

“Recapitulation, A Sermon in Six Parts: Part 4: The Provider”
For Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for March 31st 2019 (Fourth Sunday in Lent/Laetare Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Genesis 41:46-57
John 6:1-14

There are many ways of reading scripture: many ways of holding together Old and New Testaments. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, we are told that God “gathered together in one, all things in Christ.”ⁱ Based on that bold idea, the Church Fathers developed a way of reading scripture they referred to as “recapitulation”: recapitulation, meaning that the entire work of redemption—including all of the hopes and expectations, all of the trials and turmoil depicted in the Old Testament—have reached their completion in and through the Jesus we meet in the pages of the New Testament.

Of the many Old Testament figures....of the many remarkable women and men who populate the pages of the Hebrew scriptures...none is more remarkable...and none serves more clearly as a “type” of the Lord Jesus...

...in other words, none prefigures Jesus, serves as a kind of “model” for Jesus...none of the others do so quite so clearly as Joseph. Not the **New** Testament Joseph—Christ’s step-father, so to speak—but the **Old** Testament Joseph...the Joseph of “amazing technicolor dream-coat” fame, hero of the vibrant final story in the Bible’s first book. There are countless ways in which this Joseph prefigures our Jesus...countless parallels between the two. Before looking more closely at a handful of those parallels, however, permit me to review Joseph’s story for those of you who may be a wee bit rusty on some of the details.

Let’s start...let’s start by noting that Joseph’s story...like most of **our** stories...is bound up in his parent’s story: and oh boy, what a story **that** turns out to be. If you think back to your Old Testament 101, you’ll remember that a man named Jacob...

...more accurate, I suppose to describe him as a scoundrel named Jacob...

...you may recall that Jacob has to beat a hasty retreat to the hospitality of his uncle: a man named Laban, brother to Jacob’s mother Rebekah. Arriving at his uncle’s house as a fugitive, Jacob is instantly smitten with Laban’s younger daughter Rachael. And so he strikes a deal with Laban to work for Laban for seven whole years, at which point he will be rewarded with Rachael’s hand in marriage. Seven years go by and Jacob, at long last, receives his bride only to discover—by the light of the following day’s dawn—that Laban has tricked him and given him Rachael’s older sister Leah rather than Rachael. Jacob is far from pleased with this arrangement, of course, and so Laban tells him that once he has spent an appropriate amount of time with Leah, he—Laban—will throw Rachael into the bargain provided, that is, Jacob agrees to work an additional seven years. Such is his love for Rachael that Jacob instantly agrees to Laban’s terms. But there’s a further catch, this time having to do

with the obvious competition Leah and Rachael enter into in their eagerness to produce children for their husband.

And trust me: if you think the Bible lacks amusing stories, what follows in that little bit of sisterly competition amounts to one of the funniest chapters—the 30th chapter of Genesis—found in any of the world’s ancient literatures. Suffice it to say that Leah conceives but Rachael does not. And so Rachael instructs Jacob to be intimate with her **servant**, who does succeed in bearing children for Jacob. Not to be outdone, Leah then hands **her** servant over to Jacob. And on it goes...until Jacob finds himself the proud father of 10 sons and one daughter...at which point finally...finally: Rachael bears a son. And yes, you guessed it: she names that son Joseph.

Nor does it take an advanced degree in nuclear physics...frankly it doesn’t even take a high-school diploma—to realize that this might not be the healthiest of family dynamics. The fact that all of his 11 other siblings were, in fact, **half**-siblings might be enough to give a sense of what young Joseph was facing. Nor did the fact that his father shamelessly favored him, because he was the son of Jacob’s favorite wife make things any easier for Joseph. Finally, Joseph himself could be a bit lacking in tact: sharing with his brothers a series of dreams which clearly depicted him being elevated above the rest of them. This was not a well-adjusted family by any means and eventually—while out in the fields with his brothers—they decided to throw Joseph in a pit while they debated what they would do with him. Clearly some of them had murder on their minds; mercifully, somewhat kinder heads prevailed, and they sold him to a travelling band of slavers who brought Joseph to Egypt where he was sold into bondage. The plot thickens!

