

The Joseph Project and Jesus
Exodus 1:8-12
Sermon by Dan Schrock
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I

A while back I had a Christian friend in another state who was an avid supporter of one of the two major political parties in the United States. He gave large donations to candidates of his political party and to political action committees that supported his party. Since he was a moderately wealthy person, these donations were probably substantial. He also attended strategy meetings at the political headquarters downtown. Before elections, he put signs up on his front lawn. He hosted social gatherings in his living room to build momentum for his party. He knocked on his neighbors' doors and urged them to vote for his party's candidates. And between elections, he kept up a steady stream of letters to Washington, D.C., advocating for this or that public policy. Although he never ran for office himself, he did everything else he could to help his party win. In a word, my friend was politically savvy.

II

The stories about Joseph in the book of Genesis portray him to be one of the most politically savvy persons in the entire Bible. It's an engaging story. A spoiled peasant kid from Palestine rises to become the second most powerful person in Egypt, which was considered in those days to be a superpower of the ancient near East. Along the way, Joseph has lots of adventures. He is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, falsely accused of sexual impropriety by his owner, and put into prison. Yet our intrepid adventurer successfully emerges from every difficulty and miraculously ends up as the king's right-hand man. From that exalted position, he exercises enormous wealth and political power.

As long as he keeps the king happy, Joseph can do just about anything he wants to do. And boy, does he do it! In the seven years before a prolonged international famine,

Joseph institutes a 20% annual tax on all foodstuffs produced in the nation (Gen 41:34) and packs all that food away into a network of large storage bins. Then when famine hits the land, Joseph, who is only 37 years old (Gen 41:46-47), institutes a national policy to feed the nation while at the same time making the king an even richer man. Call it a massive transfer of wealth from ordinary peasant farmers to the king and his cronies. When ordinary Egyptians become hungry, Joseph's first step is to take all their money in exchange for food. Second, he takes all their horses, donkeys, sheep, and goats in exchange for food. Third, he takes all their land in exchange for food; and finally, he makes the Egyptians slaves in exchange for food. (47:13-21).

You can look at Joseph's maneuvering in two ways. One way is to say, well, he saved the nation from famine, and at least nobody died of hunger. That's true. But the underlying reality is that Joseph has just robbed ordinary people of everything they own and handed it over to the king. The king, along with his chief sidekick Joseph, now owns it all, controls it all, and enjoys it all. Together, these two men hold unmatched power.

This is wonderful for Joseph's extended family—his Egyptian wife and their sons, his Hebrew father, his Hebrew brothers, his Hebrew sisters-in-law, his Hebrew nieces and nephews. Joseph's family gets choice land in Egypt to live on. They build houses, grow their grain, and expand their flocks. For these Hebrews in Egypt, life is wonderful because they have their own powerful protector in the capital city. Joseph is their hero. He is their political strong man who will make them safe, preserve their economic way of life, and defend their religious freedom.

III

Perhaps now we are finally ready to hear the words of Exodus 1:8-14 in their proper context. I'll read them in the New Revised Standard Version.

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. The king said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over

them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.

Perhaps a chill went up and down your spine at hearing those opening words: “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” Even if no chills went up and down your spine, you can bet chills went up and down the spines of those Hebrews when they heard the news. “Oh no!” they probably thought. “The old king who had known Joseph is dead! A new king is in power who never knew our Joseph. And now that our beloved protector Joseph is also dead, what will become of us?” (Cf. Genesis 50:26.)

The Hebrew people were astute enough to realize what it meant that “a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” For a while, Joseph’s project to acquire political power, then use it to defend his own ethnic group and preserve their group privileges, had been wildly successful. Now that project had suddenly collapsed. Their strong man was gone, no longer in power, dead.

IV

We could call this the “Joseph Project.” The essential strategy of the Joseph Project is to consolidate all the power we can grab, and then use our power to preserve and protect the privileges of our own group. The stories of Joseph in Genesis show that for a while, this project can sometimes succeed. Given enough strategizing and enough power, we might be able to hang on to the privileges that we suppose are so important.

But today’s story from Exodus shows that the Joseph Project sooner or later crashes on the rocks of historical change. Sooner or later, a new king comes to the capital, or a new social movement sweeps across the land, and we lose the power that we thought would keep us secure. We spend millions to elect our candidates, to pass our laws, and to choose our judges. We think our way of life will surely be preserved, that the systemic privileges we benefit from will surely continue. And then in a relatively short time, the Joseph Project slams hard into new historical realities and ends in a wreck.

The attempt to control history has been around for thousands of years. Lots of people have tried to control history, including lots of Christians. It seems to be one of our never-ending temptations, because people on both the right and the left do it. I confess that I too have been tempted by the impulse to become powerful, to protect myself, and to make other people do what I want them to do. It might work in the short run, but it never works in the long run. The Joseph Project is a failure.

V

We Christians might want to pay more attention to the person we claim to follow. If you think about it, Jesus explicitly rejected the Joseph Project. Do you remember the 3 temptations which Satan put before Jesus in Matthew 4? The last of those 3 temptations was to acquire absolute power over the world, just as Joseph had acquired absolute power over Egypt. Jesus firmly, and decisively, said no.

Jesus carried that resolve throughout his ministry. Consider some of the features of his life and work.

1. Jesus avoided politics in the way we normally understand politics to work. He never angled for a seat in the Jewish Sanhedrin or for a seat in the Roman Senate. He made no attempts to advise either the governor, Pontius Pilate, or the Roman emperor, Tiberius Claudius Nero. It's hard to imagine Jesus becoming the second-in-command of a nation like Egypt, as Joseph did.
2. Jesus did not try to preserve the rights and privileges of his own family, or even of his own people. His mission was not about delivering a series of perks to his mother, brothers, and whatever nieces and nephews he may have had. In comparison to the way most people operated in his time and place, Jesus paid remarkably little attention to his own biological family (cf. Mk 3:31-15).
3. Instead of focusing on conventional politics and conventional family, Jesus focused on starting a new, diverse social movement of people who wanted to become God's people. The diversity was quite astonishing. He went after blue-collar workers like fishermen and white-collar workers like tax agents. He

pursued people who benefitted from the economic system (like Zacchaeus, the tax man), as well as people who suffered from the economic system (like widows). He welcomed wealthy, respectable women, like Joanna and Susanna (Lk 8:3) and dishonorable women like Mary Magdalene. He opened his arms to both the healthy and the sick. For sure he was happy when Jews joined his movement, but he also rejoiced when Samaritan women or Canaanite women or Roman centurions were interested (Jn 4:5-42; Matt 15:21-28; 8:5-13). He even welcomed people with violent tendencies, like Judas Iscariot and Simon Peter (Jn 18:10). His goal was to take this diverse assortment of people and little by little, fashion them into a new social movement of people who would live in fidelity to God. And to accomplish that mission, Jesus refused to engage in any form of the Joseph Project. He chose a different path.

V

What path have you chosen? Is your path more like that of Joseph, or more like that of Jesus? Perhaps we have a little bit of Joseph in us, and also a little bit of Jesus. That would not be surprising, because the way of Joseph is common, while the way of Jesus is uncommon. It is not easy to overcome our strong liking for power and privilege. Yet that is the way of Jesus. What will help you walk in it?