



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“Faithfulness and the Hindsight Bias”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Genesis 45: 1-20

November 1, 2015

Before we get into our focal reading for this morning I want to take a minute to set the stage a bit. The story of Joseph takes up more than a quarter of the book of Genesis – some 14 chapters – so I want to put today’s passage in context before we hear it.

Joseph’s story starts with his unusual dreams. We hear two dreams that Joseph had, as a teenager, both of which indicate that he will eventually rule over his older brothers (and even his parents). As he shares his dreams with his family he increases the already present animosity that was there with his brothers, and eventually angers them to the point that they sell Joseph into slavery. In the end, Joseph winds up in the service of the wife of an Egyptian official.

The story that unfolds after that is one in which Joseph’s gift is not only in the visions of his own dreams, but in his unique capacity to interpret the dreams of others. Through a course of events that included increasing power in the Egyptian government – and even a stint in prison because of a false accusation – Joseph eventually finds himself interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh himself. Once Joseph displays, to Pharaoh, the power and wisdom of his interpretations, Pharaoh places Joseph in charge of Egypt. “Only with respect to the throne,” Pharaoh says, “will I be greater than you.”

This is where we get set up for, as Paul Harvey used to say, ‘the rest of the story.’ The key element in all of this is that Joseph’s original interpretations of Pharaoh’s dreams were ones in which he predicted that seven years of prosperity would be followed by seven years of famine in Egypt. So, when the famine came over the land, Egypt was the only country prepared, and people came from all over the region to seek food and supplies for their survival. Among those? Joseph’s brothers – the very ones who had sold him into slavery years before.

If you ever want to read it, there’s this somewhat humorous tale that unfolds in chapters 42-45 of Genesis in which Joseph’s brothers are sent, by their father, for supplies – only to come face to face with Joseph with no clue as to his identity. For a couple of different scenes, Joseph toys with his brothers, poking and prodding at them, even framing the youngest of his brothers for

theft, as he gradually approaches the moment of revealing his true identity. So, it's there, with Joseph in power in Egypt and his brothers seeking his grace and mercy while remaining completely unaware of who he truly is, that we pick up today's story.

Read Genesis 45: 1-20

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. 2 And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. 3 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. 5 And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 7 God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. 9 Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. 10 You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. 11 I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' 12 And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. 13 You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." 14 Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. 15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

16 When the report was heard in Pharaoh's house, "Joseph's brothers have come," Pharaoh and his servants were pleased. 17 Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Say to your brothers, 'Do this: load your animals and go back to the land of Canaan. 18 Take your father and your households and come to me, so that I may give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you may enjoy the fat of the land.' 19 You are further charged to say, 'Do this: take wagons from the land of Egypt for your little ones and for your wives, and bring your father, and come. 20 Give no thought to your possessions, for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours.'"

“The best of all the land of Egypt is yours.” It is right here that the next, and arguably most formative, story of the Israelites begins. There is an extent to which, at the reading of this story, many of us know where it is going. This story is going towards the oppression of the Israelites, to the call of Moses, to the crossing over the sea on dry land, to the wandering in the wilderness, to the Ten Commandments, and the Golden Calf, and the leadership of Joshua, and the wisdom of Solomon and the courage of David, and so on, and so on. This story is going to the deepening understanding and relationship the people of Israel have with God. This story is going to the very formation of the people of Israel as the people of God. But, the part that jumps out at me is that I am all but certain that, despite his visions and dreams, Joseph didn't have a clue where all this was going and what stood ahead. But, that never changed his faithfulness in fulfilling his part of the story.

There's no question that hindsight is 20/20. Anyone who follows sports, at all, knows that as well as anyone. I sit back and laugh at the 'Monday Morning Quarterbacks' who question a call made by a coach during the game on Sunday with the benefit of information and details that had yet to ever occur when the coach made the call in the first place, on Sunday.

In psychological jargon it's sometimes known as 'hindsight bias,' or 'creeping determinism.' It's the psychological phenomenon that realizes that the unfolding of events actually distorts our memories in a way that makes us think that things were predictable all along. That coach should have made this call because he should have known that this other thing was going to happen. That parent should have done this with their child because it was obvious that what was happening was going to lead to that. It enters into our workplaces, our fandom, our relationships, and so much more. We look at what has already happened and use that 20/20 hindsight to evaluate and critique the experience of those who were in it as it unfolded the first time. And, all too often, we fail to really recognize what the experience would have been like for them without that creeping determinism that clouds our perspectives.

