

A Noble and Generous Spirit

Genesis 45:1-15

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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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.² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³Joseph 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.

⁴Then 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. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶For 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. ⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸So 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. ⁹Hurry 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. ¹⁰You 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. ¹¹I 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. ¹²And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here."

¹⁴Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him. (NRSV)

I

What is the nastiest thing that ever happened to you?

What events in your life caused you the most suffering, the most pain, the most misery?

What grand injustice came to you, stirring up enormous frustration and intense anger inside you?

II

Joseph is a patron saint for people who go through nasty experiences. Though beloved by his father, he was betrayed by his brothers. To be sure, as a boy Joseph was bratty, self-absorbed, and arrogant. Frankly, his older brothers thought he was a pain in the neck. Which he probably was. He strutted around in that long, fancy robe of his. He dreamed of becoming great one day, and then had the audacity to brag about it. If Joseph

had been your brother or mine, he might have irritated us too. Even so, his brothers were unusually nasty to him. They sold him into slavery, then faked his death to cover up the sale.

That was just the beginning of Joseph's troubles. After living for a while as a slave in Egypt, his owner threw him into jail for a crime he did not commit. Joseph languished in that jail for over two years, seemingly forgotten, without hope, his life a shambles. It was his nadir. He had bottomed out.

III

If you read the stories of Joseph, beginning in Genesis 37 and culminating in Genesis 50, you'll notice at least two things. First, you will notice that Joseph was not very religious, and not very spiritual, either. In these stories, Joseph never sacrifices anything to God—not a single goat, sheep, or turtledove. Nothing. He hardly ever talks about God and never talks to God. At no time does Joseph ever pray.

Moreover, in Egypt Joseph becomes very Egyptian. He learns to speak the Egyptian language fluently. He takes on an Egyptian name, Zaphenath-paneah. He marries an Egyptian woman named Asenath, whose name means “she who belongs to the goddess Neith.” This woman, Joseph's wife, is the daughter of a priest in the city On, one the enters for Egyptian religious life. At best, Joseph seems to have a thin faith, certainly nothing very robust.

The second thing you will notice is that the stories don't tell us very much about Joseph's inner life. Except for two dramatic scenes of emotion (43:30 and 45:1-2), we have no access to his inner feelings and thoughts. We see what Joseph does and we hear what Joseph says, but we know almost nothing about what he feels, perceives, or believes. What goes on in his soul? What stirs in his spirit? How does he process all the terrible things that happen to him? We really don't know.

And yet we do know something important about Joseph. We know he has one crucial spiritual gift: he is a master at interpreting dreams. It's this spiritual gift that gets him into trouble with his older brothers. But it's also the spiritual gift that gets him out of

jail and lands him in Pharaoh's royal court, in command of the whole Egyptian nation, second only to Pharaoh himself. The one great place where Joseph connects with God is through his ability to interpret dreams, both his own and other people's.

For Joseph, this one spiritual gift is enough. Sometimes we're tempted to think that in order to be really spiritual, we need lots of spiritual gifts. The stories of Joseph suggest otherwise. All we need is one gift. What matters is not how many gifts we have, but how we leverage the gift we do have for the sake of God's purposes in the world. Joseph leveraged his gift for interpreting dreams into a strategic plan for getting Egypt through a national food crisis. Thanks to Joseph's spiritual gift, Egypt was ready when famine came.

IV

This famine was widespread. It affected Egypt but it also affected lands to the east of the Mediterranean Sea, the very lands where Joseph's family of origin was living. During famine, news of food travels like lightning. In famine, finding food is more important than anything else. So it did not take long for Joseph's brothers to hear there was food in Egypt—and to go buy some.

At this point the story gets complicated, but suffice it to say that Joseph never expected his older brothers to show up in Egypt, and his older brothers never expected to meet Joseph when they got there. After all, it had been over ten years since they sold him into slavery. A lot can happen in a decade and more. They assumed he was dead, or if alive, that he was still a slave working some demeaning job.

When the brothers ask to buy food, they have no idea who the seller is. He has an Egyptian name, Zaphenath-paneah. He speaks Egyptian. He acts Egyptian. He looks Egyptian. They don't know him—but he knows them. When these Canaanite brothers show up at the negotiating table, Zaphenath-paneah puts them through a series of tests and difficult questions. We may guess that he's trying to gather information. In the last decade, how did these men change and develop, if at all? What is their character like?

What is the quality of their relationships? Zaphenath-paneah wants to measure their moral fiber.

When Zaphenath-paneah judges that the moment for self-revelation has finally arrived, he switches languages—from Egyptian to Hebrew—and stops using his Egyptian name. “I am Joseph,” he announces, and with those three words the emotional landscape in this family instantly shifts, every bit as dramatic as if an earthquake had just struck. The story says the brothers were “dismayed,” and for good reason. What would this rich and powerful Egyptian, their younger brother, do to them now? What revenge would he take? What punishment would he extract? In what ways, and for how long, would he make them suffer for what they had done to him many years ago?

By the generally accepted standards of almost any age, then or now, Joseph would be justified in extracting sweet revenge. But he does not. Instead what comes out of his mouth are some of the most magnanimous and remarkable words in scripture:

Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. . . . It was not you who sent me here, but God.

Somehow, somewhere, Joseph drained away whatever bitterness and anger he may have felt. Somehow, somewhere, this man had released, or maybe he just outgrew, the bratty self-absorption of his childhood. He had stepped away from the pain of his past and had gradually come to perceive the activity of God that unfolded through it and in spite of it. Overriding the frustration and anger and suffering of his life, he became conscious of God’s irresistible and inexhaustible pursuit of life.

And then somehow, somewhere, this man who was neither very religious nor very spiritual found the capacity within himself to forgive. Do not assume this was easy for him. Very likely it took years of internal work for him to get there.

But get there he did. Thanks to this difficult internal work, Joseph made space within himself for a noble and generous spirit. As a consequence of that noble and generous spirit, Joseph’s extended family turned a new corner and began to flourish in

previously unimaginable ways. They all settled in the land of Goshen. They found food and made peace with each other.

Joseph made some magnanimous choices, yes. Yet this turn of events toward grace was possible only because God persistently pursued newness in the midst of their messy lives. Slowly and surely, God found a way to renew and recreate.

V

The story of Joseph nudges us to cast a reflective eye back on our own life history. Therefore I offer three questions.

- When you suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, what did God do to summon new life?
- To whom did you offer a noble and generous spirit?
- Then how did you, and the people around you, flourish?