

LESSONS IN THE BEGINNING
NOW BEING REVISED

Texts on Sunday, September 18, 2011

Genesis 45:1-28; Ephesians 2:11-22

Since Genesis 12, when aged Abraham and Sarah begin the long walk into a hard promise, the people of this saga have been driven time and again toward the cliff of extinction. But their story has not been told like a Hollywood western. Contrary to our national myths, in Genesis you find no pure heroes bravely facing down evils they had no part in creating. Oh, Genesis has droughts and a few hostile natives, too—but for the most part, it is bad thoughts, bad feelings, and bad actions *inside* the ancient tribe themselves that has put their whole future at risk: fear, jealousy, deceit, hate, distrust, violence, indifference—all in the family. Sounds like church to me.

I don't know the literatures of all times and places, but I have never read any national stories so boldly self-critical as those of ancient Israel. What a gift of honesty! They were old, tired, and few, say the stories, and they sinned monstrously one against another. By all the stars, they should have failed. What did they do to get through? I am persuaded that of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of stories told around their ancient camp fires, just these few dozen called Genesis were kept by the generations because they contain lessons from the beginning for how a spiritual community in crisis can cooperate with the gifts of God to come through and "proclaim God's deliverance to a people yet unborn." (Psalm 22)

Their questions are the very questions that vex the mainline church in America today, and vex this church in this corner of this city. Old, tired, and too few, we often say—especially if we sadly remember days of glory when people thronged the balconies. And, yes, we have sinned monstrously one against another. Can we pass on what we have received to a new generation? Genesis answers that question with resounding affirmatives—*Si, se puede! Yes, we can!*—but only if we learn the lessons. The path to the future is found spiritually, not materially. All the Genesis stories and all the Gospel say so. What do we mean by that distinction? First, that the future is open, not determined; and second, that if the future shall be good, it is God's to give, not ours to take. To discover the right way and take the necessary risks requires a living, breathing trust in one God—not in one's wits, not in the portfolio, not in the glories of the past, not in the beautiful building or in the strategic plan or the staffing plan or . . . No. Here at last in Chapter 47:27, we read, "Thus Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt; and they gained possessions in it, and they were fruitful and they multiplied exceedingly." They came to this good end spiritually. Consider these last lessons from Genesis.

If you heard last Sunday's lesson, this one may seem only its twin. There, Esau surrendered his justice claim against his brother Jacob and welcomed Jacob in peace; and Jacob saw that the face of reconciliation is the face of God. Now, Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers brings that very lesson home again, modulated to a higher key; for the evil design of these brothers is far more perverse than Jacob's. These brothers conspired to destroy Joseph. All together, they lied to their father about Joseph's fate, leaving Jacob in fatherly grief just to save their own skins. And Joseph's power to return them evil for evil is absolute.

But there is more than forgiveness to be found in this lesson. Remember where it takes place—in Egypt. And remember why. Because all the lands are suffering drought, but only Egypt has laid up stores of food for the days of famine. Only Egypt can save lives, and only those who will risk the journey to Egypt can receive that gift of life. Listen from the inside of this story.

To the long-ago tellers of these tales, the name Egypt sounded an ominous drum: Egypt, the source of our suffering in slavery; Egypt, immense and strong and cruel and so unlike us. Search the scriptures! Almost everywhere, this name is like code for "the worst evil that can befall us." And yet, back in Genesis 12, a few sentences after Abraham and Sarah have set their suitcases down in Canaan, when God's promised land fails to produce, we read, "So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for famine was severe in the land." (Gen 12.10) Like bookends to our lessons from the beginning are these strange stories of salvation in Egypt.

Now—have you ever had a recurring dream? This is Israel's—a nightmare, it seems, to have to go down to Egypt. But the dream is teaching something deep, something spiritual. Your worst fear is not just as you think it, for what you dread most has also harbored and helped you. This word is not to soften the evil of slavery and past injustice. That stands. This word is rather that God is, more than evil is. Therefore, do not be ruled by your fears. Just as hunger led the brothers of Joseph to Egypt where great salvation awaited them, more than they hoped for, so the hunger and need of our own community can inspire us to take the risks we must take to go where we have feared to go. This is your dream too, you see. Are you hungry enough to move toward the place you have feared?

