

During this season of Epiphany, we have been reading through holy stories in our scriptures and asking: What does God reveal about Godself here?

Today’s story is unique. The main characters are ten jealous brothers, a father who plays favorites, and the young Joseph in his coat of many colors caught in a power struggle. The brothers throw Joseph in a pit. They sell him as a slave in Egypt, he is sexually assaulted by his master’s wife, framed as a rapist, and thrown in jail. What does this story reveal about God?

Joseph has the gift of dream interpretation; he interprets dreams in prison, his reputation spreads, Pharaoh calls for him when Pharaoh has a dream. Joseph provides powerful and accurate interpretation: seven years of plenty, seven years of famine. Pharaoh places him in charge of the whole land of Egypt: they save enough grain during the years of plenty to provide for the country and refugees during the years of famine. What does this story reveal about God?

Then, in today’s reading: we hear the end of the story: where Joseph’s own brothers are in need, Joseph now has power to feed them or send them away empty, to imprison them or set them free, to reveal himself or keep his identity a secret. It seems as though he is about to take revenge upon them. But he overhears their lament: we are being punished for what we did to our brother. We deserve it. We are so sorry. We wish we could go back and do things differently. What does this story reveal about God?

Joseph lets them go and he wants them to return with his brother, Benjamin. Benjamin, it seems, is Jacob’s new favorite son after he believes Joseph to be dead. Joseph sets up a trap for Benjamin and his brothers. Some could call it a test: have the brothers changed? Will they let the new favorite son of Jacob be a slave, as they sold Jacob’s former favorite into slavery?

Judah steps up to Joseph. He will not allow it. He will protect Benjamin for the sake of Jacob. He will sacrifice his own life instead of Benjamin. What a contrast to how the story begins: brother protecting brother at his own expense, rather than brother betraying brother for his own elevation.

This is too much for Joseph. He weeps. He reveals himself to his brothers. He wants them to come close. He wants them to move in. He wants to provide for them and not be afraid of him. He wants to be a family again.

What does this story reveal about God?

I could give you any number of things I see about the character of God revealed in this story. But the thing is, I'm not going to put the meaning I find onto this narrative. Joseph, the one who lived the story tells us the meaning he has come to understand. Joseph looks back on his life in this moment and he is his own interpreter of his life story. Joseph names God in his story.

“God sent me before you to preserve life...God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. It was not you who sent me here, but God. God has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.”

Before he says this, the story tells us “Joseph could no longer control himself” it says “Joseph wept so loudly” that everyone he sent away could still hear him! I think it was in that moment that he was struck with this understanding of his life story. Prior to that moment, he wasn't acting like somebody who could see all his suffering through this lens. He was acting like someone who wanted revenge. He was acting like someone who wanted payback. He was acting petty and confusing and manipulative and mad. But something clicks for him when Judah lays down his life for Benjamin. Something makes sense all of a sudden. It brings him to tears. Joseph is blessed with a new interpretive lens through which to understand everything that has happened to him and he is so sure that suddenly he can offer forgiveness and providence that felt miles away just a few verses before. He can reframe the entire sorry story with such clarity he repeats it over and over again in awe of this revelation:

It wasn't you who sent me here, it was God. God has been at work in this. It wasn't me being sold into slavery, it was God sending me to save people. It wasn't me earning some place in authority because of my cleverness, it was God making me an authority. It never should've been me deciding who gets food and who doesn't, when God sent me here to preserve life. Later, when he's had more time to work out his understanding of his own life through this God's eye view, Joseph reiterates his story to his newly repentant brothers after the death of Jacob: “Do not be afraid!” he says, “Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear, I myself will provide for you and your little ones.”

Y'all there is so much power in this story. There is so much revealed about the character of God. There is so much beauty when we allow the Holy Spirit to interpret our stories for us with a holy lens. And then we share our stories.

I want to point out to you that no one said to Joseph while he was in the pit his brother's threw him into and said: "This will all work out." No one said to Joseph, when he was a slave on his way to Egypt: "Everything happens for a reason." No one patted Joseph on the back after he was assaulted and said, "God can redeem even this." No one visited Joseph in jail and told him, "This too shall pass." No one swooped in on Joseph when his brother's showed up in need, telling him, "forgive them, Joe. I'll bet they've changed and they're sorry." While he was grieving his freedom, grieving his family, grieving his betrayal, no well-meaning person of faith approached him with a ready-made narrative that would make him feel better. No. This is something Joseph slowly comes to understand and then understands all at once in exactly the moment he needed to by the grace of the merciful God.

So often, when our friends and family are suffering, we want to push them to that "aha moment," or give them a lens that will make it all better, when it really is "the worst." But that rarely works. Instead, what we need to do is hear these holy stories, and we need to share our own. We need to practice naming God in our story, just as Joseph did. We need to share our testimonies. Where do you see God showing up? Don't swoop in and try to fix someone else's story: just tell yours. Not at the funeral or the graveside or the hospital bed to make people feel better. Just in your everyday life, in your weekly church service, tell your story. God will use it. God uses Joseph's naming of God in Joseph's story. This testimony has encouraged and inspired millions of people of faith throughout space and time. It helped me see God at work even through the death of my mother. No one tried to tell me, "God made your mother die so that you would get the call to ministry and meet your husband and learn how to be a good mom and a more compassionate person." I might've slapped them if they had. But hearing stories like this one from Joseph and from other Christians, had taught me to look out for where God might be at work within and despite our suffering, and as weird as it sounds to people who don't share these sacred stories, it helped. Testimonies help.

Y'all lets practice naming God in our story. Let's tell our stories and let our lives reveal something about God. God is good. All the Time. And all the time. God is good. Amen