

“Keeping the Coat and the Memories and the Joy”

(A Dramatic Sermon)

Genesis 45:3-15; Luke 6:27-38

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(enter wearing coat of many colors) I realize you might have thought that I would have gotten rid of this coat many years ago, given all the bad memories it stirs; not just of what my brothers did, tossing me in a pit and nearly leaving me to die before deciding to sell me into slavery; but of who I was at the time.

I was not pure as the driven snow, as you might say. I didn't deserve what they did to me, but I accepted the adulation our father gave me because I was a child of his old age and then I not only had dreams in which I appeared to be more important than my eleven brothers; I was dumb, naïve or arrogant enough to tell them about the dreams!

This coat stirs many difficult memories, but it is a part of me, they are a part of me, I cannot deny them and, in fact, do not benefit from trying to forget them. People often speak casually about forgiving and forgetting. That's all well and good, but not only is it difficult to forget, it's more challenging to remember and forgive. So, I have kept the coat, though it took me awhile to find it and then I had to clean up the goat's blood, as best I could. But I have kept the coat.

Anyway... you know my story because you have read it and because you have lived it, at least part of it. I came along just after the big three – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It could have been the big four – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph – but that doesn't have the same ring.

But I am important in our tradition. In the midrash, only I am called *tzaddik* which means righteous or just. Abraham is obedient, Isaac is brave and Jacob is faithful, but only I am righteous. I don't know why. Righteousness is about our standing before God, it's about following God's laws, but it's not just about how we relate to God but how we treat each other. Maybe my relationship to my brothers, my willingness to forgive them, is why I am called *tzaddik*. I don't know.

All I know is that my journey was never dull. I began as the favored child and then was sold into slavery by my own brothers because they were jealous of the attention I received. Many of you can relate to this familial experience of favoritism, jealousy and ongoing pain, even if no one has been sold into slavery. Families are a complex mixture of blessing and curse. Are they not?

The good news is that while I was taken to Egypt as a slave, I rose to a position of significance very quickly. I ended up working for Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh himself, the captain of the guard, and because God was with me, I was successful at everything I did. Potiphar's household thrived and thus, so did I.

I ran into trouble pretty quickly though. I did say my journey was never dull. I was handsome and good-looking, or so the author of Genesis says (39:6b)... And Potiphar's wife took a liking to me and I suppose I could have done what many powerful men do, simply enjoy the trappings of success, but that would have gone against my conscience, my sense of right and wrong. So, I refused her advances. That too may have contributed to my being called righteous.

The trouble was Lady Potiphar did not take rejection well. She accused me of wrongdoing. I know it's usually the woman who is mistreated and then blamed, but in this case, it was the other way around and those accused of doing wrong to public officials' spouses in that time did not get off easily. I ended up in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined, ancient Egypt's version of the Tower of London, but God was with me even in prison. So, I was treated well.

One day, after some time had passed, two unusual prisoners joined me – Pharaoh's chief cupbearer and his chief baker. Apparently, they had displeased Pharaoh and thus ended up in his special prison. While they were there, they both had strange dreams. You may recall that I had once had dreams of significance and I had an innate ability, a God-given ability, to interpret dreams. So, I interpreted these dreams.

It was good news for the cupbearer, he would get his job back, but bad news for the baker, he would be hanged. Needless to say, I made one friend and one enemy, but as it turned out, I was right, and two years later, this one friendship played a significant role in my journey.

Pharaoh started having strange dreams that troubled him and his cupbearer remembered my ability to interpret dreams. So, I was brought to Pharaoh and I interpreted his dreams. They were about two sets of seven cows and ears of corn, but they pointed to the same reality. The land would prosper for seven years and then experience seven years of famine. So, the people should save up food for the hard times.

Pharaoh liked my interpretation, really liked it, so much so that he put me in a position of great power, second only to him. It was quite a promotion – from slave to house manager to prisoner to Hand of the King – and I was only thirty years old! As it turned out, I was right about the dreams, of course; I mean God was right, the interpretation came from God. And the people were able to make it through the lean years of famine because of my counsel.

In the meantime, I settled down with a priest's daughter and we had two sons. Family life was good, professional life was good. God was with me, as always, and maybe I could finally enjoy life. But back home, where my father and brothers lived, the famine was raging, things were getting desperate. There seemed to be little hope until news arrived about the people in Egypt having grain. So, my father Jacob sent my brothers to Egypt seeking help.

The first time they came, I tested them in a number of ways. They were sent to me because I was the King's Hand and they expressed their desire to purchase grain. They didn't recognize me. So, I toyed with them for a few days, told them they needed to bring me their youngest brother to convince me they were not spies. I gave them grain, but had them leave Simeon with me until they brought Benjamin, the youngest.

