

## What's Your Story?!!

So, what's your story? Have you thought about that lately? If you haven't, it's something that you may want to consider because everyone has a story.

Each one of us has a biological story to share—a story whose narrative is all about place of our birth, our parents and our siblings. This is the story of about our life's journey—from childhood to the present—about relationships forged, places lived, experiences shared.

But, at a deeper level, everyone of us has a spiritual story as well—the story that concerns the narrative of how we understand ourselves and God, how we find meaning, purpose and significance in the living of life. Even though we may sometimes be unaware of it, there is, deep within us, a longing to discover the story that connects us with God, with one another and with the world of which we are a part.

This morning, I would like to invite our confirmands and everyone else, for that matter, to think about the story that is your story—the story that names you, shapes you and gives your life its direction. As I have thought about it, perhaps the best way to do that is to tell you a story—a story about a young man, slightly older than confirmation age when he is first introduced to us in the great sprawling narrative we find in Genesis, chapters 37-50.

Joseph, you may recall, was one of twelve sons born to his father, Jacob. The first we read of him, he is tending his father's sheep along with his brothers. The story, however, makes it clear that, of all Jacob's sons, Joseph was the apple of his father's eye, the son of his old age. You may have heard of the fact that Jacob has given Joseph a special coat, a robe with beautiful long sleeves and that made his brother's mad with jealousy. They hated Joseph because of the love and attention their father lavished on him and not on them.

It didn't help that Joseph was prone to having dreams that he would share with his brothers—dreams that made it clear that he, Joseph, was to be the favored one and rule over his brothers who would serve him. It's never a good idea to share dreams like that with one's siblings, but Joseph did just that and his brothers hated him all the more for it.

As the story unfolds, Jacob sends Joseph to visit his brothers who are away from home grazing their great flocks of sheep. The plot begins to thicken when the brothers see Joseph coming in the distance. Their pent up anger and jealousy get the better of them and they quickly hatch a plot to do away with him. But Joseph's younger brother Reuben manages to persuade them not to actually kill Joseph, but simply to throw him in a deep pit out there in the wilderness.

Having done that, they then notice an approaching caravan of traders on their way to Egypt. They decide then to sell their brother as a slave to these traders for twenty pieces of silver. The good news, as far as Joseph is concerned, is that they did not kill him. The bad news is that he was taken to Egypt as a slave where he was eventually sold to Potiphar who was the captain of the guard in the court of the Pharaoh.

The brothers then conceived a scheme in which they cover Joseph's robe with animal blood and proceed to take it to their father as evidence that Joseph, his favorite son, has been killed and eaten by a wild animal. Jacob, of course, is overcome with grief.

Meanwhile, back in Egypt, we are told that the Lord was with Joseph and he quickly gained the confidence of Potiphar—so much so that Potiphar made Joseph the overseer of his entire household. Everything was going swimmingly! That is until Potiphar's wife decided to make advances on the young and handsome Joseph. Joseph refused those advances, but that did not stop Potiphar's wife from framing Joseph by telling her husband that Joseph had, in fact, made unwanted advances upon her.

As a Hebrew slave, Joseph, of course, could not defend himself and was promptly thrown into the royal prison by an angry Potiphar.

Once again, however, the story makes it clear that God was with Joseph as he quickly gained the confidence of the head jailer who placed Joseph in charge of the care of the rest of the royal prisoners.

Two of those prisoners happened to be the royal cup bearer and the royal baker. They had done something to displease the Pharaoh and now found themselves in prison. The two of them were placed under Joseph's leadership and he tended to their needs. One night, they both had mysterious dreams—dreams that left them fearful and confused. Noticing that they were not themselves, Joseph asked them what was wrong. They then explained that they had dreamed dreams that no one could explain to them.

Joseph, you will remember, had the gift of being able to interpret dreams and so he invited them to share their dreams with him, which they proceeded to do. When they pressed him for an explanation, he informed the cup bearer that Pharaoh would release him and restore him to his office in three days. The news for the baker, however, was not at all good. Sadly, Joseph explained that his dream indicated that in three days, he would be hanged by Pharaoh.

It was as Joseph said it would be. The royal baker was hanged and the royal cup bearer was restored to the Pharaoh's court. In spite of the fact that Joseph had asked him to put in a good word for him with the Pharaoh, the cup bearer quickly forgot all about Joseph upon his release.

That is, until two years later when the Pharaoh himself had a most confusing dream in which there were seven fat cows and seven thin and ugly cows on the banks of the Nile. The seven thin cows then proceeded to eat the seven fat cows. That was part one of his dream. In part two, there were seven ears of corn, plump and full that were consumed by seven thin and blighted ears of corn.

Unable to understand what these two similar dreams meant, the Pharaoh consulted with all the wise men and magicians of his court, to no avail. No one could explain them. But then,

the royal cup bearer had a flashback to his prison days and remembered Joseph and his ability to interpret dreams.

