

Ordinary Joe

Joseph's Life in the Book of Genesis
How God Uses Ordinary People to Carry Out His Extraordinary Plans

Message 5 – "Coffin Confessor"

Genesis 42-45

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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Pastor John Marcott

Hello, I'm John Marcott and I'm one of the pastors privileged to serve you here at St Paul's Church. It's my responsibility and joy to bring you the Word of God today. I used to think that preparing a sermon involved mastering the text; studying it so thoroughly that I didn't miss a thing. However, now I see that the best preparation is to be mastered *by* the text. Mastered by the *Master* who speaks through the text. Preaching then becomes sharing what God has already taught me. How He's gripped my attention, arrested my heart and called me to obey. Would you join me in praying to be mastered by this portion of God's Word? Let's pray

Holy God and Father, thank You for Your persistence in drawing us close to You! By the power of Your Holy Spirit speak afresh into our hearts. If we're discouraged give us hope; if we're lost give us direction; if we're weary, refresh us; if we're comfortable or complacent, challenge us. Give us ears to hear, hearts to care, wills and bodies ready to do Your will. Speak Lord, for we, Your servants, are listening...

During the shutdowns and restrictions imposed during the pandemic, the issues of employment and unemployment have been on everyone's minds...maybe even in your prayers. So, I was a little surprised to learn of a new occupation recently reported which I had never heard of before, called a "COFFIN CONFESSOR." Has anyone seen the news story on this or heard of this?

Bill Edgar, a private investigator in Australia, stumbled upon this job while working with a client who was terminally ill. In an offhand remark, the man mentioned that he'd love to pull something off to shock his best friend at his funeral. Mr. Edgar offered that, he'd be willing to crash his memorial service and speak up for him! So, for \$10,000 he crashed the funeral and when the best friend stood to share his memories, Mr. Edgar interrupted and told him to shut up and sit down, because the deceased knew he was trying to have an affair with his wife! At another service, the pastor was told to sit down because the deceased had clearly stated beforehand that there would be no religious aspects to his funeral service. Now, please don't anyone get any funny ideas based on that one! Across the last 2 years he's been called upon to crash 22 funeral or gravesite services!

'Coffin Confessor' - I guess I expected something different from the title. Someone admitting something that they wanted to get off their chest but didn't have the guts to do so while still alive; but it turned out to be little more than a post-mortem expensive exercise in passive-aggressive accusing of others. But I want to re-purpose that phrase 'coffin confessor' and I hope you'll see how it is a fitting term

for what we're called to do from the passage we're considering. We've been looking at the life of Joseph in the Bible. We're calling our series ORDINARY JOE. And, we've seen the principle illustrated time and again in his life that

God uses ordinary people to carry out His extraordinary plans.

Pastor David has led us through the trials and tribulations of Joseph's early life across the last four weeks. We pick up the story in Genesis 42:1 where we read: ***When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt... (Genesis 42:1)*** This opening line is equivalent to our saying, MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE RANCH.... In the previous chapters, the main character in focus has been Joseph, and the location has been Egypt. We've seen Joseph as the object of his father's favoritism, and the victim of his brother's jealousy, of false charges, and of unjust incarceration. Time and again he's made the most of these situations with God's help and through an amazing twist of fate, he finds himself as the second most powerful man on earth, second only to the Pharaoh. Joseph now rubs shoulders with royalty and oversees the storage and distribution of resources during the predicted worldwide famine (**Gen. 41:33-45**).

Joseph, by now, has acclimated and finally succeeded in his new place of residence, Egypt. He's settled in and even started a family. And the names of his sons show that his homeland and birth-family in Canaan is a distant memory (**Gen. 41:51-52**). His first son, for instance, is named, Manasseh, who is named because, ***"God has made me forget all my hardship and my father's house."***

But whereas Joseph may have turned the page on his past, God hasn't. *MEANWHILE, BACK IN CANAAN...*we shift scenes back to what is going on in his father's house. He may have tried to forget; but God has not forgotten. Joseph's rise to power was not just for his own good; God has bigger plans than his personal success. **Personal blessing is never an end in itself; God always has His sights on reaching the world through us.** *In fact, this is the process by which God uses ordinary people in his extraordinary plans!*

When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you look at one another?" (Genesis 42:1) Jacob/Israel reprimands his sons: they seem to be without direction and indecisive. *"Why do you look at each other?"* I can almost hear my own father scolding my brothers and I: 'Why are you just standing there twiddling your thumbs? Do something!' This characterization of the sons as clueless and indecisive is important for the way the story unfolds. Their indecisiveness is all the more surprising given the troubled times they're living in. Their father continues...

