**Genesis 37:1-11** March 22, 2020

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Lent 4

Dear Friends in Christ,

**The Diamond Polisher**

There he stands, the second in charge of Ancient Egypt. Just like in all the ancient world, he has the power of life and death. If he says the word, anyone’s life in the kingdom is over.

His own brothers knew it. They feared him for it. They had treated him badly, very very badly when they were younger. They had sold him into slavery—if you can believe that! When those brothers suddenly, unexpectedly, found themselves gathered before that brother, they were terrified. At that moment, when they realized their doom had come upon them, that they were getting what they deserved, their brother said, *“I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me [into slavery] here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you… God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance”* (Genesis 45). Joseph stands in the greatest glory any person can ever have: Powerful and capable, wise yet with the vigor of youth, dressed like a king, Joseph looked the part of ruler. But he displayed an even greater glory, a glory rarely seen in the powerful, he is clothed in mercy. He has realized that his great power is not for him but for others.

Who is this mighty Joseph? Who in the world am I talking about? Four thousand years ago, the founding father of the Jews was Abraham. Joseph came three generations later. Father to son, by generation, it goes, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph. In our *reading* today, we heard the *beginning* of the story of Joseph. I just told you the *end* of the Bible’s story of Joseph.

This causes a problem, because if you know the end of the Joseph story, you may misunderstand a major point of our sermon reading today. As I read our reading, I want you to think what the four events in these verses tell you about Joseph’s personality. Let me read it, starting at verse 2.

*[Read Genesis 37:2-11. Event 1: verse 2; event 2: verses 3-4;  
event 3: verses 5-8; event 4: verses 9-11.]*

***Event 1:*** *Genesis 37:2[Jacob’s] Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.*

***Event 2:*** *3Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. 4When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.*

***Event 3:*** *5Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. 6He said to them, “Listen to this dream I had: 7We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.” 8His brothers said to him, “Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?” And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.*

***Event 4:*** *9Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. “Listen,” he said, “I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” 10When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, “What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?”*

At first, these may sound like random events about Joseph. They are not. It’s a bullet point list of four events that highlight something of young Joseph’s personality.

The first episode is the sort of thing that might happen in many families. Joseph grew up in a believing, but dysfunctional family. His father, Jacob, also called Israel, had had four wives and children by each of those four wives. As always in dysfunctional families like that, there was intense rivalry—rivalry among the wives, rivalry among the children. So Joseph, a talented and idealistic seventeen year old, eleventh of twelve boys, Joseph was out shepherding with some of his half-brothers. He brought back to dear old dad ***“a bad report”*** about them. What sort of bad report? Who knows. Just imagine half a dozen 18-25 year old men out for days and nights on end doing the most boring job on earth, watching sheep eat grass. That spells TROUBLE in all caps. Likely as not, Joseph’s bad report was true. But you can imagine how little brother is going to report his big brothers’ misbehavior.

In the second event, Joseph’s father, Jacob, made matters worse. Jacob (here called by his nickname, Israel) made a special robe for his favorite boy Joseph. We don’t exactly know what the Hebrew is telling us about this coat. Some think it was a coat of many colors. Others think it was richly ornamented. Others think it was long-sleeved (slaves wore sleeveless tunics, owners who didn’t do the work had sleeves). Whatever it was, it was not just a nice piece of clothing, it was a statement. Beautiful as it was, this robe stunk like a pile of rotten garbage to his brothers.

Then there were two dreams. Both dreams were prophetic. They seemed to say that Joseph would have a grand and glorious future, far beyond what his older brothers would achieve. That’s one thing, but Joseph was far from humble in sharing his dreams. He *announced* [cf. Hebrew] it to his older brothers. Of course, they hated dad’s favorite all the more.

In the second dream, Joseph saw his own dad bowing down to him! He told his father, and finally even his own father had to rebuke Joseph’s pride. Just makes you want to say to Jacob, “Hey, Jacob! Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to give that special robe to your son. Looks like it’s gone to his head! Ha! Ha! Ha!!”

What do these four events tell you about Joseph? What connects them? Pride. Rub-your-nose-in-it pride! In Genesis 37 we have a four-point record of what a miserable person Joseph was to be around. He loves what is right, but his idealism lacks any common sense. He has ability, but he has zero humility. He can get the job done, but to Joseph it’s about the job, not the people. He lacks all the things that make a great man into a good man: mercy, humility, genuine concern.

Here is the problem: God has planned to do great things through Joseph. God is going to put Joseph in charge of a nation. God is going to save hundreds of thousands of lives through him. But seventeen year old Joseph in Genesis 37 is not the man God wants to carry out his will.

