

SMSA#337, Epiphany 7C**Charles M. Pope****February 20, 2022****Genesis 45:3-11, 21-28 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50 Luke 6:27-38**

There was a play produced in the 70's that was later made into a movie entitled "1776." As you might guess it was the story of the Continental Congress and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The movie provided portrayals of the characters of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and others. After all their negotiating and arguing, at the end of the movie, the final scenes showed the signers in the process of signing the Declaration. At a certain point, the action stops, and the characters freeze in the positions given them in a painting of the signing. That painting was printed on the back of the short lived \$2 bill. For someone watching the movie for the first time, it was a unique experience. For we had all seen that painting many times in books and other places. But in viewing it at the end of the movie, we had a sense of who the characters in the painting were, and what they represented.

When we encounter characters in the Word of God, we encounter them in this freeze frame fashion.

Just to read the description and account of a character once is the same thing as looking at a picture of an event, and then putting it aside. But to study the reading carefully, to reflect on it, to read it again, and perhaps again. That is a different thing. Then the characters come alive, and the setting rises out of obscurity. And then via the Word of God, you are there. It is hard to duplicate in a sermon what you can do on your own by reading carefully. Maybe if I had a couple more hours to preach. Oh well. Today's freeze frame from the Old Testament is the story of Joseph. Joseph was the son of Jacob, who was also called Israel, and his wife, Rachel.

There were many sons in the family. But Joseph was Jacob's favorite. He doted on him. He gave him a coat of many colors, which he did not give to the other sons. The other sons predictably were filled with jealousy and anger. They were so mad that when they encountered Joseph out in the wilderness, they threw him into a deep pit, thinking that they might come back and kill him. But then a caravan came along, heading toward Egypt. His brothers sold him as a slave. They then lied to their father that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal.

Jacob was grief stricken and mourned for a long time. Meanwhile in Egypt Joseph had been sold to the family of a man named Potiphar.

To make a long story short, he became favored in that family. As his power and his fame grew, he became a consultant to Pharaoh himself. At this point a severe famine occurred, lasting for some 7 years. There was very little water. Farming came to a standstill. The reading today picks up the story of Joseph's brothers coming to Egypt, looking for food. To their astonishment they discover that Joseph is alive. Fearing that Joseph might seek revenge, the brothers cower before him. But Joseph is full of forgiveness. He gives them provisions and sends them back to bring his father to Egypt so that they can all live there and be provided for. Today's reading ends with Jacob on his way to see Joseph in Egypt.

Some scholars say this marvelous old story is carefully constructed myth, a story made up to convey meaning. Other scholars maintain that these events actually happened.

Whether the story is historical or not, we do know that it was one of those stories that was told, re-told, and memorized over generations.

Finally, at some point, it was written down, becoming part of the book of Genesis.

The character of Jacob, the father, was remarkable. He was the one who had wrestled with the angel. God had given him the name Israel. He seems to be kind of a pre-Messiah figure with human characteristics and angelic characteristics. The story has a little bit of everything: a father's love, favoritism, jealousy, conspiracy, deception, and finally forgiveness. It is the story of how things can go wrong in a family: how a father can be in the dark about his son's whereabouts or his well being, how siblings can be so angry and bitter that they contemplate murder, so angry that they banish a brother. We could say that the brothers' behavior is somewhat understandable because of the favoritism shown Joseph by his father. But I suspect that this type of behavior was common for the brothers in other situations. And I suspect that deception that followed mistrust was more common than not.

Modern psychologists would probably point to a cyclical dynamic of abuse and victimization. If counselors were called in to work with the situation, there would be much more success in working with the victim than with the perpetrators. In general, counseling is much more proficient with a victim than with a perpetrator.

Across the US we continue to work with its laws of reporting abuse and what constitutes abuse. We continue to work with what is reportable. Reportable usually means there was evidence that abuse occurred. There were marks on the victim's body that substantiated the accusation of physical abuse. But in many cases, it is considered unreportable if there is no physical evidence to substantiate the accusation of abuse. Even if our system of reporting is not ideal, the discussion of what is abuse, and what is reportable is a very important one that we should not shy away from.

In the case of Joseph, as his power and influence grew in Egypt, the stage was set for him to exact revenge on his brothers. When his brothers came into Egypt to beg for food, he could have had them imprisoned for life or worse. But here is Joseph turning from expected revenge to forgiveness. Here is Joseph breaking the cycle of vengeance. Here is Joseph who when faced with the decision of whether to be a perpetrator or not, decided not to be one. Here is Joseph who said that it was God who in the behavior of his brothers called him to Egypt to be in a position to save them from the famine.

Generations later in Egypt, the situation of the people of Israel changed, and they found themselves in slavery to a different Pharaoh. In those days God would call Moses to lead the people out of slavery, toward the promised land.

Perhaps we are able to discern a pattern in the call of God. It seems that the call of God at times, is away from something. Joseph was called away from being a perpetrator to his brothers. He was called away from being a victim after they sold him into slavery. In the time of Moses the people were called away from slavery. And so it is that in the Christian life, as surely as we are called toward a certain kind of life, we are called away from another kind of life. Or as we say in the Eucharistic Prayer: “Out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life.”

In the call of God into new life, is it possible that we would not completely let go of the old life? Is it possible that our awareness of new life would be blunted because of our continuance in the old?

The gospel from Luke reads today: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat, do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you.....”

Far from being a catalog of instructions, Luke is imploring us away from a certain kind of life.

The process of letting go of a way of life can be relatively simple. Or it can be excruciatingly difficult. For those who have been so horribly abused in so many ways, letting go of the anguish of that kind of life may be the hardest thing they will ever have to do. And yet, God does not desire that anyone be a victim. God does not desire that anyone be a perpetrator. We are called from that kind of living, that kind of slavery. But again, in one of the mysteries of humanity, it seems that many of us are more trapped in the darkness than others. Those people are a reminder that in some time and some way, we all need deliverance. We need someone like Joseph who can break the cycle.

It may be that some of us will find ourselves in the role of helper to one who is trapped in the darkness. Some of us may be like Joseph or Moses. In this life some of us may be victims. Some of us may be perpetrators. Some of us may be deliverers. Some of us may have other roles. But whatever our role, we are all called to a new life, and we are all trying to turn our backs on slavery, on the darkness.

For some of us, it seems that the darkness rolls off like water off a duck's back. For others it seems to cling to our lives like a barnacle. In either case, and in other cases, whatever our role, it is Christ who will bring us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life. Amen.