives, when they have been in the depths of despair and depression. For any one that suffers from depression it is a

dark and isolating time, where the feeling of wretchedness and desperation for an end to the suffering becomes all consuming.

Henri Nouwen, a famous Roman Catholic academic and spiritual writer experienced exactly this. He became depressed because he was living a life of academic success and pride that drained him of his spirit. Out of the darkness, God called him to a new life, as a chaplain to children with profound disabilities. It was there at L'Arche in Toronto that he found his true calling and was happiest. Parker Palmer, a Quaker spiritual writer of note experienced the same type of depression. His experience of God calling him in the darkness changed his life trajectory as well.

Often, we cannot discern how God is using the individual experiences of our lives for the greater good. You might be feeling lost and lonely this morning, isolated and vulnerable because of what's happening in your life. Suffering is hard and we fight to overcome the darkness and make ourselves happy. We might continue to bounce about in this state for a while if we can't acknowledge that God might be using the experience to change our life trajectory.

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of his suffering as he wrestled with the agonizing loneliness and negative impact that characterized the life of this civil rights pioneer. He said "I must admit that that at times I have felt that I could no longer bear such a heavy burden, and have been tempted to retreat to a more quiet and serene life. But every time such a temptation appeared, something came to strengthen and sustain my determination. I have learned now that the Master's burden is light precisely when we take his yoke upon us."¹

Joseph accepted that God was using him for something different and that his path through slavery to top civil servant in Egypt was a path that was ordained for him to follow. His actions helped collapse the world he and his brothers lived in that was built on lies, hatred, jealousy and deception.

As Christians who put Jesus Christ at the center of our lives we stand in the shoes of Joseph every day. Joseph's actions link directly to the teaching Jesus was giving to his disciples on the shores of Galilee. Jesus spoke to "those that listen," meaning to his disciples that have left their lives to follow him. These men, and women, are to be the new moral leaders of their families and communities, just as Joseph was a new moral leader in Egypt.

Jesus asked his disciples, and asks us each day, to act differently in the world and not to perpetuate the ways of the world that are skewed toward rejection of difference, judgment of the other, condemnation of those that hold different views, retribution as opposed to forgiveness and hatred rather than understanding and love. Jesus asked his disciples to go a

¹ King Jr, Martin Luther *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr* Ed, James M Washington, Harper Collins, San Francisco 1986 p41

step further than others and to be beacons of justice, love and mercy in a broken world. “Do for others as you would have them do to you,” he said.

This is revolutionary behavior. God is calling out to you this morning, those of you that want to listen, to be God’s shining lights in the world. When you sit and reflect on your life, how might God be revealing Godself to you? What is God calling you to do in your life? How will you respond?

Joseph is an example and Jesus is the model of the necessary revolutionary behavior that’s required to bring about God’s kingdom in our community. Let’s take up the mantle and change the world.

Amen