

The brothers come 'a callin. A sermon preached as part of a summer series on the life of Joseph at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons: GENESIS 42:1-28
ROMANS 12:17-21

Scripture tells us that Joseph was 30 when he entered into Pharaoh's service.

Joseph is we might say 'the man of the hour' – for the good years pass, preparing for the tough years. When the hard times come – Joseph's hard work pays off – Egypt and its people are not touched by the famine.

This is not the case in the areas and nations surrounding the Egyptian empire.

The question emerges – will the gold chains, grand chariots, crowds shouting adulation – Joseph our savior – turn his head?

Will Joseph lose touch with his historical, moral and spiritual roots?

Will Joseph become celebrity or hero?

Will he become one who lives for himself or one who acts to redeem society?

Will Joseph remain accountable to a vision larger than himself – the promises of God – the covenant with God that his parents lived out and sought to teach him when he was a young person?

Will Joseph become so wrapped up in the worldly trappings and power of his position that he forgets about the promises of God.

Will he forget that living in this world is so much more than what I can get out of it, what's in it for me?

Rather it is about using God given talents for the benefits of others.

What happens though to all this good work, good intention, faithfulness to the promises of God when Joseph's nasty and ugly past shows up unexpectedly at the palace door?

Will Joseph slam the door shut or open it wide in welcome when the brothers – his brothers – who mistreated him

Threw him into a pit,

Threatened to kill him

Then changed their mind and sold him to a passing caravan for profit

Suddenly are bowing before him?

The lesson Joan read to us this morning is pure drama – in fact I believe it to be one of the most dramatic parts of the Joseph story,

If not in all of scripture.

The action quickly moves back and forth between Canaan and Egypt.

The tension between Joseph and his brothers (who as of yet do not recognize Joseph) draws tighter and tighter!

To have to do so conjures up a very bad memory of selling their brother into slavery

This having to go to Egypt or starve – for the whole of Canaan is in famine mode – must really be playing on their minds.

For these brothers are pretty hard core nasties

Years before – chapter 38 – a story we did not highlight – under Simeon and Levi’s leadership – the brothers deceived a village,

Slaughtered ALL the men,

Took all the women and children captive in retaliation for what one man’s violation of their sister.

Further chapter 38 notes that Reuben – the oldest of this nasty band of brothers – slept with his father’s concubine

Judah also had a fling with his daughter in law, Tamar.

A wild bunch – no question

Yet as chapter 42 opens – they do NOT want to go down to Egypt – even though the family is on the verge of starvation.

Jacob to his sons

Why do you keep looking at one another? I have heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down and

buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die.

Interesting to note that Jacob is not about to let Joseph's little brother Benjamin join the trek
In fact, Jacob has not let Benjamin out of his sight since news came back to Joseph being "killed by a wild animal".

I wonder how long it took before Jacob begins to realize that his other sons have not been totally honest about the fate of his beloved Joseph.

Shift the drama back to the palace.

I wonder how long it takes before Joseph, now viceroy of Egypt, recognizes his brothers
Does he recognize them standing in the famine relief line?

Or is it their bowing before him out of respect for his position that triggers a memory of long ago
Memory of a dream of sheaves of grain bending which he said so long ago meant his brothers would be bowing down to him.

A feeling of Deja vue.

Standing before them, Joseph recognizes them.

They however do not recognize Joseph.

I wonder why.

Is it because Joseph is now 20 years older – he is no longer a boy, but a grown man wearing Egyptian garb.

Is it because they believe Joseph to be dead and gone

Is it because Joseph speaks to them only in Egyptian and then through an interpreter.

Is it simply because they are bowing before him – they do not see his face.

The bottom line is that Joseph has transformed himself – both externally and internally.

The boastful little so and so brother who could not resist broadcasting in an arrogant and self-righteous way his dreams of glory

Has now become a mature man who is able to hide his strongest emotions.

In recognizing his nasty brothers, what is Joseph going to do?

Summarily have them imprisoned or executed?

As Egyptian viceroy, no one would question such an order being given.

Run to them and forgive – all is well brothers

In time,

This will happen, but the forgiveness is not yet there.

For the present, Joseph wants his brothers to relive every agony to which he himself was subjected

Every feeling of helplessness,

Every emotion connected with the slavery and unjust imprisonment

Every physical hurt of being cast aside and left to die

So here in the initial meeting, Joseph manipulates the situation – adding to the brothers' already anxiety and unease.

Where do you come from? (vs7)
You are spies! You have come to see the nakedness of the land (vs.9)

Their pleas of denial go unheard – they know they are in big trouble – accused for being what they are not!

Not really caring about his nasty brothers but to seek information about Father Jacob and little brother Benjamin, Joseph, viceroy of Egypt, Proposes a test.

One of you must stay here in Egypt as a hostage. The rest of you are to return to Canaan and bring your father and Benjamin back to Egypt.

Until you decide to do this, then I am going to have you placed in prison.

Probably the same prison in which Joseph was incarcerated after the Mrs. Potiphar incident!

Three days later, the brothers agree to the viceroy's test

Their packs are loaded with grain and they head homeward,

Leaving Simeon as hostage until they return to Egypt with Jacob and Benjamin.

