

Thinking About Our Heroes
Union Chapel, Nuangola PA, August 5, 2018
Grace Chapel, Bear Creek PA, August 26, 2018

Scripture reading:

Genesis 37: 1 Jacob dwelt in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan. 2 This is the history of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a lad with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought an ill report of them to their father.

3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a long robe with sleeves. 4 But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

5 Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they only hated him the more. 6 He said to them, "Hear this dream which I have dreamed: 7 behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf arose and stood upright; and behold, your sheaves gathered round it, and bowed down to my sheaf."

8 His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him yet the more for of his dreams and for his words.

19 They [the brothers] said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer." 20 Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild beast has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams."

21 But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." 22 And Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; cast him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand upon him." - that he might rescue him out of their hand, to restore him to his father.

23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe – the long robe with sleeves he wore; 24 and they took him and cast him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

25: Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt.

26 Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood? 27 Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers heeded him.

In Egypt, Joseph as a slave earned his master's trust, but was then unfairly betrayed and imprisoned. Later he was taken from prison to interpret Pharaoh's dream, which predicted years of plenty followed by a long famine. Joseph advises Pharaoh how to address this challenge. Joseph is speaking:

Chapter 41: 33 "Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man discreet and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. 34 Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land, and take the fifth part of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plenteous years. 35 And let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and lay up grain

under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. 36 That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine which are to befall the land of Egypt, so that the country may not perish through the famine.”

During the famine, Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt seeking food.

Chapter 45: 3 And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph; is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.

4 So Joseph said to his brothers, “Come near to me, I pray you.” And they came near. And 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 yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 7 And 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; and he has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

So, the Children of Israel settle in Egypt, and the famine wears on. The people buy food from Pharaoh’s stores to sustain themselves. A year or more later:

Chapter 47: 15 And when the money was all spent in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph, and said, “Give us food; why should we die before your eyes? For our money is gone.”

16 And Joseph answered, “Give your cattle, and I will give you food in exchange for your cattle, if your money is gone.” 17 So they brought their cattle to Joseph, and Joseph gave them food in exchange for the horses, the flocks, the herds, and the asses: and he supplied them with food in exchange for all their cattle that year.

18 And when that year was ended, they came to him the following year, and said to him, “We will not hide from my lord that our money is all spent; and the herds of cattle are my lord’s; there is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our lands. 19 Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for food, and we with our land will be slaves to Pharaoh; and give us seed, that we may live, and not die, and that the land may not be desolate.

20 So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. For all the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them. The land became Pharaoh’s; 21 and as for the people, he removed them to cities from one end of the borders of Egypt to the other end thereof. (RSV)

May God bless the hearing of his Holy word. Amen.

Today, I’d like to talk a bit about heroes. It’s a word we don’t hear so much these days. More commonly, people we are supposed to admire are called celebrities, or even idols. Being an idol, worshiped as a god, is a tough standard to live up to. On the other hand, a celebrity these days seems to be famous mostly for being famous; one need not do anything particularly heroic. But in history, as well as fiction, we do meet characters who did something heroic. More than a celebrity, but without trying to be an idol.

As we survey the history of this country, we often do so citing particular people as heroes. I’ll name a few. Captain John Smith, George Washington and Nathan Hale from the

revolution, John Glen, the first American to orbit the Earth. Humanity's thirst for heroic figures has led also to those of drama and fiction, such as Ulysses of the ancient Greeks, to Ben Hur, Tarzan and even such as Spider Man, and Princess Leah. As we open our Bible, it is no surprise that we also find there heroic figures, who made a difference in their time and place. Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Deborah, Jonathan, David, Elijah, Ester, and many more. New Testament examples include Mary, Stephen, Barnabus, and Paul. (Barnabus is a particular favorite of mine.)

But, how do these fit in? How do we relate to them? Do we build statues? Just enjoy the stories? Do we seek to emulate them? What do we actually do with these heroes? I bring to you this question, because it's been an issue I have struggled with.

When I was young, I loved to read. What I wanted to read was adventure, action stories. I liked Jules Verne's *Mysterious Island* and *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*. I read a lot of Edgar Rice Burroughs: Tarzan and the rest. When I got to 7th grade, "English" was split into separate grammar and literature courses. I was fine with the grammar part. But literature was a disaster. You see, I just wanted to enjoy a good read. I didn't care about character development, theme, or plot. I wasn't looking for symbolism. I didn't even notice words I wasn't familiar with; I'd pick up the meaning from context without slowing down. I was not mature enough at that point to have any interest in analysis, or the techniques of writing. It was a long time before I did. So, English continued to be my worst subject for as long as I had to take it. The point is, I didn't know what to do with my heroes. I enjoyed reading Tarzan. I identified with his character. But I never, no never, expected or aspired to be like him. And similarly, for these heroic figures of the Bible. I found them interesting, but disconnected from who I was, or what I did. Maybe I absorbed something worthwhile, but that would have been accidental.

