

God Shows Up
June 15, 2008
Genesis 45:1-8
The Reverend Tom Cramer

Synopsis:

Joseph is beginning to learn that God has been with him and his brothers all along, even through their bad decisions. Paul writing to the Romans says that “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). We know this because Jesus persevered through terrible circumstances for the better good.

I.

Let me begin today by sharing with you where I’ve been this past week, and the gift of grace it was to me at this point in my life.

The Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church (USA) invited me to a program called CREDO in the hills of southern Indiana. I know that Indiana doesn’t sound like a very exotic place to some of you, but I got to tell you, it was one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever seen.

Because of the time of year, the sun didn’t go down until after 9 o’clock at night, and every evening after sessions I took long walks in the woods. But let me warn you, they have wild turkeys in the hills of southern Indiana, so if you’re not paying careful attention, they can scare the bajebies out of you.

II.

CREDO literally means, “I believe,” but it would be better translated, “that to which I give my heart.” I was there because the Board of Pensions which oversees our church’s medical and pension plan has awakened to the fact that there are a lot of pastors who don’t finish their ministries nearly as strongly as they began them.

I was struck by two things from this conference: One is that the Presbyterian Church is filled with great pastors. I mean wonderfully gifted, generous, lovers of God who pour out their lives for the mission of Christ.

And two, I found out there are a lot of pastors who pour out their lives in service to the church, but woefully neglect to take care of their own physical, spiritual, financial, and relational health.

III.

I'll never forget what one pastor said at the first session of our conference. We were asked to blurt out our expectations of the week ahead, and this one pastor said, "I'm here because I don't know who I am anymore. I'd like to find myself."

That was such a sad thing for me to hear because as I got to know him during the conference, I realized he was a tremendously loving and giving person. Yet, his statement in that first session was like a bell going off for me. It made me consider the places in my own life where I might be lost, and where I need to be found again.

So that's what CREDO was about. It was a week-long process of discernment about who God calls us to be and how we can finish strong not just as pastors, but as children of God.

IV.

In our sermon text today, we meet a man who is lost in another way. He is lost in his unforgiveness toward his brothers, and it has blinded him from the provision that God has placed right in front of his eyes. [CWS: Follow along as I read this text this morning from chapter 45 of Genesis, verses 1-8, found on page 52 of your pew Bibles.]

Let us pray us pray together as we begin: Sovereign God, we're going to meet Joseph again today. We know that you spoke to him in dreams, and you gave him uncommon gifts to preserve your people. Help us to learn from *his* life so that we might be transformed by the renewing of your Spirit, in Jesus' Name. Amen.

V.

When I was growing up, I thought Joseph was the "good guy" in this story of Jacob's messed-up family. He had the cool coat; he could tell people the meaning of their dreams; and he was the original comeback kid.

He was like one of those inflatable clowns that you could hit on the nose and it would bounce right back up onto its feet. By the time Joseph was 30, he had become Pharaoh's number one man, and he was given authority over all of the wealth of Egypt.

As far as I can tell he was a faith-filled person. Joseph consistently gives God credit for the talents God has given him. He names one son “Manasseh,” which means, “*God has made me forget all of my troubles,*” and his second son “Ephraim,” which means, “*God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering?*” If there was ever a guy who makes the most out of adversity, it was Joseph.

VI.

But there’s another side to Joseph that we need to notice and it comes to a head in this passage. This is now the second time his brothers have come from Canaan begging for food, because the famine has spread so widely.

Although Joseph recognizes his brothers immediately, his brothers don’t recognize him at all. To them, Joseph is a mean-spirited Egyptian official who holds their family’s life in his hands. Nothing more than that.

Even when they described to Joseph the fragile state of their father’s health, making it exceedingly clear that losing his son Benjamin would most assuredly push him toward death, Joseph continues to demand that Benjamin come to Egypt.

This is not the kinder, gentler Joseph we like to think of. This Joseph is vindictive, myopic, and arrogant.