While working as a slave in the household of a man named Potiphar, Joseph quickly rose through the ranks, and earned the favor of his master. Unfortunately for Joseph—who doesn’t seem capable of catching a break—he also catches the eye of his master’s wife who—when he repeatedly rejects her advances—manipulates things so that it looks as if Joseph has been after her, rather than the other way around. Once again Joseph is thrown into the pit: an Egyptian prison where he earns a reputation for interpreting the dreams of his fellow prisoners. Lo and behold—here’s where Joseph finally does catch that break—Pharaoh (the ruler of Egypt) has a couple of dreams which leave him quite shaken. He mentions this to a servant who got to know Joseph in prison, commends Joseph to the Pharaoh who instantly has Joseph brought to his side. Once there, not only does Joseph accurately interpret the dreams...

...dreams which prophesy the coming of seven fat years followed by seven lean years, but Joseph advises Pharaoh how to proceed in light of those dreams. Instantly Joseph is elevated (just as his own dreams had foretold so many years earlier): elevated to the Pharaoh’s right hand, where he is given the authority to oversee a vast grain-storage programme, so that Egypt is ready when the seven lean years roll round. And, of course, Joseph’s story doesn’t end there: but I am going to hold the rest until Palm Sunday, when we’ll be revisiting his story, focusing on one of the not-so-bit players who rises to the surface at a critical juncture. But for this morning...for today...

we have enough of a taste of Joseph's story to pick out a few of the ways in which Joseph prefigures the story of Jesus which is to say: the ways in which Jesus recapitulates the story of Joseph.

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Let's begin with the fact that both were cherished children: children who from the moment of their birth were regarded as something special. In the case of Joseph that has to do with the fact that Joseph was the first child born to Rachael, Jacob's favoured wife. In the case of Jesus, of course, it has to do with the clear sense that fills both Matthew and Luke's Christmas stories: the sense that with the birth of the Christ-child something new and wonderful had entered the world. Nor is it long before their special status begins to manifest itself. In the case of Joseph, it is not only the vibrancy of his dreams, but the fact that he is depicted as an insightful interpreter not only of his own dreams but also the dreams of others. In the case of Jesus, no dreams are required in order for him to demonstrate his understanding of other human beings: he often responds not only to the actions of others, but to their innermost thoughts: thoughts which they imagined were private until Jesus revealed them. One of the most important ways in which Jesus recapitulates the experience of Joseph is in his deep understanding of the human heart. But, of course, there is more: some of it far less happy, I'm afraid.

To put it succinctly: both Joseph and Jesus receive horrendous treatment by those who are closest to them, followed by further mistreatment by those into whose hands they fall as a result of the betrayal of those closest to them. In the case of our Lord, this season of Lent provides an especially appropriate time for recalling the escalating conflicts between Jesus and his people's religious leadership, culminating in his being handed over to the Romans: not by strangers but by one of his own disciples. In the case of Joseph, it is his own half-brothers—his own flesh and blood—who turn on him and hand him over to strangers. And yes: although the strangers into whose hands Joseph falls do not go quite so far as the strangers into whose hands Jesus falls...

...**those** strangers are the ones who place Christ on the Cross...

...Joseph hardly has a picnic when he gets to Egypt, having to serve the indignity of being a slave, having to resist the temptation of seduction by his master's wife (the fact that both Jesus and Joseph successfully resist temptation is yet one more parallel between them), the fact that Joseph languishes for quite some time in a foreign prison...all of it, all of it prefigures and parallels the experience that Jesus undergoes at the end of his earthly life. And, although we still have three weeks to go before Easter Sunday, it's also worth noting that—in the end—Joseph's story no less than Jesus' story ends on a note of triumph. In the case of Joseph triumph within this world, having been made viceroy at the Pharaoh's right-hand; in the case of Jesus, King of kings and Lord of lords, at the right hand of God. The parallels are real, the parallels are fascinating: and the light Joseph the wise-man sheds on Jesus who, though **more** than a wise-man, was not **less** than a wise-man: all of it serves as a powerful example

of the way in which Old and New Testament connect and illuminate each other. But now here's the thing.