Before they return, the story teller inserts a conversation the brothers have among themselves. Joseph is present, but they do not think he speaks their language – they have only heard him speak Egyptian.

²¹ They said to one another, “Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us.” ²² Then Reuben answered them, “Did I not tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood.”

Joseph says nothing, but turns aside and weeps.

20 years of lingering guilt over what they did I wonder whether Joseph’s weeping is the beginning of a heart change.

A prompting to remember promises of God over against getting even.

Yes, the brothers were cruel long ago, but have they changed at all?

So, Joseph sends them on their way with brimming sacks of grain back to Canaan.

But there is an added twist to the story – when the brothers stop en route home, they check their grain to see if it is still secure.

When they do check, they find all the money they paid for the grain in their sacks.

Now they lament, the viceroy will accuse us of theft.

This morning's reading ends with a cliff hanger
They tremble as they say to one another

What is this that God has done to us? (vs.28)

Indeed!

What does this portion of the Joseph story say to us?

Of what are we reminded?

Nothing nasty stays buried forever

Painful memories never stay repressed, they inevitably resurface at other times in our lives and often when we least expect them.

Exhibit a – Joseph

All the trappings of power,

All the glory of the present cannot erase the emotions he still retains about his past, when the brothers come a callin.

If Joseph thought that his brothers' treatment of him was a long ago and far away event,

The story teller correctly shows us that this is not the case!

With God's help and in his strength, love and mercy there is still the need to forgive his brothers,

To keep his perspective and eyes on the big picture

Not perhaps to forget, but to let go of the painful memories that retain a power to control or compromise the present.

But not yet, not immediately!

Exhibit B – the brothers.

20 years down the road and they are still troubled by what they did to their little brother. Hard core nasties that they are – the guilt they feel as they journey to Egypt is very real – witness the conversation they have in verses 21-22

We are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother

Nothing nasty stays buried forever.

Exhibit C – Father Jacob.

The sending of all his sons except Benjamin has rekindled a nagging fear that the sons did something to Joseph – that he was not killed by a wild animal!

I wonder has Jacob held a long term sense of guilt about not dealing more forcefully and intentionally with the sibling rivalry he witnessed 20 years before.

Exhibit D – each of us

All of us carry painful memories and hurts

All of us have regrets.

All of us wish certain things had happened, but did not

Or did not happen and we wish they had

Nothing nasty stays buried forever

Painful memories never stay repressed, They inevitably resurface at other times in our lives and often when we least expect them.

For example, how many of us are still afraid to speak in public before others owing to what often happened when I was in public school – laughter and snickers of classmates as we could not answer a simple question in front of a class.

I can still see faces and remember the embarrassment of many such cases...

The pain is still there and it does cripple.

Or perhaps we said or did unkind things to people years ago – that still trouble us.

And that feeling of guilt or regret resurfaces when we face a like situation in the present – and face a like situation we will!

That is in many ways minor to what childhood abuse of any sort can do to a person

It is so true

Painful memories never stay repressed, They inevitably resurface at other times in our lives and often when we least expect them.

Far too often the unresolved pain of these incidents, though we may have consciously forgotten them, Continue to wreak havoc on personal relationships and everyday living.

Some even result in illnesses.

I am not a psychiatrist,
Or a physiologist

Or a family counselor
Or even a social worker.

My professional credentials do not stretch that far!

What I DO KNOW AND AM

UNSWERVINGLY CONVINCED ABOUT IS THAT

- a. Hurtful and painful memories are carried unnecessarily by too many for too long.
- b. There is a way to heal or make less toxic such memories.
- c. That way is only found in drawing closer to God. Therapy does help as sometimes does medication, but in the end only God can really heal a painful or hurtful memory. Why? God was there when that painful or hurtful memory happened. He knows what you experienced. He knows the pain and anguish you went through at the time and the emotional baggage you have carried since.
- d. Healing a memory will take *time, intentionality and seriousness*. It is said that takes a year of healing work for every decade the hurt has been buried. I began my own memory healing in 1981 and though much has been given to God, the healing work before God continues.
- e. Healing a memory *is a great deal more than just reading a book on memory healing*. It includes being honest, really honest, not a you know sort of honesty before God. He does know, but he wants you to really admit things – for

your own well-being. Acknowledgement, confession, contrition and a real willingness to change and be changed.

- f. Like Joseph's brothers, *it may take a crisis to realize that guilt over a long ago hurt is still present and very controlling.*
- g. *Engaging with the Lord in healing memories is not easy.* But, from personal and professional experience, holding onto old hurts, memories and guilt over past actions is much worse to the soul and the body.
- h. *God is a God of unlimited grace, mercy and forgiveness.* He does not want us to be emotional or spiritual cripples. God certainly did not want Joseph, Jacob or even those nasty brothers to be overwhelmed by old hurts and unhealed memories or crippled by unresolved pain. He wants to help each and every one of us be the people he intends us to be – *ransomed, healed, restored, and forgiven!*
 - i. Each of us are therefore called ongoing to respond in faith, hope and trust to Jesus' oft asked question to those who needed his healing touch.

Do you want to be made well? [Jn. 5:6]

Amen