

Genesis 45:1-15
August 17, 2008

South Plains
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

When Is The Past Really Dead?

How many times during the Olympic Games have you heard some commentator introduce a gymnast by reviewing a disastrous performance, maybe a fall from the balance beam or a misstep in floor exercises. And then, as their next event is about to begin, the voice over becomes quiet and we hear these words, "And now, he has put that disaster behind him and focus on the next few minutes."

It's not just athletes who must put the past behind them. The student who flunked out of school last year has to get beyond those bad study habits this September. The husband haunted by an indiscretion must put his guilt to rest. The victim of an automobile accident has to focus on the road ahead. I have a friend who is a successful funeral director. One day he innocently lined up the procession to the grave with the minister's car following the hearse. I don't know what that grieving widow said to him later, but he never again allows any car but the family to follow a hearse. In a thousand ways, our past clutches at our ankles to trip us up, or to turn memories into nightmares that distort and distract our present responsibilities.

It doesn't take much to imagine what thoughts and memories were running through Joseph's mind when he

sees that his brothers have walked all the way from present day Israel to the land of Egypt seeking his help. This was payback time. When our reading begins, the brothers have not recognized Joseph. But, their guilt over selling him into slavery is very much on their minds. The full story of these chapters is too long to tell this morning, but suffice it to say that up to this point Joseph has made them beg for his help. With the threat of starvation hanging over their family they interpret their dire straits as punishment for the way they treated their little brother years ago.

We say what goes around comes around. The bullies are now bowing and scraping before Joseph. The dreamer who was cast into the pit now holds the power of life and death. What we know is that Joseph is not timid about exercising his authority. What we have not been able to do up to this moment is to see into Joseph's heart as his brothers are squirming in distress. The man who is second only to Pharaoh has kept a tight lid on his emotions; and now it's time to drop the mask.

"Joseph could no longer control himself," says Genesis 45:1. He sends all the servants and bureaucrats out of the room and he weeps, loudly, telling his brothers, "I am Joseph." For years, he has had an Egyptian identity. For years, his Hebrew name has been an open wound in his father's chest. For years, his ghost has hung as a guilty nightmare over his brothers. Now, this declaration, "I am Joseph."

His next words tell us much about his heart as he asks plaintively, "Is my father still alive?" But, the ten brothers cannot hear anything but "I am Joseph," three words that stun them into silence. Then, as they make out his features, matching them to memory of the Hebrew adolescent they brutalized, their numb minds begin to calculate the enormity of their past sins against the all but infinite power of the Egyptian Joseph before them. They are speechless. It's his move. "Come closer to me," he says. And, because they have no choice, they come closer.

"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 (45:5)."

Earlier today we sang an Easter hymn because this is a story of new life. The one who was counted dead is alive. The grieving father finds comfort and hope and a new reason to live. The guilty know release from fear. The starving family will not only be fed, they will grow fat with prosperity.

But, all the blessings of a new start, a new life, will have to be worked out over time. In the gospel accounts of the resurrection, Jesus' disciples react to the news of his new life not only with amazement and joy, they are also fearful because their new future is unknown. Fear and uncertainty cover the face of each son of Jacob as they stand before Joseph. What they assumed was

behind them in the irrevocable past was now in front of them as their future, a future with the possibility of forgiveness.

Very shortly, old man Jacob whose life has been crippled by the loss of one son, and whose hopes have been closed down by famine and this truculent representative of Pharaoh, Jacob will see a door open up that leads to happiness and prosperity.

For those of us who read this story knowing that the next chapter is called "Exodus and Journey to the Promised Land," we see the plot moving steadily toward the people of Israel. This is a story of new life and reconciliation within a particular family; but, it is also the story of the genesis of a people. God's promise to Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation.... And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:2, 3)," that promise is coming to fruition.

The providence of God is at work. Last week, I said that providence becomes evident in hindsight and through the eyes of faith. We are now in a position to flesh out that evidence more fully in the life of Joseph and in our lives.

The most obvious evidence for God's providence is the wonderful, new possibilities that open up for this family. They will have a new, prosperous life in Egypt, a life that in the short term, at least, will be full of blessings. In the long term, the tribe of Jacob will multiply so much

that they will threaten a new Pharaoh. But, all that lies in the distant future. For now, the danger of starvation is past. They are saved.

It's interesting to see how God brings this about. Joseph is not only an interpreter of dreams; he is also a clever and successful leader who manages the agricultural resources of Egypt for the benefit of the whole country and especially Pharaoh. God brings seven years of good crops to the farmers of Egypt. God works through Pharaoh who chooses Joseph to run the country in a time of crisis. God uses the talents of a far-sighted administrator. God influences Jacob in far away Canaan to accept the help of the Egyptians.

We see that providence does not overturn the normal processes of creation or violate the free will of human beings. Farmers plant corn in the springtime; the sun warms the earth; rain swells the seed; and some 90 days later, we put butter and salt on sweet corn just the way God intended. Providence uses these characteristics of the world to bring about the goals God has in mind.

But, to recognize providence means more than to see creation as a blessing. The providence of God works personally with human beings who make good and bad choices, who plan and work, who cry over their disappointments and celebrate their successes. If we follow the career of Joseph in Egypt from chapters 39 to 45, we see a young man who works hard, practices good

morals, and perseveres. He mentions the name of God, but outwardly he could just as well be a pious Egyptian pagan as a worshiper of the true God. But, when he confronts his brothers, the tone of his voice changes. His demeanor changes. He is no longer the efficient administrator of Pharaoh's treasury. He is a brother and son. He is an heir of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. To use his own words, he is the person "God sent...to preserve for you a remnant on earth (45:7)." He wept.

The providence of God works not only as an abstract blessing where God "sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt 5:45)," but providence also challenges us with this personal question, "If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith (6:30)?" I take comfort in those last words. Even when we have little faith, God cares for us.

The ten brothers are people of little faith like many of us. They need reassurance that Joseph is willing to bury the past and take care of his family. The rest of the book of Genesis describes how Pharaoh welcomes Joseph's family and how they prosper. But, in the last few verses of this book, Jacob dies. And, when the patriarch is dead, the brothers' faith in Joseph's and God's generosity begins to falter. They wonder if now, with their father out of the way, Joseph will exact

revenge. They fall down before him, begging for mercy and saying, "We are here as your slaves (50:18)."

opens a new future, a future shining with the light and joy of a whole new life. Praise God!

Once again, Joseph affirms God's providence: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good (50:20)."

When is the past really dead and gone? In one sense, I suppose we never shed our past completely. God enables us to live beyond the past when we accept the forgiveness offered to us in Jesus Christ, and when we accept the goodness God intends, the goodness God makes possible even in the face of evil intentions.

Sometimes, faith means believing that God's forgiveness is more powerful than the blame we place on ourselves. The brothers almost got stuck in blaming themselves forever. Sometimes faith means joining God in Christ to forgive our enemies. Sometimes it means opening our eyes to the good that God is bringing out of tragedy. Sometimes faith requires the hard work of wrestling good from the sadness we have experienced. Sometimes it means that we stop struggling and simply accept the blessings God has given.

In the end, the past dies only on the cross. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new (2 Corinthians 5:17)!" It's not humanly possible to get rid of the past completely. We can only hide it for a while. God in Christ not only puts the past behind us. Christ