VII.

I can’t say for sure what causes Joseph’s turn around, but I suspect that it was coming face to face with the transformation of his brothers. He remembers them as cruel, heartless people, who would sell a younger brother into slavery, and now he is confronted with caring, loving people, who are willing to sacrifice their lives, if necessary, for the sake of preserving their family.

Rather than standing by idly and allowing Joseph to take Benjamin as a slave, Judah steps forward on his brothers’ behalf and begs Joseph to take him instead (44:33). (You can read this at the end of chapter 44)

VIII.

Joseph, I’m sure, was living in a conversation with himself about how justified he was for treating his brothers with contempt, after all they had done to him.

He takes the role of the younger brother who gets a chance to play the older brother, when all of sudden, he is confronted by older brothers who are willing to give their lives for the sake of their younger brother.

Joseph isn't making this up. They do this every time he's in their presence. It has become a pattern for them. He tries to manipulate them to act like their *old* selves and hand over their younger brother Benjamin, but they keep offering themselves instead.

When this happens a third time, something deep inside him changes, and he weeps so loudly the whole house of Pharaoh can hear him sobbing.

IX.

This is a moment I suspect, that all of his years of suffering, all of his losses, all his desire to belong to a family, welled up into one spontaneous and uncontrollable moment. When he sees the deep commitment of his brothers to save Benjamin and his father, it reminds him of his true identity as a child of Israel. He is one of their brothers, son of Jacob, child of Abraham, and most profoundly, child of God.

Look at what he says at this moment: “Come closer to me.” It’s almost as if he was saying, “I know it’s difficult for you to see me for who I really am, but I want you to try nevertheless.”

And then he told them what was really happening inside him.

This God he believed in when he was young, the one he trusted while he was sold into slavery, and the one he depended on when he was thrown into prison, this God had used all of that for good. They don’t need to be distressed anymore, because *just* as they had changed, so had he.

He says to them, “Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; God sent me before you to preserve life.”

X.

The fact of the matter is that up until this moment, Joseph doesn’t know who needs saving. He has the world at his fingertips, but “he is still in a pit of suffering at the hands of his brothers,” as pastor Emily pointed out last week. He has power and security on one hand and resentment and unforgiveness on the other with no sense of seeing himself as he really is, a child of God in need of salvation.

Joseph wanted to save his younger brother Benjamin, and God wanted to preserve his whole family to be a blessing to the entire earth. Joseph resented his brothers, and God was working through them to bring him to a place where he could see God’s bigger vision for the world. God uses all of it to bring Joseph to wholeness and to begin reconciling Joseph to his family.

It was like coming home again, but even better, because all of his sadness and all of his grief and all of his tricks of manipulating his brothers, could at last be set aside.

Most importantly, he felt free to claim his true identity again as one of the family. Accent or no accent, powerful official of Egypt or younger brother, he was finally, FINALLY, free. And he wept tears of joy and sorrow.

XI.

Who, or what, are you giving your heart to today? You may not have the power of Joseph to insulate you from the change that God wants you to make, but there may be something else that's keeping you from giving your heart fully to God.

As Joseph shows up to God in the midst of his pain and resentment, God is showing up for you today and asking you to come back to him. It doesn't matter if your in Egypt or Canaan, California or Indiana, God will come to where you are today.

Maybe instead of insulating yourself from God's call with power and success as Joseph did, you've been insulating yourself in some other way. Perhaps you've falling into bad habits that are damaging your relationships or health. Maybe you're drinking too much or taking addicted to prescription medications. God is showing up for you today.

Don't be like Joseph who missed years of intimacy and fellowship with his father and brothers because he hid behind his power, talents, and success. Get real with God this morning and take his hand. He's the God who brings estranged people back together again, just as he brought reconciliation to Joseph and his brothers. He's also the God who sent a messiah to die for you and to bring you back to himself. Amen.