Sometimes we call people like this young Joseph, a diamond in the rough. It’s a familiar storyline to many a movie. A man off the streets has no polish, but his has street smarts. He comes into contact with the finer things in life and proves to be a really kind guy, a go-getter, a great person. But to make rough diamonds into the sort of thing a bride would wear with pride for the rest of her life, you don’t just brush off the dirt. You have to cut them up and grind them down with the hardest substances on earth.

Joseph has to be shaped and polished by something bigger than him. God is the one who would take this young believing man Joseph and teach him what it means to belong to God. What follows in Genesis chapters 37-45 sort of reads like a movie script. (Just so we aren’t confused, Genesis was written a few thousand years before we had movies.) For the next thirteen years of Joseph’s life, God laid on him the yoke of adversity. God the diamond polisher ground down Joseph’s pride.

Here’s how it happened:

In some families, if there were, say, twelve brothers and one of them got uppity like Joseph and he gathered his older brothers all around to tell them his dream, “…and you know the funny part about my dream was that at the end of the dream all y’all were bowing down to me, like I was a king or something! Ha! So what d’ya think about that?”—in some families they wouldn’t just hate him, they’d walk up to him and knock his block off. But in Jacob’s family, they did one better. His brothers took him and sold him into slavery. As the slave-traders got on their camels and Joseph trailed behind in shackles crying out to his brothers, “Hey guys, I’m sorry! Get me out of this. I didn’t mean it.” they just sat there counting the money. “Finally, we got shut of Joseph!” one said. Another added, “And we made money at it, too!” They all laughed. Scary family!

That’s how God got started on his diamond polishing. Then Joseph spent a few years as a household slave. Then he was falsely accused of a crime. Joseph found out that there are even worse things than slavery. He spent several years in prison. All in all, it was thirteen years of slavery and prison. We don’t know how it was divided up: six years in one and seven in the other? or three years in one and ten in the other? It doesn’t matter. Thirteen years of God grinding Joseph down, of Joseph learning the humility we all must have before God. Joseph learned about repentance and dependence on God. He learned to suffer wrong, and to pray to God, and to seek the good of others. Joseph learned to serve slave masters and prison wardens. Joseph learned to give credit to God for even the lowly things he could do as a slave. And after thirteen years of God grinding hard on Joseph, God had the man he wanted: powerful, able, wise, humble, caring. God made a good man out of one who would only have been a great man. And if that doesn’t make sense, think about it: God made a good man out of one who would only have been a great man. In the end, Joseph stood there before his brothers, powerful but thankful and forgiving.

God never stops grinding and polishing diamonds.

These days of March 2020, remind us of that. As our economy crumbles into dust faster than anybody could have imagined, we remember the Diamond Polisher.

When did we stop to say, “God, thank you for the great job market we have in America, so that our children have jobs when they get out of school?” When did we give credit to him? When did we stop to ask ourselves, “God has given me so much, more than I need. What can I give to him? What can I give to the preaching of the Gospel? What extra bit of my wages can I squeeze out to help people in need?” When did we ask questions like that? We didn’t, did we? And then we lose the jobs. Our positions become uncertain. Will we make the house payments, the car payments? Will there be a job when I graduate? Things aren’t as sure as we were sure they were.

In an instant we are thrown back upon God’s mercy. As our earthly needs become glaringly obvious, once our pride has been broken, we suddenly become aware of our spiritual needs. We realize that prosperity has skewed our priorities in favor of this life over eternity. As this disease reminds us of our mortality, we remember that there are more important things than bank accounts and early retirement.

Do you see what God is doing here? He is humbling us. Like Joseph, to be really and truly God’s blessing to the people around us, the one thing we cannot have is arrogance, pride. We dare never think we have things figured out. I dare never think that my own strength and wisdom have got me here. I dare never imagine that I do not daily need God’s forgiving mercy through Jesus Christ.

Like a good parent, God loves us enough to put us through some pain in this world to preserve us for eternity. God loves the people around us enough to teach us to be humble.

Why did Moses spend forty years in the wilderness by himself, *before* being called to lead Israelite. What was the message that patient Job had to learn through the loss of all his great wealth? God’s prophet Jeremiah, sometimes called “The Weeping Prophet”, why did he weep? And what about Noah or David or the apostle Paul? Each had their time in the proverbial desert, to learn to be great in God’s eyes.

What was Jesus’ message to James and John in our Gospel reading when they greedily asked for the best positions in the kingdom God? The same as it was to Joseph: *“You know that the rulers of the [nations] lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

God teach us that to be truly great is to be the servant of all, just as Christ has served and saved us. Amen.