

*Genesis 45:1-15*

*14 Pentecost / Proper 15 / Year A*

*17 August 2008*

*Preached by the Rev. David Fredrickson*

The story we heard this morning from the Hebrew Scriptures was the climax of the story of Joseph. I am sure that you all know this story, how it begins, how Joseph ends up as the most powerful man in Egypt. If not, perhaps you have seen Andrew Lloyd Webber's Broadway musical, *Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat*. At any rate, let's go back to Genesis 37 and so some refreshing.

Joseph was the eleventh of Jacob's twelve sons and he was Jacob's favorite. At 17 Joseph begins to feel his oats perhaps a bit more than he should reminding his brothers that he is their father's favorite, the beloved son and in a series of dreams he lets his brothers know in no uncertain terms that they will someday bow down to him. Hated by his brothers for his favored status and his arrogance, one day they plot against him. Joseph is sent out by his father to check on his brothers who are busy tending the family flocks. As they see Joseph coming, the brothers decided that they are going to kill him and throw his body into an old cistern. Reuben was the only brother that didn't go along with the plot.

When Joseph reached his brothers they ripped off his fancy and colorful coat given to him by his father and they throw him into a dry cistern alive. Reuben had persuaded them not to kill their brother first thinking that he would go back later and pull him out. As the brothers ate their lunch they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites or Arabs coming their way. They were headed to Egypt. So the brothers plotted again, this time to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites and let them kill him. The brothers decided to take his coat, tear it up and drench it in animal blood and tell their father that Joseph was eaten by wild animals. So for 20 pieces of silver the brothers sold Joseph and he found himself on his way to Egypt. Joseph was never killed, however. In Egypt, he was sold again, this time to the manager of the Pharaoh's household. His name was Potiphar.

God blessed Joseph and as it turned out, he became a really good schmoozer. With God's help, Joseph was able to interpret one of Pharaoh's dreams that predicted 7 years of plenty followed by 7 years of famine. The Pharaoh was so impressed that he put Joseph in charge of the entire country of Egypt. During the 7 years of plenty Joseph stored up enough food to hold the entire country during the 7 years of famine.

The Israelites weren't so fortunate. During the famine, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to get food. They made a couple of trips during the first few years of the famine. The brothers did not recognize Joseph, but he recognized them. Finally on their third trip after a number of things occurred, Joseph reveals himself to them, this is what we heard read this morning; "I am Joseph." His brothers were flabbergasted, speechless. "I am your brother Joseph whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life." Amazing response! In other words, I forgive you; though you meant it for evil, God meant it for good." He then kissed all his brothers and wept on their shoulders. It was at that point that his brothers could finally speak.

What a great story that is. No wonder it is such a famous musical. By God's mercy, Joseph was able to see the big picture, to create new life from death. The day he was sold into slavery, everything changed for Joseph, yet he was able to see

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and acknowledge God's hand through all his suffering and find new life, find transformation.

For Christian people, the Paschal Mystery is really the central mystery of our faith. Interestingly enough, we see it at work here in the life of Joseph. In his book *The Holy Longing*, Ronald Rolheiser, a Roman Catholic priest, shares some really interesting and wonderful insight about the Paschal Mystery. The Paschal Mystery, he says, is the mystery of how we, after undergoing some kind of death, receive new life and a new spirit. Jesus is our guide. In John 20:33, Jesus says, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest." // That is the Paschal Mystery. To come to a fuller life and spirit, we must constantly practice letting go of the present life and spirit. Whereas terminal death ends life and possibilities, paschal death, while just as real in many ways is a death that ends one kind of life and opens a person to receive a deeper and richer form of life. The Paschal Mystery is transformation. It begins with suffering and death and it moves on to the reception of a new life; it spends time grieving the loss, a grieving that can truly take years, but when the old life has finally been let go of, a new spirit is given for the new life already being lived into.

You know, there is so much dying going on all the time in our lives; the death of our youth, our wholeness when we lose a spouse or loved one or suffer illness, abuse or some other trauma. There is death when we lose our dreams, our honeymoons, our vision of how our life was supposed to be lived. And there can be no question that we must mourn our hurts, our wounds, our losses, life's unfairness, our shattered dreams, our failing vitality, all of life that we once had but is now far gone, passed by. Unless we mourn we will live either in an unhealthy fantasy or an ever intensifying bitterness. This is what we see in the older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son, bitterness as he clings to his hurts, his unfulfilled dreams, to life's unfairness. Good grieving, however, consists not simply of letting go of the old, but also in letting the old finally bless us. This is what we see in Joseph. "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." Joseph was able to die to the dreams of his youth, grieve that loss and see new life, new possibilities in the place where he landed with God by his side.

In the gospels there are two images of the Ascension. In the synoptics, Matthew, Mark, and Luke the Ascension is depicted pictorially. Jesus blesses the disciples and then floats bodily upward into heaven. His earthly body is understood to be taken off the earth. In John's gospel we see pretty much the same theology, but a very different image. Early Easter Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene meets the resurrected Jesus. Initially she doesn't know who she is and supposed him to be the gardener. But immediately upon recognizing him, she tries to throw her arms around him. Jesus for his part tells her; "Mary do not cling to me!" What lies behind Jesus' reluctance to let Mary touch him? Mary Magdalene herself, if we could speak to her today would, I suspect, explain it in this way:

I never suspected  
    Resurrection  
        And to be so painful  
To leave me weeping  
With joy  
    To have met you, alive and smiling, outside an empty tomb  
With regret  
Not because I've lost you  
But because I've lost you in how I had you  
    In understandable, touchable, kissable, clingable flesh

Not as fully Lord, but as graspably human.

I want to cling, despite your protest  
Cling to your body  
Cling to your, and my clingable humanity  
Cling to what we had, our past.

But I know that.....if I cling  
You cannot ascend and  
I will be left clinging to your former self  
.....Unable to receive your present spirit.<sup>i</sup>

In Jesus Name.

<sup>i</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search For A Christian Spirituality*, Doubleday, New York, NY 1999, pp. 141-166