

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“What’s Your Story?”
Genesis 50
September 25, 2016

From beginning to end, Genesis is filled with these hugely significant stories. There’s the story of creation, of the flood, of Babel, of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebecca, of Jacob and Esau. But in terms of length, none of those stories even come close to the amount of ink that is spilled on the story of Joseph.

So, when I saw that the Narrative Lectionary gives us only the bookends of this story, I immediately felt disappointed, because Joseph’s story is full of twists and turns, ups and downs. I mean, you could spend an entire week of VBS on Joseph, each night another chapter in the story, and still not cover the whole thing.

What I did find interesting is that we were given this reading in chapter 50, which I’d venture to guess is not part of the story you learned in Sunday School or VBS, or even watching DreamWorks movie versions, “Joseph: King of Dreams”

You probably know what happened after Joseph was sold to Potiphar. Potiphar’s wife had the hot’s for this foreign slave boy, but Joseph ran away. She was hurt and embarrassed, so she got him thrown in prison.

There he stayed for years... until Pharaoh had these dreams about skinny cows eating up fat cows, and withered corn eating up fat corn... It was all this foreshadowing of the famines to come. Joseph ends up being the only one who can interpret Pharaoh’s dream... and through a crazy turn of events, Joseph has gone from daddy’s favorite, to a slave, to a prison rat, to first in command over Egypt’s economy.

Then come the stories of famine itself. His brothers back home are starving, so they go to Egypt, looking for food, and who holds the keys to their life or death? Well, none other than Joseph.

Of course, they don’t recognize him. It’s been years since they’ve seen him, and they certainly couldn’t have imagined being related to this Egyptian official in front of them with all of his makeup and royal garb on.

But after a series of tense moments, and character tests, Joseph reveals himself and there’s this great moment of reconciliation and reunion. So, the brothers go back and bring their father, Jacob, to Egypt... all for them to live happily ever after, right? The sun sets in the background. Roll the credits.

Well, not so fast. There are still 4 more chapters to Joseph’s story... which is a nice little reminder that even after the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers... things are not so simple. Once the family moves to Egypt, it’s not like they just have a big family reunion every night. Joseph is still the highest-ranking Egyptian government official. He’s way more Metropolitan-Egyptian, than Canaanite-Shepherd like his brothers.

They've got different ways of living, different inside jokes, different foods they're used to eating... different ideas of fun. So, don't get the wrong idea here. It's not like Joseph has suddenly become buddy-buddy with his older brothers. He's not "one of them" now that they are all here in Egypt, any more than he was "one of them" growing up back home.

He still doesn't fit in. He's still the outsider. Sure, he might have way more power than they could even begin to imagine, but that power only exacerbates the gulf between Joseph and his brothers.

And so, years go by as they try to figure out how in the world they are supposed to even interact with each other... how they're supposed to be around each other.

You might know the feeling with some of your family. As difficult as your family may be, you might have wished some of them were sold into slavery.

Most families are pretty messy. And certainly all of the families of the bible are. Families are the relationships that bring us the most joy and meaning in our lives and the most gut wrenching pain and frustration in our lives. They are almost always both.

Well, I imagine the same continues to be true for Joseph and his brothers. And a big part of that comes from the different stories they have that shape their perspective... the different narratives they each have operating on the inside. ***They are each telling themselves a different story about their relationship with one another.***

I mean, just imagine Joseph, with his busy government job, has the weight of the world on him. In fact, some of these later chapters continue to tell the story of the famine, and how it played out in Egypt... and the decisions Joseph had to make along the way. So, Joseph is handling one crisis after another.

But you know, probably every now and then, he looks over and gets a glimpse of his brothers, laughing together and sharing some beautiful moment. He looks longingly at them; his heart still aches. He still wishes he could be one of them. But he knows it's not possible.

In fact, they probably don't want him around.

They never have.

He's never fit in.

And he certainly doesn't now.

That's the story operating on the inside for Joseph. It's the story he knows. He's not wanted. Never will be. He'll always be on the outside looking in. So, when the brothers look up and notice him lurking there in the corner, he's a bit embarrassed. He turns and gets back to his work.

The brothers have a different story that's operating for them... It's the story of the guilt they've carried for decades and the story of fear and revenge.

And now... well, they are here, and they have what they need. But there's no way Joseph could actually forgive what they've done. The story they are telling themselves is that Joseph probably keeps them near by so he can keep an eye on them.

But it's pretty obvious, Joseph doesn't like them. He always keeps his distance. It's pretty obvious that Joseph still resents them. And who could blame him?

So, when they look up and see Joseph lurking in the corner, looking their way... they don't see a longing face, they see scheming eyes.

When Joseph quickly turns and walks away... they can't help but wonder what he's planning. What he might do to them and their families?

It's the same moment, but they have two different stories, two different narratives about their relationship. And those different stories shape their relationships, their lives, their self-understanding.

Those two different stories they are living with allow them to look at the very same moment, the same set of facts, and come to very different conclusions.

The brothers: Joseph walks away because he's scheming their demise.

Joseph: He turns and walks away because his brothers don't really want him around anyway.

And here's the thing: ***we all have stories*** of one kind or another, that are shaping our lives and our relationships. We have a certain narrative that we live by.

There are stories that shape how we understand ourselves,
and how we understand the events of our world,
and even how we understand God.