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At the end of the day, as I pondered the parallels between Joseph and Jesus—as impressive as all of these other parallels really and truly are—none of them are the ones that really grabbed me over the past week. And let me give you a sense of the parallel—the prefiguration—that truly spoke to me...and I hope truly speaks to you, by describing two little “ah-has” that came to me a couple of weeks back.

The first little “ah-ha” that came involved my recollection of the massive book the great German novelist—Thomas Mann—devoted to Joseph. I describe it as a massive book, but in fact it is actually four books: the first of which is entitled “Stories of Jacob”, the next of which is entitled “Joseph and his Brothers,” the next of which is entitled “Joseph in Egypt” and the last of which...

...the last of which is entitled: “Joseph the Provider.” Joseph! The Provider. Hold that thought...while I share a second, different “ah-ha”.

For some reason—and I am delighted this happened—I found myself recalling my first year at McGill University: technically my only year at McGill since I dropped out part way through what would have been my second year! At any rate, even though I was a science major, I did sign up for a history of economics course. And what truly blew me away, was that the very first lecture in that course was devoted to Joseph: which came as a complete surprise despite the fact that I was no stranger to the story of Joseph. But our Professor used the Biblical story as an ancient instance of central economic planning: with Joseph—using the authority granted him by the Pharaoh—preparing through the seven fat years for Egypt to prepare for the seven lean years. As a result of his correct interpretation, coupled with his wise economic management, not only was Egypt able to feed its own people: it was able to feed people from well beyond its own borders.

And yes: my pairing of the story of Joseph as provider with the story of Christ's feeding the 5000 is a pretty dead giveaway as to the pride of place I want to give to Joseph as **a** provider for the same reason I want to give pride of place to Jesus as **the** Provider. Consider that the story of the feeding of the 5000 is a story that we could have heard from any one of the four Gospels: which makes it one of the very few stories found not only in Mark, Matthew and Luke but also in John. And frankly, that only begins to capture the full centrality of what it means to see Jesus through the lens provided by the Old Testament portrait of Joseph the provider, because whatever else we know about Jesus, we know that he was consistently recognized through his table-fellowship. Breaking bread with saints and sinners alike; providing bread for the lost and confused; choosing to spend his final evening at table with his closest circle of disciples; being recognized by the Emmaus disciples—in the aftermath of Easter—in the breaking of bread. Jesus, like Joseph, is a provider. **The** provider. The One who

does not wish to see His people hunger...the One who seeks to meet their hunger with finest grain, to quench their thirst with purest drink. And, of course, all of that is of singular importance precisely because...

...precisely because Jesus the Provider is the One who comes to us **in the name of God**. That he seeks to nourish us in his own right is lovely. But the fact that he seeks to nourish us in the name of God means not only that he summons us to his banquet, but that he reveals to us, through that banquet, God's own heart. A heart that isn't content to settle for empty gestures and emptier word: but is determined to feed, to build up, to nourish, to nurture and yes...to banquet with His scattered children. And His word to us, even in this season of fasting...is that, at the end of time, we will be lovingly ushered into His feast: we will be welcomed at that feast: not as servants, but as guests, companions, friends. In and through the love of Christ. In and through the love of the One who was not above serving His friends; the One who was not above washing their feet.

All of that worth celebrating! And all of that worth remembering as we prepare to deliberate—after worship—on some of the very serious questions and possibilities that Trinity United now faces as it looks to the future. The fact that our God is a nurturing kindly God does not mean that this congregation will not need to make responsible decisions where its future is concerned. Nor does the fact that God is for us, not against us, guarantee that you will not make decisions you may come to regret. But what God's love does mean, is the promise that you will never be abandoned...and that the God we worship will find ways to bring about nurture and nourishment and blessing from even the very worst that others can do to us, the very worst that can happen as a result of our own shortcomings and downright failures.

Friends in Christ: receive the Gospel: the good news of God's unyielding love. Rest in the Gospel. And then go forth and live boldly and generously. In Jesus' name. Amen.

¹ Ephesians 1:10