

How Then Shall We Live? Epiphany 7C

His brothers left him for dead when they threw him into the (presumably unclimb-outable) pit where the traders found (good news) and enslaved him (bad news... or is it?). Our story today finds Little Joe all grown up and expressing the belief that it has all been for the good. Certainly, if those siblings had ever faced charges of kidnapping or attempted murder, they wouldn't have needed Perry Mason to get them off. Not only did Joseph have arrogant dreams in which he lorded it over them with his father's approval, Joe felt the need to rub it in their faces and repeat the dreams, as if his brothers might learn from them. He was his father's unabashed favorite, and the rest of them boiled with anger when they saw the beautiful coat Joe wore, while their father Jacob expected them to be content with their accustomed drabbery. Envy, the green-eyed monster.

After pushing him into the ditch, the other 11 cooked up a story to tell Jacob about Joseph's being attacked and killed by a wild beast: "Here's all that's left, Dad, his bloodstained shirt," they lied. Jacob bought the story, even though the blood smelled suspiciously of lamb chops. Which proves that occasionally, you can kid a kidder. The brothers figured Joe probably did get eaten, so there was a kind of truth in their story.

They weren't aware, however, that their victim had been uncovered, discovered and recovered by some slave traders, who sold him when they got way down in Egypt land, where Joe was enslaved by a big shot army officer named Potiphar, was falsely accused of assaulting Potiphar's wife and was thrown in jail (another pit) from which he emerged better than ever to serve the Pharaoh himself as dream-interpreter, Secretary of Agriculture and general factotum.

Twice Joseph was thrown into a dark hole – the dark night of despair. It is easy for most of us to identify with a time when we were down, if not out. Maybe we feel like we've been thrown into a hole by people, places and things beyond our control; maybe we blame ourselves, but there we are, nevertheless. Part of the wider truth of the Joseph story is that his dark nights are brought on, at least partially, by his own actions and attitudes.

This is not to imply that any time there's trouble, it's at least partially the victim's fault. History is full of innocent victims. No, the story's universality stems from its inescapability. No matter how far down the scale we have gone or how we got there, no matter what the circumstances or causes of our dark nights, we are all like Joseph and, like him we can see how our experience can benefit others.

Nietzsche said, "*Was mich nicht umbringt macht mich stärker.*" "What does not kill me makes me stronger." With acceptance of our darkest situations and the honest attempt to "make life" out of them, as Joseph characterizes his response to his trials, we can co-opt this idea, expressing it as "*Was mir nicht umbringt, macht mir mehr mitfühlend,*" *Mitfühlend*, as in with feeling. In surviving our trials, we can become ever more compassionate.

Today's portion of the saga takes place much later, when the brothers venture down to Egypt looking for a way to feed their people during a drought-caused famine. Joseph knew exactly who they were, but with his beautiful clothes and lofty position he was unrecognizable to them. At first he messes with them a little. Who could blame him? He pretends he thinks they are

spies and thieves, but his emotions are so poignant at the reunion that he breaks down and has to leave the room to avoid discovery.

Finally he can't stand it any longer and does the 'big reveal.' There is a tearful reunion and abject apologies from the brothers, followed by an invitation from Joe to come share the wealth and comfort he has attained. And in case the lesson is lost on us, we need only remind ourselves that Joe's invitation leads to 400 years of slavery for the Hebrews. The story is not primarily one of Israel being saved from famine; the happy ending of her Egypt story is still a long way off. And it doesn't read too happily when we get there. No, this is a story of personal transformation; Joseph emerges from his own flaws and the violence of the world a better person. He is someone we would like to emulate. And we can still wear many-colored coats whenever we like.

Again, this is not to say that we should look for trouble and wallow in it. Trouble will find us. It is to say that A: Though there is always more trouble coming, B: Our attention must always be on co-operating with God in making new life from every trial. As Joseph lives again and forgives and all thrive, so Jesus lives again and forgives and all benefit. We must look to the day and make it one of transformative goodness if we can.

Frederick Buechner wrote: "Joseph's answer rings out like a bell. 'Don't be scared, of course you're pardoned. Do you think I am God to grovel before me like that?' In the old days, of course, God was just who he'd rather suspected he was, and the dreams in which his brothers groveled were his all-time personal favorites." But now he knows what God is: the potential for good within himself. God is the potential for good within each of us.

As Shaw's Eliza Doolittle realizes when others' actions seem to control her life, "I have my own soul. My own spark of divine fire." That fire is what makes Joseph capable of taking spiritual action, the bold action of forgiveness and reconciliation. He can engage with others in their dark nights and walk through with them. He can challenge whatever evils come his way and work for peace. As John Milton put it in *Aereopagitica*, 'I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercized and unbreathed, who never sallies out and sees her adversary.' Joseph's adversaries are shame, guilt and vengefulness; he conquers them.

Here, in the climax of the Joseph saga, he tells his brothers, do not regret what you did; I came here for life. Does he just mean for his whole lifetime, or does he mean for the purpose of giving life, to live into his fullest potential, so that others may also? The answer is both. Perhaps thanking God for answers to the decisions we all face is not so important as glorifying God for the questions. After all, no matter how you cut it, God has given us the capacity for thuggery and evil along with our better natures; both the capacity and the choice. We thank God when we succeed, if only in believing.

But if, beyond thanking, we concentrate on glorifying God for creating the universe, the place where created things and beings affect one another and humankind must decide how to behave. We can share in that glory which empowers us to, not only survival, but have joy and permanent fulfillment, if only we believe. There really are rights and wrongs. For each of us, the question remains, "How will I respond to my growing awareness that I can freely choose the kind of life I'd like to lead?"