And he said, "Behold, I have heard that there is grain for sale in Egypt. Go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die. (Genesis 42:2) Especially, in the face of immanent and impending danger, their inactivity is flabbergasting and inconceivable to their father. The famine that has hit Canaan is

life-threatening. Starvation was a very real and occasional threat in the ancient world. The story moves forward with their plan:

³ So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. (Genesis 42:3) Everyone knows that Israel had twelve sons. Now one of them, Joseph, is in Egypt....so do the math. Why doesn't he send the remaining eleven? We find out...

⁴ But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with his brothers, for he feared that harm might happen to him. (Genesis 42:4) The exclusion of Benjamin from the trip explains the number '10.' Benjamin is Joseph's only true brother (everyone else, among the ten, is a half-brother of another mother). So, favoritism is still alive and well in Jacob's family. Remember that.

The brothers go to Egypt. Upon arrival, whom do they meet? We read in verse 6: **⁶ Now Joseph was governor over the land. He was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. (Genesis 42:6)** Does that ring a bell? If you remember, one of the things that infuriated the brothers when they were younger was when Joseph shared his dreams with them. The dreams implied that they would bow before his authority. Just to jog your memories, we flashback to **Genesis 37:5-8**: *Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: Behold, we were binging sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.*

And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. And Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them. (Genesis 42:8-9) So, the dreams came true after all! However, it doesn't dawn on the brothers but Joseph recognizing them, makes the connection.

And he said to them, "You are spies..." (Genesis 42:9) Although he recognizes them, he keeps that fact to himself. He asked them their business. And when they answer that, like everyone else, they are in search of food, he insinuates that they have ulterior motives; that they are spies come to observe Egypt's weaknesses. Joseph's accusation of them as spies is almost comical! A spy is someone who is crafty, resourceful, and usually disguised well. If they are spies, then they resemble a group of Inspector Clouseaus, Agent 86s or Ace Ventura Pet Detectives!

¹⁰ They said to him, "No, my lord, your servants have come to buy food. ¹¹ We are all sons of one man. We are honest men. Your servants have never been spies. (Genesis 42:10-11) They forcefully deny the insinuation, maybe, just a bit too forcefully. One thing sticks out in their answer:

We are honest men.

Now, at face value, given the circumstance, the brothers' response: "We are honest men" is HONEST – they are NOT spies. They are not pretending to need food like

everyone else as a cover for their covert operations of finding the soft spot in Egypt's defense. They could simply be implying, "Honestly, 'for real', we're just looking for food! There are no ulterior motives for us being here." However, scratching below the surface...'Honest' is not a word that characterizes Joseph's brothers, and Joseph - *OF ALL PEOPLE* - would be aware of the hypocrisy behind their words, even as we are, but the brothers are not. At least not yet.

In their defense they spell out the details of their family: ***We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan, and behold, the youngest is this day with our father, and one "is no more."*** (Genesis 42:13) Based on what these 'honest man' share, Joseph turns up the heat:

Joseph said to them, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God..." (Genesis 42:18) Another matter of life and death: Jacob, fearing starvation from the famine realized it as a life-and-death situation. But now, the brothers face another life-and-death situation as it seems they have fallen into the hands of a suspicious Egyptian Official who is threatening their very lives.

if you are honest men... (Genesis 42:19) He tests their 'honest men' appraisal. When you read the full story, you'll see that Joseph repeats this phrase a half dozen times. I wonder if it stung Joseph...maybe "heartless" men who would fit better. Or even "hungry men" ...any other 'h' word would have fit, but 'honest'? I wonder if every time Joseph repeats their phrase, "honest men" he does so with a wink and a nod, or gestures italics around the phrase.

So, Joseph devises a plan to test their so-called 'honesty'...

...let one of your brothers remain confined where you are in custody, and let the rest go and carry grain for the famine of your households, ²⁰ and bring your youngest brother to me. So your words will be verified, and you shall not die." (Genesis 42:19-20) Here's the plan: 1) One of you will stay here in prison; 2) The rest of you return home with food for your families; 3) Return with your youngest brother.