So it was that Joseph was summoned from prison by the Pharaoh who asked him to interpret his dream. Joseph proceeded to inform him that the two dreams that he had were really one and the same. They were God's way of informing the Pharaoh of what God was about to do. There would be, Joseph informed him, seven years of bountiful harvest followed by seven years of severe famine. But Joseph didn't stop at this point. He went on to recommend to the Pharaoh a detailed plan for facing this coming crisis. It was a plan that called for stockpiling all the grain that could possibly be stored over the next seven years in preparation for the following seven years of famine.

To be sure, it was a bold move on Joseph's part—one that could have easily displeased the Pharaoh. After all, Joseph was a prisoner in the royal dungeon. Who was he to be giving advice to the ruler of the land? Yet, Joseph's boldness was inspired by the spirit of God at work within him and even the Pharaoh could see and sense this: **"Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom there is the Spirit of God?"** he asked in astonishment.

And so it was that Joseph, once again, overcame the poor hand that he had been dealt. Not only was he released from prison, but he was given the authority of one who was "second in command" over all of Egypt—an astounding reversal of fortune.

Joseph went to work immediately gathering all the grain that could be stored and when the famine began seven years later, Egypt, thanks to Joseph's wise stewardship, was well prepared to handle the potential catastrophe. In fact, Egypt was so well prepared that we are told that "all the world" came to Egypt to buy grain.

And guess who "all the world" managed to include? Well, as it so happened, it included Joseph's brothers—the very ones that had sold him into slavery to begin with. Their father, Jacob sent them down to Egypt to buy enough grain in order to survive the famine.

Now, if you recall the story of Joseph, you will remember that this is where the plot thickens and actually becomes quite complicated. While his brothers fail to recognize Joseph, he recognizes them and proceeds to take advantage of the situation. He begins by accusing them of being spies and then proceeds to "mess with them" by insisting that they go home and bring their younger brother Benjamin (with whom Joseph was very close) with them upon their return. He then took his brother Simeon as a hostage in order to ensure their return and sent them on their way.

When the brothers returned home, their father, Jacob was upset to learn that not only did Simeon not return with them, but that now they wanted to take Benjamin back to Egypt with them. He initially refused, but when the famine worsened and they faced the prospect of perishing, he relented and sent Benjamin back with them.

Joseph, however, was still not above messing with his brothers a little more. He conceived a plot by which he framed his brother, Benjamin by planting a royal silver chalice in his

grain sack. When the chalice was discovered by Joseph's steward, the brothers feared not only for their lives, but for the life of their father Jacob whom they felt would surely die if they did not return with Benjamin.

Pressed to the point of desperation, Judah passionately pleaded for Joseph's understanding and mercy—asking to take the place of Benjamin as a hostage rather than allow the brothers to return to their father without his beloved, Benjamin.

It took a while, but at this point, Joseph could no longer bear the emotional torment. He sent all of the Egyptians present out of the room and proceeded to reveal himself to his brothers. **“I am your brother,”** he told them, **“the one you sold into slavery. Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.”**

And with these words of grace and forgiveness, the saga of estrangement came to an end. Although it would still take time, Joseph, his brothers and his father would eventually be reunited and healing would begin to replace the brokenness that had torn their family apart.

It's quite a story, don't you think? And while there are many facets to it, many subtle points that could be made, what stands out in my thinking was the fact that Joseph believed enough in himself and trusted enough in God to allow God to use him in some rather astonishing ways. It would have been easy for Joseph to give up—to conclude that the odds were stacked against him. After all, his brothers sold him into slavery! Not only that, but Potiphar's wife unjustly framed him and he ended up in prison through no fault of his own!

If that isn't enough to convince you that the world is out to get you, I don't know what is. And yet, Joseph simply did not allow himself to go there. He never lost the sense or the conviction that, in spite of the dire circumstances, God was, somehow and in some way, at work within him, using him, as he put, to “preserve life.”

To our confirmands, I would like to express my hope that this message will be one that you take with you, one that you never let go of or lose sight of. As you move forward from this celebration of the faith commitment that you make, there will be times in which you may find yourselves tempted to conclude that the deck is stacked against you, times in which you may feel as if you might as well give up and give into whatever pressure you happen to be facing.

I hope that you won't do that. I hope that you will remember the story of Joseph and his refusal to give into the circumstances that could have so easily defeated him. I hope you will remember that it was because he believed in himself and trusted that God could use him, that he was able to “preserve life,” that is, to find a way to make life better, not only for himself, but ultimately, for others as well.

So, what's your story?! You have one you know. In fact, you are already writing it, already participating in it. As your story continues to unfold, I hope that you will keep Joseph's story in mind. It is a story, you see, that reminds us of what the Apostle Paul writes about in his letter to the Romans (and his letter to us)—namely that “All things work together for good, for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose.” I believe that and invite you to not only believe that, but to trust that as well. **Amen!**