

Seventh Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/C): "God Writes Straight with Crooked Lines"  
Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Luke 6:27-38  
February 22-23, 2025  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

None of Joseph's brothers were singing "Alleluia!" when they realized their meeting with an important "Egyptian" official was actually a surprise reunion with the little brother they'd sold into slavery years before, and passed off as dead to their father Jacob. "Oh, sugar...." You know it's going to be a bad day when you unexpectedly come face-to-face with the person in the world you've wronged the **most** – so much so you can only hope your victim is dead and unable to take vengeance.

You may remember how Jacob sent his sons from Israel into Egypt to find food for their starving family, and how they unknowingly received assistance from their brother Joseph (of "amazing technicolored dreamcoat" fame) who had risen to a place of prominence in Egypt as a trusted advisor to Pharaoh. Keeping his identity secret, Joseph demanded that in return for food assistance, they bring back to Egypt their little brother Benjamin. (Joseph and Benjamin had the same mother, Rachel.) When they arrive back in Egypt with Benjamin, Joseph arranges for a silver cup to be hidden in the grain bag given to Benjamin. When the supposed "theft" is discovered, Joseph insists the boy be left behind in Egypt with him. Big brother Judah begs to take Benjamin's place, pleading that losing Benjamin would kill their father, whom he claims had already lost another son (Joseph!). Hearing about his father's grief overwhelms Joseph. He excuses all the Egyptian courtiers from the room, leaving behind only his brothers.

*"I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?"* (Genesis 45:3b) The brothers are struck dumb. 'Seems like the gig is up. They **sold Joseph into slavery**, after all, and now he's in a position to squash them like bugs. He tells them to draw near and they do, even though they may have expected him to strike them. In case they didn't get his drift the first time, he lays it out more

clearly: *“I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.”* [Gulp!] What might they have expected to hear next? “And now the chickens come home to roost!” Or: “I’m going to throw you into prison and you’ll never see the light of day again!” Or: “Bet you didn’t bank on ever seeing me again!” But if their first surprise was seeing Joseph, their second is that he doesn’t react as they fear. Instead he says:

*“... do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here: for **God sent me** before you to preserve life.”* (Genesis 45:5)

Three times Joseph is going to repeat, “**God sent me**....” Instead of harping on, “You **sold** me!” he focuses on, “**God sent me.**” Later on he’ll say, “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” (Genesis 50:20) Luther has described this as “God writing straight with crooked lines.” We sin, we and others suffer because of it, but God is able to bring forth goodness out of it. God doesn’t override our free will which allows us to choose between kind and cruel, but our sin isn’t powerful enough to gut God’s plans either. God is always working behind the scenes to bring about God’s purposes, despite roadblocks we put in the way.

When we expect punishment and receive forgiveness, that’s a sure sign the Holy Spirit is working feverishly behind the scenes, within and among us. Remember that early scene in *Les Misérables* when Jean Valjean, the recently released convict, steals the silver from the kind Bishop who gave him dinner and a place to spend the night? The police drag him before the Bishop (whose nickname is Monsieur Bienvenue, “Mr. Welcome”). They triumphantly present the robber to the man he stole from. No one is more surprised than Jean Valjean when the Bishop declares it’s all a misunderstanding. He insists he’d **given** Valjean the silver, and then scolds him for forgetting to take the candlesticks, too! Once the gendarmes have left, he sings to Valjean: “I’ve ransomed your soul for God.” Valjean lives to repay the debt, to pay forward the kindness, many times over. “God writes straight with crooked lines.”

God is always putting Kingdom puzzle pieces in place. In *the amen effect*, Rabbi Sharon Brous gives us an interesting rabbinic take on the story of Joseph. Way back when, **before** Joseph's brothers sell him to slavers, his father Jacob sends him to check on the brothers who are tending the flocks. Joseph sets out to find them, isn't having any luck, is really just wandering around, ready to head back home, when he sees some random guy on the road and asks if **he** knows where his brothers might be. Brous writes that the man replies:

"I heard they went that way" ... (Gen. 37:15-17). And that's it.

Joseph turns to head *that way*. We rabbis love that the Torah includes that detail, because we can only infer that without that encounter, had Joseph simply returned home, he would not have been thrown into the pit and then sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers. Years later, during the famine, the brothers may have sought food from Egypt, but Joseph would not have been Pharaoh's chief advisor, in a unique position to help them. He wouldn't have invited the family to stay in Egypt, and maybe they never would have become enslaved when a new Pharaoh arose. They wouldn't have suffered hundreds of years of oppression, degradation, and cruelty, and they ultimately would not have been redeemed by God's strong hand and outstretched arm.

All this because this man, a stranger, points Joseph toward Dotan.

Who is this strange man? The Rabbis indicate that it was the angel Gabriel, sent by the Holy One to *ensure* that Joseph would fall into his brothers' hands, just as God intended, so the story of the Jewish people would ultimately unfold as it did. Trials and suffering, but also triumph and redemption.<sup>1</sup>

When Jesus tells the story about the Prodigal Son, it's like that loving father is a modern-day Jacob, who upon learning that Joseph was well in Egypt and not dead in a ditch, might also have said, "My son was dead and is now alive; he was lost and is found." There is another One in the Gospels who was dead, truly dead, and then was raised up by God's love and power on the third day. In this sense, Joseph's surviving and thriving have been seen as a foreshadowing of the resurrection of Christ. The wonderful Bible commentator Walter Brueggemann calls this a "gospel disclosure. The dead one is alive! The abandoned one has returned to power!"<sup>2</sup> No matter how dire things look, God is at the helm.

Joseph's brothers didn't have any reason to expect that Joseph would be **nicer** to them **after** they sold him into slavery than he had been **before**. Remember, there was a reason they wanted to get rid of him: he was obnoxious, insufferable, lording it over them even though he was the little brother, describing dreams in which they and even their **father** bowed down to him. Everyone knew Joseph was their father's favorite (hence the gift of the technicolored dreamcoat) and he didn't mind reminding them of it. So this upstart pipsqueak was going to be gracious?? Forgiving?? No way!

But like we heard a week or two ago, we say, "No way!" and God says, "My way!" *"I am your brother, Joseph."* In his reflection on this, Luther points out that Joseph didn't use the Egyptian name of power Pharaoh had given him (*Zephenath-paneah*, Genesis 41:45) but the name his father had given him, Joseph:

...the one [meaning] "added" by God, the surplus of meaning and joy and hope given to this family of faith. The point is a central one in biblical faith: the power to create newness does not come from detachment, but from risky, self-disclosing engagement.<sup>3</sup>

Joseph shows his brothers he can leave the past in the past. He invites them to, as well. Our God leaves **our** sinful past in the past, evaporating our failures in love like morning mist, as we'll be reminded on Ash Wednesday and throughout Lent. God does not tie our future to our past. God frees us in the present for what have been called "Genesis" beginnings. The Holy Spirit makes those fresh new starts possible, "writing straight with crooked lines," even enabling us to forgive as we've been forgiven. Amen

<sup>1</sup>Sharon Brous, *the amen effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World* (NY: Avery, 2024), p. 78.

<sup>2</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), pp. 343-344.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 344.