Today, as we think about this, we focus on the story of Joseph. We have a lot of material on Joseph – his story spans Genesis chapters 37 to 48. Only David has more depth of material about his life than Joseph. Joseph is an important hero of the Biblical narrative.

Joseph is the oldest son of his father Jacob's favorite and beloved wife, Rachel, who died when Joseph's younger brother Benjamin was born. He's spoiled, and his brothers resent it. Joseph is given the "coat of many colors," by his father. It is called "a long robe with sleeves" in the RSV translation. That doesn't help. To top it off, he tells his brothers how he's destined to be lord over them. We know the story. His brothers grab him. Rather than kill him, they sell him into slavery. Joseph winds up in Egypt. Things seem to be going well as he is a diligent worker. But then, he's unjustly thrown into prison. Eventually, his talent for interpreting dreams brings him to the attention of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. He listens to Pharaoh's dream. He interprets the fat and lean cows and ears of grain as a prediction of years of plenty, followed by years of famine. Joseph winds up with the job as Pharaoh's right-hand servant. It is his job to plan and collect, during the years of plenty, grain that will sustain people through the famine to follow. Eventually Jacob and his family are forced to come to Egypt for food. Joseph uses his power given by Pharaoh not only to save the Egyptians, but his family as well. As a result, they live through the famine. They also all end up being slaves of Pharaoh.

That seems like a good bargain at the time. After all, Pharaoh is under Joseph's influence. Joseph not only saves his family and others, but is faithful to his duty to serve

Pharaoh's interests. There would come a time later when a Pharaoh arose, who did not know Joseph. That's the Exodus story, but it's far into the future.

Joseph is a great story. It can be viewed as a "coming of age" story, where the protagonist begins as a young man, a child really, and faces hardships and challenges as he grows to adulthood. It's the same trajectory found in many a work of fiction. His character is such that he perseveres, meets those challenges, and finally comes out on top. The troubled situation of his childhood is brought to a satisfying conclusion. That's the "good read" part. We can all enjoy the story. If you have not seen the show or the movie, *Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, it really is worthwhile. You'll enjoy it.

There are nuggets beyond just the enjoyment of the story though. Perhaps the most important is that he attributes what has happened, the salvation of his family from famine, not to his own genius, but to God. He says: (Genesis 45: 8a RSV)

"So it was not you who sent me here, but God."

Isn't this what we love to see in our heroes? A true hero shows humility.

I'd like to point out something else of Joseph's accomplishments, that is usually overlooked. His family is called, "The Children of Israel." Israel is Jacob's other name, given by God. But, why not "Children of Isaac?" Isaac was Jacob's father. But Isaac's other son, Esau, became a different people, the Edomites. They were never reconciled to the Israelites. There is conflict between Israel and Edom for the next millennium. Or, why not "Children of Abraham?" Likewise, of Abraham's several sons, only Isaac retained the blessing of being God's chosen. We also do not read of a separate "The Children of Joseph." He did have many descendants. They are described as tribes, but within the "Children of Israel," not as a separate nation. "The Children of Israel" becomes a people, a nation. That's because Joseph, for the first time in his family's history, and with God's help, managed to bring about reconciliation, harmony, and peace within the family. The Children of Israel remain together as a nation, not just the various separate tribes. Folks, is that not an amazing accomplishment?

Take a look at Israel's dysfunctional family earlier. It's a mess. There's an illustration of this in our scripture reading. When Joseph is 17, we read that Joseph was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. Sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, but not Leah. When Joseph, son of favorite wife Rachel, brings a bad report, he is picking on the "second class" sons of the two concubines. Joseph calculates that those other sons have less power in the family pecking order, despite being older than he is. He doesn't pick on Leah's sons. At least, not yet. That's the kind of family dynamics that are going on. Thanks to Joseph, after he has matured, and with God's guiding hand, the "Children of Israel" become God's Chosen People, and a blessing to all of the Creation.

We can figure Joseph lived about 3500 years ago. How does this story hold up today? Pretty well, I think! It's still a great story. But was Joseph a flawed hero? If there were statues of Joseph about, would people in our day be insisting that they be torn down, because of something Joseph did those many years ago? What about that bit about selling everyone into

slavery? According to the account of Genesis 47, Joseph cemented into place a totalitarian regime in which everyone (excepting the Egyptian priests) was made literally slaves of the ruler.