But, here's the thing – I'm simply not sure we can ever come to a full appreciation of the faith experience of people like Joseph without doing everything we can to shed that hindsight bias from our perspectives and try to look at the experience that they had. You see, we know where the story is going. We know how this whole thing is going to unfold. We know that Joseph's life in Egypt leads to the Israelite proliferation in Egypt, which leads to the oppressions of the Israelites, which leads to the call of Moses, which leads to the crossing of the sea on dry land, and so on and so forth right down the line to the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

- As we see Joseph beaten and thrown into a cistern – we know what comes next.
- When we see Joseph sold into slavery – we know where that is leading.
- When we see Joseph put in prison for false charges – we know how that's going to resolve itself.
- And, when we see Joseph rise to power in Egypt – we know what paths are being laid for the story of God.

But, that's the rub – because, he doesn't! Joseph makes it clear, as he is revealing his identity to his brothers, that he puts his life and faithfulness into the context of God's will and purposes. He can look back, with hindsight, and see where his experiences have allowed God's work to unfold

in his life. That doesn't change, however, the fact that he didn't understand that as he experienced them, nor that he still doesn't know, as he reveals himself to his brothers, where all of this is headed in the long run. All Joseph knows is that God has placed a path before him and that his faithfulness is not a question of being able to determine the end of that path, but a question of trusting in God enough to follow that path without the benefit and clarity of hindsight.

You see, I think that danger of hindsight bias, at least in the realm of our faith, is that it encourages a faithfulness based on logical understanding. Being able to look back at stories like Joseph's with the benefit of hindsight means we get to see where everything went. We get to put a nice little bow on everything that happened because we can see the manner in which the things that happened eventually revealed the work of God in the lives of God's people. And, frankly, it's easy to do faithfulness that way. If we know the end, if we know the blessings that will come from it, if we see the conclusion of the story so perfectly, it's a lot easier to follow the paths and endure the trials we might encounter on the way because we can keep saying – 'yeah, but I can see the end, so it's OK.' But, the reality is that faith doesn't work that way.

The simple reality is that the biblical narrative is laden with stories of people pursuing their part in God's story with little, and sometimes no, understanding of how their part fit into the greater narrative God was seeking to write in the story of His people.

- All Noah had was a command to build an ark and some notion of an upcoming flood.
- Abraham was asked to move his family to an entirely new region with nothing but the promise that this is what God wanted him to do.
- Moses was asked to lead the people out of Egypt, but he endured decades of doubt and struggle on the part of his people as he faithfully followed what seemed to be the endlessly wandering leadership of God.
- David went out to battle Goliath with no idea that he would become the model king for the people of Israel.
- Joseph and Mary accepted God's work in their lives with no clue what Jesus was going to endure and become.
- The Disciples left everything behind with no sense of the true import of the ministries and life of Jesus.
- Peter was a Jew sent to minister to the Gentiles with no clue of the full scope that Christianity would become.
- Paul was confronted on the road to evangelize for the exact thing he had spent his career fighting.

The true danger of our hindsight bias is that I think it causes us to miss out on the profound reality that the story of God unfolds through the faithfulness of those who follow and pursue the paths of God without the blessing of hindsight nor the gift of clear and distinct foresight. I think the problem with our hindsight bias is that it clouds our understanding of the biblical narrative and forces us to overlook the faith of the people, like Joseph and so many others, who followed God's paths, submitted to God's will, and served God's purposes with no understanding of where that was leading or what part of the story their part of the story would play in the long run. But, still, without that hindsight and without that foresight, they followed – not because they saw

where it was going or what it would do, but because in faith they trusted in God's lead, regardless of what that meant.

I have done messages, before, on the call God has for each of us, and I will do them again. Today, I'm not going to delve into that piece but simply reclaim the fundamental truth that God does have a purpose for you! God has a path for you to follow! God has a will for your life! God has a part for you to play in this greater story that is unfolding in God's people! But, that's right where we run up against our bias. Because, we don't know where our part will lead. We don't know what part we will play in the story. We don't have the clarity of hindsight to be able to point to our journeys and understand what led to what in our lives. All we have is the question of faith that so many others have had before us. There is a part for us to play – will we have the faith to follow even when we don't where it will lead?