The reason people so often disagree is not because they have different facts, but because they have a different operative narrative that shapes how we are interpreting the same facts. There is a different story into which those facts are put.

It's why Democrats and Republicans can look at the same set of data and disagree so vehemently about what the best policy would be. They each have different narratives, different stories that shape their understanding of their world... stories that lead them to opposing conclusions.

And it's why people who are white and people who are black can look at the same incident and draw a completely different set of conclusions.

It's not that black minds operate one way and white minds function in another way. In fact, it's not really about color. It's about the story that we have already working in our mind when we come to the fact. ***And we all have a story.***

There is a narrative that is already operating in us,
that shapes how we interpret the same information.
and can often lead us to different conclusions.

And those stories run so deep within us,
so deep in our subconscious, that most of the time, we don't realize the story that is there... determining how we see this life of ours.

We just assume that we are drawing the right conclusion, because of the facts in front of us,
because "this is the way things are."

Well, Joseph and his brothers have two very different stories at work. And when their father dies, the conflict of those two competing narratives of their relationship bubbles to the surface.

As a pastor who works closely with families when a loved one dies, I can tell you that it is almost always at these critical moments in the life of a family when the competing narratives come to the surface most clearly. Conflict can so often happen in the aftermath of a funeral, and it's because there are two different stories operating in the life of the family.

Jacob dies, and now Joseph's brothers are afraid. ***"Is this this the moment when Joseph is going to get revenge? Is this what he's been waiting for?"***

Of course they are asking that question. It just makes sense in light of the story they've been watching... the story of Joseph, still aloof, still distant, all powerful... the story of Joseph who has always loved their father, but never them.

And so, here they beg for Joseph's mercy, for his forgiveness once again. Remember, Joseph and his brothers had already reconciled 5 chapters back... years and years earlier. But here again, in this moment, they beg for his mercy like it never happened.

And Joseph... just begins to weep. He knew they have still been distant all this time, but he didn't know they were still afraid of him.

He weeps because he longs to be part of his family, not separated from them.

He weeps because the story he's been telling himself these last several years is so different than the story his brothers have believed.

He weeps and says, ***"Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do me harm, (just like I said years ago) God intended it for good..."***
I've already told you that.

In Joseph's response we learn a little more about the narrative that Joseph is living by... the story that is shaping his self-understanding.

It's pretty clear here that Joseph hasn't taken on a victim's story, which most of us would be inclined to do.

Joseph doesn't read his life as a tragedy, even though there has been plenty of suffering and loss.

In fact, he doesn't even seem to be the primary character in his own story. Did you notice that?

Instead, he reads his life as part of God's story,
He reads his life as a part of what God is doing in the world,
as a part of God's great redemption,
of God's salvation.

***And that story in him, that narrative,
changes everything about how he sees his life!***

Because he's living from God's story,
he is able to forgive his brothers,
Because he's living from God's story,
bitterness is not defining his life,
Because he's living from God's story,
even his greatest tragedies,
have profound meaning and purpose.

But here's the thing, he's not living from just any "god-story."
because there are an awful lot of different god-stories out there.

There's the god-story that say God is an angry and vengeful god. And if that had been his God-story, his brothers should be pleading for their lives.

There's the God story that's more like karma... whatever you do in this life will come back to you. If that was his God-story, his brothers should be nervous.

For a lot of us, there's the "God-story" that's a lot like Santa Claus. The story of a god who is jolly with rosy cheeks and passes out candy and presents for anyone who asks nicely enough... Or the story of a god that's [sing] "*making his list and checking it twice, who's going to find out who is naughty and nice.*"

Now I know that you're not going to find very many people who would intentionally equate Santa with God. But if you start looking under the layers of theology for the average American nominal Christian... ***the story of Santa Claus has defined their God-story a whole lot more than the story of Jesus.***

Which should make us all ask: “What God-story is operating under the surface of our lives?” ...because some story is there. Whether you can articulate it or not, there is some story at work within you, shaping how you think about God... and God’s relationship to you and God’s relationship with those around you.

For some of us, it’s the story of an impersonal force that created the world, but is not relational in any way.

For some of us, it’s the story of a clock-maker, who wound the clock up and is letting it run its course. Maybe that’s not what we think we believe, but it’s the story that’s working on us... in our everyday lives.

For some of us, it’s the opposite, the story of a puppeteer, who controls each and every movement we make, each and every word that is spoken, each and every action that is taken in our world.

There is some god-story operating within you...shaping how you see God and how you see your world. And that god-story is shaping your life. Richard Rohr says, **“Your operative image of God, determines who you are becoming.”**

I wonder... how close is your God-story to the story that Jesus would tell.
Jesus’ God-story is about a Father, who embraces his prodigal son with celebration and joy,

It’s about a woman, who sweeps her house looking for her one lost coin. Nothing will stop her from finding you.

It’s also a story about a shepherd who separates the sheep from the goats.

Jesus’ God-story is about death and resurrection,
surrender and eternal-life.

It’s the story of a God who enters into the darkest evil that this world can stir up, even the darkness of a cross... and repurposes it for our salvation.

This is the God-story operating in Jesus.

Maybe it’s the story you say you “believe,” but sometimes...there is a profound difference between the story we think we believe, and the story operating in us and on us, shaping how we see our life, and our relationships.

So, maybe it’s time to take a second look.

And ask ourselves, what story is my life telling?

Reflection:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.

- Thomas Merton