I believe that we need to recognize that Joseph was a man of his time. In his role as Pharaoh's servant, the course he took would have been obvious to him. It was the path God had laid in front of him. A path that made sense in his time and place. What we need to take from this story is a sign that God was with him, and the Children of Israel, at that time, and ultimately is with us, today. Yes, the slavery was a problem later. But God was again present for the Children of Israel at the time of the Exodus.

You see, our heroes are not idols. They were people. They are signs that God finds among us those who, from often humble origins, rise to challenging occasions and accomplish great things. They may make decisions or do things that can be seen as problems in our day. For Joseph, perhaps this slavery question. Compared to David, Joseph lived the life of a saint! Moses made errors too. As did most of the others. Even one my favorite Biblical heroes, Barnabus, was called out for hypocrisy in Antioch by Paul. Barnabus had stopped dining in fellowship with the gentile believers when certain Jewish visitors came from Jerusalem. These heroes, are they not all just men and women, much like us, but for their heroic opportunities and deeds? People, real people, do good things and bad, they rise to the heroic on occasion, and make mistakes on other occasions. We err if we require them to be godlike idols.

It seems that in our own time, we more often find heroes being torn down rather than lifted up. The focus is shifted from accomplishment to any negative available. Christopher Columbus, for example, brought disease to the New World that decimated those we now call "Native Americans." George Washington and Thomas Jefferson may have helped win the revolution against the British, but now it seems that their role as slave owners is what is given most importance. Public figures, both past and present, seem to be falling all around, leaving in place mostly the celebrities who are famous for their fame.

As an aside, a week or more ago when I should have been working on my message for today, I was finishing a book found among my father's things. *The Saga of Andy Burnett* was written in the 1930's about a young man born in Eastern Pennsylvania about 1800. At 19, he ran away from his stepfather and learned to be a "Mountain Man," trapping beaver among the Indians in the Rockies, and eventually settling in California. It's a good read. Hard to put down. The author, Stewart Edward White, had been a friend of Teddy Roosevelt, and was writing of an era about 100 years before his own. It was interesting to see how the author excused and explained some of the hero Andy Burnett's actions as being typical of that earlier age of the story setting. Even so, the book itself would probably be banned or denigrated today, due to some of its characterizations, the pejoratives some of the characters use, and its perspectives on various issues, which are today, about a century later, seen differently than in the author's time.

In our Bible, we meet heroes of the faith who have their moments of greatness and sometimes of failing. For some, like Jonathan and Josiah, everything we read is positive. Then we have those like the hero Sampson, whose failings were multitude, but he was redeemed in the end. God has done wondrous things with this weak human clay. He has fashioned a marvelous creation, and then a civilization, through these people we read about in the Bible. Yet they were

all imperfect, doing these great things by God's grace, and receiving forgiveness for their transgressions upon repentance. Just like us. Can we be satisfied with these imperfect human heroes?

We read of great things, and terrible things, as we make our way from Genesis to Malachai. Then we get to Matthew. The Jews need a hero. They look forward to, and expect, a Messiah. They expect this Messiah, blessed by God, to rise up and lead them against the hated Romans, and establish a righteous kingdom to rule over all the earth. We meet Mary and Joseph, and a baby named Jesus. A child who grows up to become a great teacher and worker of miracles. A man who, as far as we can tell, never does anything we would judge to be evil or wrong, even by the standards of our own day, though he lived two millennia ago. A man who showed, in his words and actions, what it meant to live a life of righteousness. Is he the hero, the messiah, that is expected?

Jesus, by God's grace, chose to be a different kind of Messiah. God's will led in a different direction. He was persecuted, and ultimately killed, suffering a criminal's death by torture. He was not respected in his home town of Nazareth, nor embraced by his own people, the Jews. He was not the hero the Jews were looking for. He was more.

In his sacrifice, death, and resurrection, he reconciled us to God as his children, an act even more amazing and consequential than Joseph reconciling his brothers. In Jesus we have life, and have it more abundantly. For, as the apostles and early church fathers came to understand, Jesus was not just a hero like the others, but the very manifestation of God. We use the word "incarnation."

So, what about our heroes? At their best, they do great and wonderful things, God-blessed things. They do so despite their failings. Think about those who have been your heroes. Give thanks for them to God. Where it makes sense, and when God seems to be leading you on similar paths, they are worthy of emulation. But, don't expect them to be gods. Look to Jesus. For He is our true example. We can do no better than to heed his call when he says to us, "Follow me."

Amen.