

Healing from Wounds

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
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- Genesis 45:1-15 Good News Translation ¹ Joseph was no longer able to control his feelings in front of his servants, so he ordered them all to leave the room. No one else was with him when Joseph told his brothers who he was. ² He cried with such loud sobs that the Egyptians heard it, and the news was taken to the king's palace. ³ Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But when his brothers heard this, they were so terrified that they could not answer. ⁴ Then Joseph said to them, "Please come closer." They did, and he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ Now do not be upset or blame yourselves because you sold me here. It was really God who sent me ahead of you to save people's lives. ⁶ This is only the second year of famine in the land; there will be five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor reaping. ⁷ God sent me ahead of you to rescue you in this amazing way and to make sure that you and your descendants survive. ⁸ So it was not really you who sent me here, but God. He has made me the king's highest official. I am in charge of his whole country; I am the ruler of all Egypt. ⁹ Now hurry back to my father and tell him that this is what his son Joseph says: 'God has made me ruler of all Egypt; come to me without delay. ¹⁰ You can live in the region of Goshen, where you can be near me – you, your children, your grandchildren, your sheep, your goats, your cattle, and everything else that you have. ¹¹ If you are in Goshen, I can take care of you. There will still be five years of famine; and I do not want you, your family, and your livestock to starve.'" ¹² Joseph continued, "Now all of you, and you too, Benjamin, can see that I am really Joseph. ¹³ Tell my father how powerful I am here in Egypt and tell him about everything that you have seen. Then hurry and bring him here." ¹⁴ He threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and began to cry; Benjamin also cried as he hugged him. ¹⁵ Then, still weeping, he embraced each of his brothers and kissed them. After that, his brothers began to talk with him.

It's one of the most impressive church buildings you could ever visit – although it has no roof, and only three of its four walls are still standing. It's the Anglican cathedral in Coventry, England: a late-Gothic masterpiece finished in the early 1400s.

On November 14, 1940, 515 heavy bombers of the German Luftwaffe attacked the city of Coventry with high explosive and incendiary bombs. The saturation bombing created a firestorm that burned out the center of the city, including the cathedral. More than 4,300 homes were destroyed that dreadful night, and about two-thirds of the buildings in the city were damaged....

After the war, a new cathedral was built, of strikingly modern architecture. It was dedicated in 1962. It was not built on the site of the old cathedral, but rather right next to it. The remaining stone walls – the Gothic stone filigree empty of the stained glass that melted during the firestorm – [those walls] were allowed to remain.

Outdoors—for there is no roof, still, over that section of the building—there is an altar, located in what used to be a transept of the old church. Atop the altar is a charred wooden cross. It's a replica of a cross a construction worker built out of two blackened roof-beams he found in the rubble after the bombing. Engraved on the wall behind that altar are two words, in elegant gold lettering: "Father forgive."

The church authorities could have reconstructed the old cathedral, in all its Gothic glory. It would have taken a long time, but it could have been done. There

are still expert stone carvers in the world who practice that medieval trade. Or, they could have bulldozed the sad ruin and constructed something new in its place.

What they decided to do, instead, was genius. They preserved the roofless ruin as a witness to peace, even as they constructed a new cathedral of radical 20th-century design.

The message was clear. We will not forget, but we will not let the painful memory hold us back.

...It's the mute witness of the old – the charred wooden cross and the words "Father forgive" – that convey the true power of the place.

In a very real sense, it's the scar [of destruction] that speak[s so clearly today].¹

We, too, have scars. We all do. We didn't start out that way. A remarkable thing about a newborn baby is that its skin is flawless. Eventually it will bear the marks of scraped knees, a scar from an accident with a pocketknife, discoloration from touching a hot stove. Those scars show the body's remarkable ability to repair damage and return to more or less normal function. The scars also serve as reminders of carelessness, or foolhardy behavior, accidents, or even acts of violence.

Many of us also bear scars that are invisible to the naked eye.

- Our spirit has been scarred by emotional or sexual or physical abuse we suffered at some point in life.
- We may be scarred from neglect by people who should have cared for us.
- Our sense of self and our confidence may be scarred from acts of discrimination because we were told that we were the wrong gender or we weren't old enough or we were too old or we didn't live in the right place or attend the right school.

Scars remind us of past wounds. What wounded us often prompts us to want to seek vengeance, retribution, payback for what others have done to us.

A famous character in the first book of the Bible who certainly had suffered enough scarring mistreatments to warrant payback was a man named Joseph. Where does he fit in the story of the Bible? Joseph was one of the sons of Jacob, who was the son of Isaac, who was the son of Abraham. Joseph is perhaps best known as the young man whose father Jacob gave him a splendid coat of many colors – yes, he's the Joseph of musical theatre's "Technicolor Dreamcoat" fame. The book of Genesis spends thirteen of its fifty chapters telling Joseph's story – let me summarize it in just a few minutes.

...As a boy, Joseph was a dreamer and the favorite of his father, Jacob, which led to no small amount of jealousy among his older brothers. His father made him [that gift of a "coat of many colors" which can also be translated from Hebrew as] "a long robe with sleeves," which implies that his dad thought him to be a little more special than the others and expected him to do less work (Genesis 37:3).

Joseph's dreams had his brothers bowing down to him, and Joseph was young enough (and naive enough?) to tell them about it, and thus the sibling rivalry boiled over. When Joseph goes out one day to check on his brothers at his father's request, they finally decide to get rid of him by tossing him into a well, stripping off his fancy coat, and then selling him into slavery. The brothers told their father he was eaten by a wild animal and presented their dad with the coat smeared in goat's blood as fake proof – easy to do in the days before DNA testing!