The brothers' reaction to this plan is revealing. *Just maybe*, for the first time in their lives they are being held accountable for their words and actions. *Just maybe*, for the first time, they have been faced with unexpected difficulties...*Just maybe*, this is the first time they have examined themselves by looking inside, beyond the surface. Amongst themselves, they re-think (to put it mildly) their claim to honesty... ***they said to one another, "In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us*** (Genesis 42:21)

We are honest men....in truth, we are guilty concerning....

This unexpected detour stymies the brothers and they start to see themselves, their past and their character in a new light. And, the tight spot they find themselves in prompts them to ask

"What is this that God has done to us?" (Genesis 42:28)

As far as I can tell, this is the **first time** GOD has figured in the thinking of the brothers! This predicament has prompted them to take a hard look at themselves and to wonder what God is doing in their lives. We learn that

**BAD THINGS CAN BE GOOD THINGS
IN HELPING US UNDERSTAND OURSELVES AND
IN HELPING US CONSIDER WHAT GOD MIGHT BE UP TO!**

This experience is the proverbial WAKE UP CALL for the brothers. How much like them am I, are we? When my life is going along without significant interruption or speed bump, or worse...I can virtually 'sleepwalk' through life. I coast into living on the surface – assuming all is well with my heart and God fades from my perspective. I can live comfortably numb. But sleepwalking can be very dangerous! Although rare, people have been known to fall from ledges or tumble downstairs, and there have been reports of sleepwalkers freezing to death after walking outside into the cold. Sleepwalking is likewise a dangerous spiritual state to slip into!

Just this morning, while I was reviewing my notes for this sermon, I was frustrated about something bad I learned last night. "I don't need this distraction," I said to myself, "I need to concentrate!" From the time I heard about it, I had gotten mad, and in my mind started assigning blame. But then, all of a sudden, I realized, WAIT! THIS 'BAD SITUATION' can teach me something about myself and my responsibility and look to see how God will work!

Think back through your own life. How many times - and what specific difficulties – prompted you to WAKE UP to take ownership of your life; to take responsibility for your actions; to make you cry out to God? What BAD THINGS are you dealing with presently?

Honestly, most of my WAKE UP CALLS were not things I wanted to happen in my life. I never would have chosen the difficult route. Although I originally saw them as 'bad' either due to my own fault, or due to the inconvenience or pain or difficulties involved, good resulted. Because when 'bad' prompts a better understanding of myself, and a deeper awareness of God.....it is good! A BAD THING CAN BE A GOOD THING IN HELPING US UNDERSTAND OURSELVES MORE ACCURATELY, AND IN HELPING US CONSIDER GOD AT WORK IN OUR LIVES.

Okay, Joseph has thrown down the gauntlet. To test his brothers' quote 'HONESTY' they are sent home to return with their younger brother. Jacob, who originally refused to send his youngest son, [Benjamin is Joseph's only other full brother born of his favorite wife, Rachel] is still reluctant to send Benjamin. In fact, it's almost comical that Jacob is annoyed that his sons were so HONEST with the Egyptian Official by admitting they *had* a younger brother! However, that 'little thing' about *starving to death* finally prompts him to send his youngest along. As incentive to urge Jacob to send Benjamin, older brother Judah pledges himself to his father, basically saying, "*Over my dead body will I allow any harm to come to him!*"

Well, through a series of unfortunate events, the unthinkable happens. After the brothers return to Egypt, Joseph wants to keep Benjamin with him and send the brother's home without him. This final setback sets up Judah's finest moment:

Judah stands up to Joseph, who appears as this menacing, insinuating, threatening Egyptian Official. But he doesn't speak defiantly or brashly. He is desperate and he pleads that this foreign officer would have a heart of compassion. He quotes his father's words, and as he does, think of how these words must have registered in Judah's own heart:

24 "When we went back to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord. 25 And when our father said, 'Go again, buy us a little food,' 26 we said, 'We cannot go down. If our youngest brother goes with us, then we will go down. For we cannot see the man's face unless our youngest brother is with us.' 27 Then your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons. 28 One left me, and I said, "Surely he has been torn to pieces," and I have never seen him since. 29 If you take this one also from me, and harm happens to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in evil to Sheol [= 'the grave']' (Genesis 44:24-29)

...my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons.' (Genesis 44:27) "My wife...two sons." Jacob, in reality had four wives and twelve sons. But he speaks as if ten of those sons don't even exist...Judah himself included. Judah doesn't excuse or criticize his father's favoritism...he just quotes his father's words. But, can you imagine how those words had to cut deep into this older son's heart? He continues quoting him...