This is how homecoming happens in the strange wonder of divine promise. You come home in a different land than from the one you planned to dwell in. You come home in ways you denied you needed, and you are saved from your sorrows, and you are received into a future more broad than you knew to plan for. This is homecoming of the divine kind. Why, ordinary homecoming needs no God to give it. If you have been separated for a season from friends and family and now you set it in your calendar to come

home into their glad embrace, that is delightful, but not divine—if only because there’s no mystery in the design. From ordinary homecoming, we get what we expect. But Genesis, like Jesus, is sending us toward a new home by means of a surrender and an abundance and a forgiveness we do not expect and did not deserve.

What is our Egypt, here at The Riverside Church? What is that place we dread in our dreams, yet which harbors for us food and forgiveness and a future new now? There is no simple answer. Problems whose solutions can be said in a few words are either not problems, or are thoroughly misrepresented by the fabricators of a few words. (A little aside: According to Genesis, Joseph kept Egypt from economic collapse by imposing a 20% income tax on everyone. Go look, it’s in the book. I pray for the day when simple-solution, anti-tax politicians realize they can’t both beat the Bible *and* read it! Closed book or open? It’s one or the other.) At any rate, it is not possible for the preacher to simply answer the question, What is our Egypt?

Let me paint some possibilities for this coming home by the guidance of God in our unexpected Egypt. This fall, we will gather, twice I hope, in large meetings with a spiritual, rather than a business, purpose. What if In one of them, we touched deep into our memory for how we treated one another ill and how we felt treated here in fairly recent times? What if we gathered in that blessed spirit of truth and remorse and reconciliation handed down to us by our spiritual ancestors and commended to us by our Lord Jesus? What if we found the way to feel and to say “I am sorry,” without defense, and without fear of reprisal? Wouldn’t that be coming home by God?

What if we found a way to utter apology to our former senior minister? Never mind that some part of you flies up from the seat of your listening with an angry story of what was done to you? Unless the gospel is of none effect in you, Christ has died in you, and Christ is made alive in you! I am asking you, What if Christ in you, who is great and abundant and forgiving, should move you as one body to speak your sorrow that any servant of the Lord suffered insult in this place? Wouldn’t that be coming home by God?

From its founding, the Riverside Church in the City of New York has committed to become a fellowship international, interdenominational, and interracial. More than the first two commitments, becoming interracial—or, more demanding still, multi-cultural—is a work that takes generations. What if we accepted that we have only just begun the work and have yet depths and depths to explore? What if we dive deeper into our relationship with racism and with our sisters and brothers of other mothers and other cultures? Wouldn’t that be coming home by God?

In chapters of Genesis we did not read today, Joseph send his brothers up to Canaan to bring his father and younger brother back down to Egypt,

that they might all be one. He sends with his brothers not only all the food they came to buy, but all their money as well. What if we learned “generous” like that? Now, you can say, *Well, he could afford it!* but you can only say that at the cost of not learning the lesson from the beginning. What if you ceased making excuses—had not Joseph plenty at hand?—for why you do not give freely from your stores to your church? Let go of all the old arguments, how you’re waiting to see who and how and whether the church will turn around and meet your expectations. Arguments like those not only keep your giving small, they keep you small, and prevent your eye from seeing what God is doing now. Let Genesis generosity flow through you as if you were Jesus’ own. Wouldn’t that be coming home by God?

God will devise much more surprise for us in our Egypt, if we are hungry and willing to go. There will come changes in the norms of our worship celebration, changes in how we select leaders so that new, young, different voices sound in our councils and committees; changes in how we learn to see and receive people who are not yet here. Is it not altogether obvious that where self-preservation is a church’s preoccupation, whether in worship or planning or deliberations, there vital, adventuresome, creative individuals do not sign on. Einstein famously said, *The problems we face today cannot be solved by the minds that created them.* If so, then every work and plan of this church must be turned toward the generations and cultures who are not yet here. Wouldn’t that be coming home by God?

Only our spiritual hunger will lead us to go where we have not wished to go. Are you ready and willing for such a homecoming? In a way unlike any you have known heretofore, are you ready to see that *in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought home by the blood of Christ; who is our peace; who has broken down the dividing wall—that hostility between us—to create in himself one new humanity.* In the very last chapter of Genesis, their father Jacob now having died, the brothers once more fear that powerful Joseph will now turn and render them evil for evil. But Joseph assures them, “Fear not! Am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, that many should be kept alive.” To see of a sudden that you have been seen anew—that is coming home. This is the good news. We are all being reviewed and “re-vised.” A revision of you is being issued today, so that a whole new nation may be born, filled with all us—and no them. Trust this, and you may be sure that you will proclaim God’s deliverance to a people yet unborn.

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*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*