

Our Lives Are Open Ended Stories

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28, Matthew 14:22-33

When I was in junior high school, I came across stacks of books -- Bible stories in the shed attached to my parents' house. Those books were bundled with string, covered with dust and the pages had turned yellow. My father must have used them in teaching Sunday School decades before. Old word styles, like the English "thou" and "thy" were used, but the books were definitely written for junior readers.

Once I started to read the beginning of Genesis, which is the first book in the Bible, I couldn't put the book down. I sat on a box or another stack of books in the shed and kept reading. The stories in the Genesis were fascinating. They were about how the world was created from the Biblical points of view, how Adam and Eve turned against God, how they were tempted and expelled from the Garden of Eden. They were about families and people—how they interacted with each other, made mistakes, disobeyed God, experienced tragedies and good times, survived ups and downs, and how God was behind all these human events. The stories were about Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and his family, Abraham and Sara, Sara and Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael, Esau and Jacob, Jacob and Rebecca, and Joseph and his brothers.

The stories were about the temptation Adam and Eve experienced, the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau, the favoritism of parents, which always ended badly for their children, jealousy between those who were favored and not favored, whether they were siblings or wives, arrogance of those who have over those who do not, whether they are material possessions, children, first child's right or abilities. There were tears of sadness, loneliness, regrets and joy. Forgiveness took place in relationships. There were marriage and love stories as well.

I could identify and feel for those complex human interactions and see them in my family and people around me. Those stories and dramas were so captivating and thrilling; I just couldn't stop reading them.

This morning in our Old Testament Lesson we read about Joseph, the favored child of Jacob, who was also named Israel. Joseph was his father's favorite child because he was born when Jacob was of old age and was from Jacob's favored wife, Rachel, over Leah, less favored one.

Joseph grew to be a spoiled 17 year old and a tattletale. He reported back to his father, Jacob, all the "unflattering things" about his siblings. He proudly wore a special robe given to him by his father.

Joseph told his family about a couple of nighttime dreams he had, both of which were about he being exalted and his parents and siblings all bowing before him. That puzzled his father and of course infuriated his siblings.

One day his father sent Joseph to a field where his siblings were attending their father's flock, asking him to report back to him how they were doing and how the flock was. Seeing Joseph walking towards them from afar, his brothers plotted to silence him forever - to kill him and throw him in an empty cistern -- an underground pit. We read that he was thrown in the pit alive.

Thanks to the pity of two of his brothers, his life was spared. He was pulled up from the pit and ended up being sold to some traders on their way to Egypt. The favored son of a man with some wealth was sold as a slave to foreigners traveling to a foreign country, Egypt. Today's Old Testament reading ends here.

For those who might not be in church next Sunday, let me give you a glimpse of the "hereafter" of Joseph's life story.

In Egypt, Joseph experienced rollercoaster rides again: ups and downs. He started as a low status servant of his master, who was one of Pharaoh's officers. Since Joseph gained his master's trust from his industriousness and skill, he was promoted to overseer of his master's household. (Definitely an Up!) Unfortunately, his master's wife had designs on Joseph. When he resisted her attempts to seduce him, she accused him of making unwanted advances. His master threw Joseph into prison. (His life descended back to a pit again.)

Later on Joseph was called out from the prison to interpret Pharaoh's disturbing dreams, which had come from God. The dreams were about there being 7 years of abundant harvests followed by 7 years of famine. Upon his interpretation, Pharaoh made Joseph head of the food-storage program, with the responsibility to prepare the nation for the coming famine. (His life went up again!)

Joseph saved the lives of all the people in Egypt during the time of famine. In addition, he saved his own family from the famine - his father and siblings-- by using a ploy that would bring them to live with him in Egypt.

This brings us to the background of the story of Moses - the children of Israel living in the land of Egypt.

What might we learn from Joseph's story? What does God say to us through the life story of Joseph? What might his story tell us about life?

We can learn from Joseph's life story:

1. We never know about our future.
2. There are ups and downs in any life.
3. We grow and mature as we age and as we experience the hardships of life.
--Joseph became a hard worker from a spoiled brat and earned trust of his first master and the Pharaoh.

--He grew to be a man, who brought his family to Egypt to live with him, including his brothers who had conspired against him. As he reflected on his life, especially in his hardships, probably he could understand how his brothers had felt towards him, who was his father's favorite and a tattletale.

4. Though there are many down times in our lives, our lives do not stop there.

The downs in Joseph's life didn't stop other good things from happening.

-- There were a couple of brothers who felt for Joseph and saved his life. (up)

-- Joseph's hard work, diligences, wisdom and trustworthiness helped him to become the head servant for his first master and the right man for the Pharaoh. (up)

-- God- given- ability to interpret dreams led him from the prison to the Pharaoh's court and then to becoming the head servant for the Pharaoh. (up)

5. God is with us in our ups and downs as God was with Joseph in his ups and downs.

6. Our lives are open ended stories. Our future is unwritten.

Though we experience ups and downs in our lives; though we have many human flaws and have made mistakes, God hasn't finished with us yet. We can write our future together with God.

May we continue to write our future with God, who is with us in our ups and downs and blesses our life journeys. Amen.