"One left me, and I said, 'Surely he has been torn to pieces,' and I have never seen him since. If you take this one also from me, and harm happens to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in evil to Sheol." (Gen. 44:28-29) Judah has listened closely to his father's words - and more importantly - he hears his heart. I highlight this because it is important to see that Judah is fully aware of the dysfunctional family context he has suffered through. His life is far from perfect. But crucially, this doesn't stop him from his next heroic move...he says...

"Now therefore, as soon as I come to your servant my father, and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy's life, 31 as soon as he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. 32 For your servant became a pledge of safety for the boy to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father all my life.' (Genesis 44:30-32)

33 Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers. 34 For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father." (Genesis 44:33-34) Dysfunctional family and all, Judah doesn't use that as an excuse from his responsibility of offering his life for

the welfare of others. Judah offers to exchange his life, his future, his freedom for the sake of sparing his father emotional pain, sparing his brother's life. *Judah's life isn't perfect, but he follows God fully* in offering his own life for the sake of others. To save Benjamin and his doting father, as well as his own family and grandchildren, he offers his own life in exchange. Remember, this chapter has all been about saving lives. Here is truly a COFFIN CONFESSOR - he willingly lays down his life for the sake of others. OVER MY DEAD BODY can I allow harm to come to my younger brother, and it would kill my father! TAKE MY LIFE AND LET IT BE IN PLACE OF THE YOUNG MAN and the untold misery it would cause my dad. God has been at work in Judah's heart...because in reality...

**Grace does not just pardon our failures;
grace empowers our successes...**

Judah and his brothers appeared clueless, indecisive at the beginning of the story, but here he takes action, self-sacrificial action, and reveals a heart and act that is aimed at ending the cycle of heartbreak in his extended family. But there's more - and this comes to light only after Joseph hears his brother's selfless offer; only after Joseph has seen the transformation that has taken place in his brother's heart that

Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. (Genesis 45:4). Judah just offered to give up his own life for one brother and he receives his, supposedly 'lost' brother back! What is more, listen to Joseph's extension of forgiveness, reconciliation and God-awareness in his next line:

And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life (Genesis 45:5).

Joseph's words are chosen carefully here. The brother's WAKE UP CALL prompted deeper self-awareness, and a God awareness.

Do you remember when they said, "***...we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us (Genesis 42:21).***

'Distress' is the key word. The brothers heard Joseph's distress when he plead for his life from the pit; they felt God was now bringing distress to them. Joseph says, don't be distressed, *God's intentions are for your good, not for evil - to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future* (see Jeremiah 29:11).

**WHAT WE CALL BAD = 'GOD IS GETTING BACK AT ME'
ATTRIBUTES WRONG MOTIVES TO GOD'S INTENT.
GOD'S AIM IS GETTING ME BACK TO HIM.**

Remember when the brothers asked, *'why is God bringing this distress on me?'* Their instinct was to see God judging them for past despicable acts. *'God's judgment has finally come to roost!'*, they thought. But the opposite is the truth. The difficult times were to make us be in line with God's plan so that we become part of it; so that we are caught up in it; so that our hearts beat along with His....

Here's the principle at work....

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever saves his life for my sake and the gospel will save it (Mark 8:35)

Jacob finally lets go of the youngest son he clung to

– and he gets back both sons.

Joseph had long ago let go of control of his life

– and he rules the most powerful nation

And reclaims his family and saves them.

Judah gives his life for his dysfunctional family

– and regains a fuller family and destiny

All of us are called to drop our own agendas, our own little kingdoms (basically, 'our life') and submit to seeking *His* kingdom, *His* will to be done on earth as in heaven.

Abraham left home and family for what God had planned for him – he became the father of nations. **Ruth** left behind homeland and kindred and became ancestor of the Messiah. **Jesus** left behind heaven's glories and laid down life itself so he could share it with you and me. So that we wouldn't be left out of the eternal reward he won. Let us pray....

Lord, thank You that at the heartbeat of reality is You, God – the God who loves, the God who gives. Help us trust You enough to give you what is rightfully Yours in the first place, namely ourselves and our everything. Help us to allow all our experiences: what we deem 'good' or 'bad' to lead us to a deeper understanding of ourselves and of Your involvement in our lives. Help us to lose our lives for Your sake and for the gospel. Amen