



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

August 7th, 2011

In 1967 Andrew Lloyd Webber was asked by a friend to write some lyrics for a musical project for a school in London, it was to be a pop-cantata and the story of Joseph from the book of Genesis was suggested. It was about 15 minutes long and was so well received by the school community that it was performed several times in other venues in London but never went beyond that until after Webber and his partner Tim Rice became famous for another biblical story set to pop/rock music, *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Their school project was expanded into *Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat* and its success continues. By 2008, over 20,000 schools and community theaters around the world have staged productions of this charming show. It periodically returns to Broadway and Las Vegas with Donny Osmond as the most famous Joseph.

The story itself is nearly unique in the Bible. It is considered a novella, not as long as a novel and different from a short story in that it is told over a sweep of time, and allows for considerable character development. King David's story is the only other such literature in the Bible. Joseph's is a complex story told with a marvelous theology that shines through.

Joseph is one of Jacob's twelve sons. And he is the favorite. That favoritism comes from the fact that Joseph's mother was Rachel, the one great true love of Jacob's life and it took a long time for her to have children. So when the boy was born, Jacob lavished love, attention and gifts on him, a situation that did not go unnoticed by the older brothers. It didn't help that Joseph was something of a brat. He was also one of the great dreamers in the Bible. His dreams were prophetic and eventually they all came true. He unwisely shares a couple of them with his brothers – dreams in which they appear to fall down and worship him. Along with being a brat, Joseph seems to have overlooked the character of his older brothers who have already shown themselves to be violent and blood-thirsty. One day, motive and opportunity come together and they attack him, planning to leave him for dead. But then along come some traders and they decide to make some cash by selling Joseph into slavery and off he goes to Egypt.

To cover their crime, they took his coat, the emblem of their father's favoritism and smeared it with the blood of a hapless goat and went home to tell their father that a wild animal had killed their brother. Andrew Lloyd Webber set that scene to country western music – “there's one more angel in heaven...”

Once in Egypt, Joseph is bought by Potipher, a wealthy government official whose wife has a wandering eye. Joseph's intelligence, presence and good looks begin to elevate him in the household but ultimately spell disaster as Joseph rebuffs the attention of the wife. She becomes a woman scorned and accuses him of having seduced her. He ends up in prison.

Once there, he interprets the dreams of other prisoners and word of that skill reaches the Pharaoh. Eventually Joseph becomes a trusted advisor to Pharaoh, managing the food supply so that Egypt is able to survive a severe drought.

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That drought brings Joseph's brothers to Egypt and face to face with their now Egyptianized victim. Joseph recognizes them and at first extracts a bit of revenge. He accuses his younger brother Benjamin of having stolen a valuable golden cup. It is here that character development leaps front and center. First the brothers are unwilling to sacrifice Benjamin for their own safety and stand by him. Joseph too, has grown up. Revenge is not satisfying and he reveals himself to them and they are reconciled. The brothers realize that they have the opportunity to put things right with their father also and someone travels back to Canaan to bring Jacob to Egypt.

In the narrative of the Hebrew people, Joseph's story is critical because it explains how they came to be in Egypt in the first place. Now, I don't often look for historical evidence of Biblical stories but in this case, there appears to be a lot of support for many of the parts of this story – not necessarily a boy named Joseph who becomes Pharaoh's trusted advisor – but for the way he was forced into slavery, the presence of semetic, particularly Hebrew names, among leaders at various times in Egypt's history, records of Middle Eastern migration at times of famine. This is a story with rooted in historical realities. But for a people whose foundational story is the deliverance from slavery in Egypt, it is necessary.

But beyond the necessary plot lines of this story are several exquisite moments that reveal God's purpose better than anything since the creation story. When he finally reveals himself to his brothers, he reflects on the journey that began with their violence and tells them that God's will is being served now in his life. Later on when their father has died Joseph reassured them by saying, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

God's story is told through the people of Genesis. God from the very beginning transforms human misdeeds, from the disobedience in the Garden, which unleashed human ingenuity to survive outside of Paradise where everything was given without work or effort. The image of the divine, implanted in each human is the potential for independent action, either according to God's will or against it. The music of time is created by harmony or discord according to human action. God's contribution is to continually create harmony out of our angry, violent, selfish actions.

When Joseph was sold into slavery, I do not believe that God had designed such a plan that included hatred, despair, and grief. But when it came, God set other things in motion that drew good out of a bad situation. This unseen, subtle hand is our confidence and hope that whenever we are in dark times, God is at work, bringing order out of chaos and joy out of despair.

The story is ultimately one of reconciliation and growth. Cain and Abel's sibling violence which could never be reconciled finds its healing in the Joseph and his brothers. The desire for revenge is reconciled into compassion and forgiveness. The people of Genesis represent our ability to grow up. At first we are impulsive, jealous and violent like Cain and Abel in Chapter 4 but by chapter 50, we have learned and transcend the jealous, fearful, angry parts of ourselves. Joseph and his brothers give us hope and a lot to live up to. God's work on us continues. We will never be left alone and forsaken. What seems like desolation is always the middle of the story. God is writing a chapter with your life and all things will eventually be brought to the end that God intends. I can't imagine any better news than that.

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