So, they went home and shared their news with Jacob who was distraught at the very thought of losing Simeon and Benjamin, after having lost me so many years before. He thought I was dead. But they brought Benjamin. I toyed with them again, had a silver cup placed in Benjamin's sack and then accused him of theft. I said he'd have to stay.

This is the point at which you have joined the story today with your reading. The stage is set. They still don't recognize me. It is time to act in some way. What will I do? After all these years of remembering what they did to me, will I finally seek my revenge?

You have seen this movie many times. Something horrible is done to the hero played by Arnold or Bruce or Jean-Claude. Time passes, he harbors his rage and, in the end, he gets revenge by wiping out all the bad guys! You have seen this at work in the real world where nations and groups are at odds until the bad guys get theirs. You may have experienced this with someone you know, even a family member, someone who did you wrong and it took a long time, but one day, you got your chance to even things up.

This is where I am at this point. Will it be sweet revenge? No. Because I haven't been harboring anger all these years. I was angry for a time, but then my life turned out "O.K.", indeed better than "O.K." And I had this sense of purpose all along, this sense of God being with me and using my gifts for good. I couldn't pretend that what they had done did not matter. Maybe that's why I toyed with them, tested them for a while. But other emotions are overwhelming me now and I don't want the Egyptians to see me like this.

So, I send them out of the room so that I am alone with my brothers, and I finally tell them who I am and ask if my father is still alive. They can't speak. They are overcome with emotion, mostly fear. I've never seen that much color drain out of men's faces so fast. They look at me like I am Arnold or Bruce. I have the power to end their lives and good reason to do so!

Realizing their fear, I say, "Come closer to me." I tell them I am their brother, Joseph, whom they have sold into slavery in Egypt, but they don't need to fear or be angry with themselves. God has used me here to preserve life. I want them to go home and tell our father that I am alive and doing well, very well, and I want him and all of them with their families to come and dwell in our land, in Goshen, a narrow strip of grazing land in the Delta. I will provide for all of them until the famine is over. Then, I hug Benjamin's neck and weep. And then, I kiss all of my brothers and weep with them. And when they realize that they have nothing to fear, that I feel nothing but love and compassion for them, they finally talk with me. It's still a little tentative. I may have forgiven them, but they have not yet forgiven themselves. Time and God will take care of these things, the same God who has been with me all along.

“What am I doing?” you may rightly wonder. Have I lost my mind or found my soul? Given a chance to seek revenge, given an opportunity to hold these men accountable, I offer them forgiveness? Isn't this letting them off the hook? Don't they need to suffer for their sins? Don't we all... but look at them, trembling, and not just in fear. Listen to them bathing in their guilt. Who could argue that they have not suffered already? Hey, they haven't had me in their life...

But misplaced humor aside, what they need now is a way back into relationship with me, not because I am in a position of power, but because I am their brother. They need forgiveness, to know that what they have done is wrong, but it will not continue to separate us. It's what I need too, what I want. So, I give it to them.

How can I do this? I don't know, I really don't. Maybe it's because God is with me in this moment just as God has been with me all along. I don't think I could do this alone. Thankfully I don't have to.

So, why am I telling you all of this today? Because your preacher invited me, apparently he has had a cold or something, but also because you need to know it is possible to forgive, to love someone who has hurt you. It's not a sign of weakness. In truth, it takes great strength and it takes God's help and a willingness to accept it. But it is possible.

You remember those words of your Lord and Savior, Jesus. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you... Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven...”

You know all of this, but you don't do it. It's in the red-letter part of your Bible, it is not disputed; Jesus said it and made it a priority, but you'd much rather talk about other issues he never addressed because these teachings are just so difficult. No one can do this!

Maybe no one should. Jesus also said, echoing the psalmist, that the meek will inherit the earth, but we all know that as soon as they do, the not-so-meek will take it right back! Where will such a gentle and forgiving spirit get you in the real world?

And yet, what are the alternatives and where will they get you in the real world? Endless cycles of revenge, because no one ever agrees

as to who started it all; isolation from people we have loved and who have enriched our lives at some point; the damage anger does to our own soul. Is this what we really want? Is this better? Is it a sign of strength?

I know I can't make you do anything. Maybe this is the real reason your preacher invited me. He knew he might not be able to convince you. Maybe he was hoping I could. But it's up to you. I just want you to know it's possible, and it's wonderful, maybe the most wonderful experience you can have in this life, to experience the kind of forgiveness, whether you are giving it or receiving it, that we all need. You can't do it alone, but you don't have to. The same God who loves each of us as we are with all of our messiness and forgives our every frailty and sin will be with us every step of the way.

So, yes, I'm keeping the coat. It reminds me of my struggles, painful struggles, but it also reminds me of my joy. You know all about the struggle. Are you interested in the joy?