

We have today an abridgement of the Joseph story, which is necessary but unfortunate. It would take way too long to read the entire story, and would probably present an insurmountable preaching challenge, but it's a great story and I hate to leave out any part of it. Essentially, you'll remember, Joseph was Jacob's favorite son, and made himself obnoxious by telling the rest of the family about his dreams in which they all bowed down to him. His brothers made him disappear, and he was sold as a slave in Egypt and then imprisoned on false charges. From prison he parlayed his dream-interpretation talents to become Pharaoh's second in command. Famine struck back home, his brothers came to Egypt looking for grain and they didn't recognize him, but ultimately he revealed himself to them and they were terrified that he would avenge himself. But Joseph said, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people."

The story raises the question, how do you know what any particular event "means," and how do you know—or do you know—when the story is complete? There is one fateful turning point after another in Joseph's story. In fact, Eliezer Segal of the University of Calgary tells about his wife's grandmother who would follow the weekly reading closely from her seat in the synagogue, and one year when the reader came to the part about Jacob sending Joseph out to find his brothers at Dothan, "her countenance became increasingly filled with consternation, until she could hold it back no longer, and blurted out audibly: 'Joseph, don't do it again! Didn't you learn your lesson from last year?!'"

The rabbis were also concerned about these seemingly innocuous but fatal

turning points. Jacob sent Joseph to look for his older brothers because he didn't know exactly where they were; I guess you could go pretty far when you were pasturing your sheep. So Joseph went out a ways and then asked a stranger if he'd seen them, which is how he knew to go to Dothan. Well, the rabbis wanted to know, why is that detail in the story? Why don't we also know what Joseph ate for lunch, or whether he stopped and picked flowers? What's the point of this little interlude with the stranger? Ibn Ezra, in the 11th century, says there is no point; it's just something that happened; but Eliezer Segal doesn't accept that. He says, "For one thing, who ever heard of anybody giving proper directions in Israel? . . . Why single out for mention this particular incident?"

Rashbam, in the same century, says that the anecdote is meant to establish how hard Joseph was trying to do his father's bidding even under adverse conditions. Rashi says the nameless guide was an angel, whom God sent to make sure Joseph did get to the right place because God had a plan for him. And so forth.

And that's just one fateful turning point. Another comes when Joseph fails to elude Potiphar's wife, and is wrongfully accused and imprisoned. Another comes when a companion in prison happens to be entertaining everyone with his dreams, and Joseph interprets the dream for him. And another comes when this companion, now freed, happens to mention the talented Hebrew slave to Pharaoh. And so forth. You look back on it and, like Joseph, you might say that God had a hand in everything that took place in order to preserve a numerous people. But at the time, how do you even know you just took a turn, and how do you know it means anything?

This story is one of several “court stories” told about virtuous or heroic Jews placed in the courts of powerful foreigners who by their virtue, courage and integrity are able to do good for their communities. Esther is another such court story, in which as queen she foils an attempt to massacre all the Jews in the city. The first half of Daniel is another such court story, in which Daniel and other young men refuse the Persian king’s non-kosher food and live only on vegetables, but gain the favor of the king for themselves, their community, and ultimately their God. These stories must have been tremendously comforting for the Jewish people in exile in Babylon, trying to sustain their identity in a place that denied that their identity and their God were valid. These stories would remind them that adversity is not a sign that God has forgotten you, and that there is always a way you can live out your identity and faith in the God of liberation and abundance. Like Joseph, they could only do their best and hope that God was somehow in the mix.

This story makes me think about the fight over the Dakota Access Pipeline and a discussion we had at church council a couple of weeks ago. What I took away from the conversation, which was very interesting and which I think Deb recorded in the minutes as “Discussion ensued,” was that there are a bunch of narratives about the conflict. Each narrative is true (in the sense of being not false), but also often structured to win supporters. So non-native pipeline opponents talk a lot about the risks of spills, which is a compelling angle to take, but they don’t talk about the fact that transporting oil by train or truck is even riskier. The real issue for many non-native opponents is use of fossil fuels, period. It just seems like a bad idea to continue to build infrastructure for the use of fossil fuels when we

desperately need to develop sustainable energy sources. But that's too big and complicated as an argument, so they scale it down to oil spills. "Oil will be spilled" is a true story, but it's actually not their *real* story. There are also narratives about the abuse of eminent domain, and the Native determination not to let this be one more in a series of abuses and neglects of the land and the people by US government and its friends. Pipeline supporters have stories about good jobs for construction workers and energy independence for Americans—true stories, but "energy independence" is not the *real* story. Like the opponents' oil spill story, it's something of a cover, in this case a cover for the story "The Bakken company wants to make a profit." Each story has turning points, and we probably all wonder which turning point will matter, how the story will end, and where God is in the mix.

Say what you will about Joseph, and he's a character with many flaws, he was a straight arrow. He told the truth as he knew it, even when doing so got him into serious difficulties. I take that as a clue that he trusted God—and I think he tips his hand there at the end of the story when he tells his frightened brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good." I'm told that the word translated "intend" has resonances with the word for weaving, suggesting that a weaver may plan a pattern that is not immediately visible to another person. In fact, a weaver or artist may create an image of, say, a lion's mane, only to have another person see it as a flower. Joseph is saying that the brothers wove a design of harm, but God saw it (and made it) a design for good. At what turning point did that happen? We can't know, and Joseph never knew.

Jesus says in Luke 6:35, "Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting

nothing in return.” That is also a posture of trust—a recognition that although we have to take responsibility for our own behavior, we cannot determine outcomes. We have to trust that God is in the mix. In complicated situations like the conflict over the Dakota Access Pipeline—but in family situations too—passions can lead us to cover over our real reasons, our real stories about what’s going on, with stories that are designed to garner support. Of course we want good to prevail, and of course the side we align ourselves with is the side we believe is good. But the Joseph story suggests that it is wise not to try so hard to control the outcome that we compromise our truthfulness. Joseph told the truth as he understood it consistently, *despite* unfavorable outcomes along the way. In the long run, the outcome he could not possibly have created was one that preserved his family and bore the fingerprints of the God of liberation and abundance. We never get to know the end of the story—but I would like to be able to live *my* story truthfully and in the confidence that God is in the mix designing a better pattern than I can imagine.

Let us pray.

God of our ancestors, although Joseph is millennia away from us, we recognize his story as one of our own. If we take our sticky hands off the steering wheel, can we trust you to make the outcome part of your good reign? Help us to discern wisely what we can do and be tough enough to do it. Help us not to try to tip the scales with propaganda or a refusal to recognize the rest of the story. Sanctify to us our despair and our failures. Amen.