

August 16, 20A (Genesis 45:1-15)

Is the Joseph story just an old unsophisticated morality trope?

by [Michael Fick](#) in the [July 29, 2020](#) issue

How do any of us know what the events of our lives mean? Human beings often consider some version of this question in response to important events or milestones, joys and challenges. It is worth pondering how or if faith gives to our lives a different sense of meaning and purpose.

Some find meaning or even divine purpose and guidance in almost any event. The gift of this perspective is that God is perceived to be near and active in the way a life unfolds. Good things happen? God is to be praised. Bad things happen? God is to be trusted to use it for some kind of purpose. The challenge to this perspective is that God then becomes the author of some pretty terrible things that do not seem to be working for any good purpose. It can also excuse us from taking responsibility for our own actions. All becomes God's will.

Others believe that God is somewhat absent from the minutiae of human life and maybe even from larger events in human history. The gift here is that humans must take responsibility for their agency, for their triumphs and failures. The challenge is that God becomes distant and cold, watching flailing humans do what they will in isolation from divine mercy, guidance, or meaning.

Many people of faith would describe themselves dwelling in the mystery in between those perceptions.

In this passage from Genesis, we have a complementary bookend to the story of Joseph and his family from the previous week. Joseph, once sold into captivity by his brothers, encounters them again. He now has great power and authority; they have fallen on decidedly harder times. The reversal is complete. All, in this encounter, will discern together the meaning of the events of their individual and collective lives—and how God has or hasn't been present in those events.

Joseph's true identity is obscured; his brothers have been interacting with him in ignorance, buying grain for their family as their land experiences famine. Through elaborate machinations, Joseph has been getting a read on the current status and disposition of his long-lost family. He has learned that his brothers are capable of mutual care and self-sacrifice. Joseph's secret has now become unbearable, as secrets often do, and he reveals himself to be the very younger brother they sold so long ago.

Joseph's breakdown reveals something about both him and his brothers. One can imagine that a person so treated would understandably seek some distance from those who have done harm or even seek retribution. Joseph is in a position to do either. His authority in Egypt is nearly unrivaled. Banishment, imprisonment, enslavement, and even execution are at his immediate disposal. To say that the brothers are dismayed by his revelation is an understatement. Fear and shame are theirs.

It is rarely easy to be confronted by wrongdoing, to own up to a betrayal or a lie. These can become unbearable burdens. The brothers have been carrying heavy baggage to try to survive in a dying landscape, grain for their starving bodies and guilt for their souls.

Joseph has perceived that these experiences have changed them. They're far from perfect, but these are not the quarrelsome younger men who sold him for silver out of jealousy. Their lives are now in his hands.

Joseph's response is breathtakingly magnanimous. But it is not dismissive of the wrong that has been done. Only after naming the hurt they intended and did ("I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into slavery") does Joseph absolve them. He learns who they have become, chooses to bring them closer, speaks the truth, and then forgives.

Joseph believes that the events of his life have had a purpose. Through their betrayal, he has not only grown powerful in worldly authority but will now be able to save a remnant of his people from the famine in the land. Joseph believes his life is the means of grace by which God will save his people.

The tensions around God's action or inaction and the meaning of events in this text are difficult to ignore. They are the same questions with which people of faith struggle in every time and place. Perhaps the ancient tellers of this story would have

been more comfortable with the idea that God sends famines in order to resolve them through tragic and then redemptive events. Perhaps some reading it now are quite certain it can be dismissed as an old morality trope from an era when humans were less sophisticated in their knowledge of the world and how and why events occur.

Does God really send disaster and famine in order to then save only some? Does God allow people to experience pain or shame in order to make them better people? Caution is warranted in drawing such conclusions, given the harm they can do to people who are hurting or ashamed.

Yet Joseph's own declaration that God had given his life meaning and purpose is not cynical. His self-revelation, as their brother and as a person who believes God has guided and cared for him, is real. And it's real in the lives of countless people of faith, too, who wonder at the mystery of God's presence in events yet nonetheless experience real redemption, forgiveness, and meaning through faith. God seeks us when we are both lost and found, doubtful and faithful, bound and free, wronged and forgiving. God's presence with us is a mystery, and it makes meaning.