

The story of Joseph. It covers a huge section of Genesis. It is even the longest continuous narrative in the Quran. In classic biblical style, we get the whole story of human beings with brutal honesty. All the character flaws and evil deeds are in full view. We witness that delicate blend of God's central role in the drama inhabited by human persons, that dance of God's providence and human agency.

Remember last week's story? We saw the birth of the dysfunctional family par excellence, the blended family of Jacob where his various wives and their sons do battle. Jealousy reigns as Jacob inaugurates Joseph as his favorite. Now we say we don't have favorites, but often we do. I was lucky to have a daughter and a son, so I could say, "You're my favorite little girl." or "You're my favorite little boy."

So Jacob started it all; Joseph fed it with his dreams of supremacy that he saw fit to share at the dinner table; and his brothers took the conflict to its conclusion. Everyone was part of the tensions and dysfunction. As the

Hebrew has it, they could not even say Shalom to one another. They were no longer on speaking terms.

Joseph is seventeen years old when it comes to a head. He is flying high with that special ornamental robe his father bestowed on him. The world is his oyster. He is entering that season of life when Richard Rohr says we are building the container for our life—but before we have found the meaning that goes in that container of career, family, and home.

Joseph's poise and cockiness incite the perfect storm.

So his brothers conspire to do him in. Their preference is the drone approach as it were, the way of killing him one step removed. First, it means leaving him in a pit—reminiscent of a tomb—left for dead. Some of them do feel some compunction. Judah diverts things a bit with the idea of selling him into slavery for twenty pieces of silver. After all, he is their own flesh and blood---as though killing their own flesh would be suicide after a fashion. So they strip him of that infamous robe and dip it in animal's blood, concocting the story of death by wild beasts. They do not kill him,

but blood is on their hands and they kill him in their father's heart. The rabbis certainly considered it murder.

So they return home to live with what they have done and watch their father mourn. Their jealousy must have grown as Jacob's heart broke. Sure they thought, "But what about us? We are still here for you to love."

Now we fast forward to today's portion of the story. A lot has been happening in Egypt. Joseph lands in prison after his master's wife makes unwelcome advances. I once saw a performance of Joseph and His Amazing Technicolored Dreamcoat where someone walked across the stage at this point with a placard that read, "Genesis chapter so and so, verse so and so." In prison he becomes known as an interpreter of dreams. After he goes on to interpret pharaoh's dreams that warn of famine on the horizon, Joseph becomes the chief financial officer of Egypt. When the famine arrives, his brothers arrive on his doorstep not recognizing him as the brother they enslaved.

Even more than this has been happening at a deeper level. Joseph has lived through great struggle and loss. He has experienced the pain caused by both evil intent and misfortune. He has been forced to discover his own identity and the identity of God. He has come to discover God's providence in the struggles of his life and is now free for the first time to love and to forgive. As a mature person, he is now able to be generous and compassionate. Frederick Buechner says it well, "Almost as much as it is the story of how Israel was saved from famine and extinction, it is the story of how Joseph was saved as a human being. It would be interesting to know which of the two achievements cost God the greater effort and which was the one he was prouder of."

So Joseph pulls back the curtain and reveals himself to his brothers. With love and forgiveness, he says, "...do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life....So it was not you who sent me here, but God..." He proclaims God's role in this drama. Later after their father dies and his

brothers fear that he will withdraw his forgiveness, he goes even further.

Then he says, You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. Everett Fox captures the Hebrew even better when he says, “You planned ill against me, but God planned-it-over for good.”

There is human agency driving the ill that was done. Everybody has to accept their responsibility for their part of the disaster—Jacob, Joseph, all the brothers, the rest of the family who sat back and watched. But God found a way to “plan-it-over”, to shape the convergence of this human conflict with God’s loving care moving through human history.

Joseph’s story sums up our individual lives as finite human beings and the lives of our families and our communities, especially our faith communities. Everyday we live out this story. In the midst of our interconnected lives, here is the need for the maturity of differentiation, living with consistency without being rocked about by the emotional pressure of others. Everyone has the choice to contribute to the tension and anxiety of the community or to take individual responsibility for self.

Finally Joseph matures in his relationship with himself and with God. The change within him is healing for all. He becomes a co-creator with God, a steward of his life, his giftedness, and his relationships. He learns to offer his gifts without wallowing in his misfortune. Now he can love and forgive.

In the wake of Robin Williams' death, I finally watched the movie, Good Will Hunting. That story gives a good picture of the other path Joseph could have taken. Will is beyond brilliant, a self taught genius of a mathematician from South Boston who cleans floors at MIT and answers impossible math questions secretly. Abandoned and abused as a child, he at age twenty acts out and refuses to claim his giftedness. He clings to the loyalty of his drinking buddies until one of them does what the professor, the therapist, and the woman in his life could not do. His best friend gives him a blessing and also a shove into the larger world. He asks Will to leave and go forth to claim his life. To become his true self would be a gift to those he left behind.

Our destinies are indeed bound together in the human family and in the family of the faith community. So says Genesis. Devorah Steinmetz describes well this story of a family with a common destiny whose threat to survival, as she says, “comes not so much from without, but from within the patriarchal family.” She goes on to say, “In each generation, the family is threatened by the twin dangers of conflict between members and loss of identity: either the family members remain together and threaten to destroy one another, or they separate and are in danger of being lost to the family’s special mission.”

That was the threat in the time of Joseph. The greatest danger was the end of the house of Israel and its mission for the sake of the world. That is the threat for every generation of the people of God. The shame is not so much that God’s people might suffer but that faith might die out.

The good news of Joseph’s story is that God never give up on us. It is the good news of Jesus Christ. God takes our mistakes and broken relationships whether evil or misguided and “plans them over”. That special

mission of God's people continues because God continues to work in and through us—and sometimes in spite of us. With God's help, let us each grow into the most mature person we can be that we might be generous and compassionate with one another and with God. In our generation, we continue writing the story. May we choose the healing and salvation of Joseph.