Joseph is brought as a slave to Egypt and sold to an official named Potiphar, who saw Joseph's potential and put him in charge of the household. Potiphar's wife saw Joseph's potential, too, but as a lover, not a worker. When Joseph refused

¹ https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93041264 accessed 8/10/2020

to have an affair with her on moral grounds, she falsely accuses him of rape and has him thrown into prison.

If you're keeping score, that's at least two major scars: being sold unjustly as a slave and being unjustly accused of a crime. But Joseph doesn't pick at those wounds. Instead, he makes a favorable impression on the prison warden, who puts him in charge of the other prisoners. He becomes the interpreter of their dreams as well, and eventually rises again from the dungeon to interpret the dreams of the Egyptian Pharaoh himself. When Joseph predicts a great famine to come, Pharaoh appoints him as the equivalent of the prime minister in charge of the social and economic affairs of the empire. Once again, [Joseph] is wearing a coat with long sleeves!

The famine strikes hard in Joseph's homeland of Canaan, where his still-in-the-dark father and scheming brothers still reside. They hear that there is grain stored up in Egypt, so they decide to take a shopping trip there, not knowing from whom they would be buying! That's the recap of the story [up to the episode we heard today in Genesis Chapter] 45.²

When the brothers come before Pharaoh's right-hand man to purchase grain, they don't recognize that it's their brother Joseph. And in today's scripture passage when Joseph reveals his identity to them, they naturally fear retribution for their long-ago offense of selling him into slavery.

But Joseph had changed the way he looked upon the scar left by his brothers' conspiracy against him. Joseph didn't see their abandonment as motivation for payback. (For that matter Joseph didn't see the false accusation by the Egyptian official's wife as grounds for somehow trying to get even with her or her husband.) No, Joseph saw God working to salvage some good from those horrible experiences; he saw God trying to redeem those scarring episodes, pulling some divine good out of those tragic, hurtful instances of human cruelty.

In Gen. 45:5 Joseph told his brothers, "Now do not be upset or blame yourselves because you sold me here. It was really God who sent me ahead of you to save people's lives." And in verse 7 Joseph adds, "God sent me ahead of you to rescue you in this amazing way and to make sure that you and your descendants survive. So it is was not really you who sent me here, but God."³

When Joseph looked upon the scars from being thrown into a pit, the scars from being bound as a slave, the scars of false imprisonment... when his mind recalled the emotional scars of feeling lost and betrayed and mistreated and forgotten, Joseph could see how God worked to redeem those scarring experiences, to try to bring something beneficial out of something awful.

Rather than dwelling on anger toward his brothers, Joseph looked at how their abuse ended up putting him in a place and position to care for many dealing with severe famine – the Egyptian people and their neighbors to the east in Canaan – including Joseph's own father and brothers!

Now in no way did God prompt Jacob's sons to beat up their brother Joseph and sell him to slave traders. But God is able to redeem something beneficial out of something that's unfortunate, able to redeem rays of hope out of experiences of misery, able even to redeem new life from the finality of death. In the closing verses of the book of Genesis Joseph expresses his view of God's power to redeem the scarring events of his life. Joseph told his brothers, "You plotted evil against me, but God turned it into good, in order to preserve the lives of many

² https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93041264 accessed 8/10/2020

³ Genesis 45:5, 7-8 Good News Translation

people who are alive today because of what happened.”⁴ Did you hear that? “...You plotted evil... but God turned it into good....”

What God did for Joseph God did for all of us in the life, death, and resurrection of the son Jesus Christ.

- Like the brothers who abandoned Joseph, the disciples abandoned Jesus.
- Like the wife of Pharaoh’s official who brought false accusations against Joseph, the religious leaders heaped false accusations against Jesus.
- Like Joseph was tossed into prison for deeds he did not commit, Jesus was arrested despite not having brought harm to person or institution.
- And like God raised Joseph from the pit of the dungeon to serve Egypt’s Pharaoh, God raised Jesus from the death of the tomb to new and everlasting Life.

What about the scars you bear, whether on your body or on your spirit? How might God be redeeming those experiences for you? What caused those physical or emotional scars was unfortunate, tragic, maybe accidental, maybe intentional. The pain, the damage they caused was real.

But now, consider how God may be working to redeem those scarring experiences, taking something awful and, by God’s grace, making some good emerge? I’ll give you an example from my life. I remember the emotional devastation my wife Mary and I felt when she had her first miscarriage. But because of that experience I was directed to receive some professional counseling which had a lasting benefit for me. Out of the tragedy of our loss God was able to redeem an opportunity for my personal growth that also impacted my professional development as a minister. That emotional scar was transformed into an occasion to grow in my capacity to be compassionate.

The example of Joseph invites us to remember the scars we have accumulated over the course of our lives and the experiences that caused them, but to consider how God may be redeeming those experiences so that we might derive some measure of good from what we endured.

The shell of old Coventry Cathedral is a scar on the country’s landscape, a reminder of frightful and tragic suffering; but its inscribed message urging forgiveness shows how God takes the scarring events that life presents and seeks to redeem them. God seeks to transform suffering into accomplishment. God seeks to transform sorrow into joy. God seeks to transform loss into opportunity. And in the witness of Jesus Christ God signals that even death is transformed—transformed into new life.⁵

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⁴ Genesis 50:20 Good News Translation

⁵ https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93041264 accessed 8/10/2020