

“Scar Fadeout”
Text: Genesis 45:1-15

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The first 15 verses of chapter 45 of Genesis form the climax of the story of Joseph. The story of Joseph is one of my favorites and in October and November our church school children will encounter Joseph in the rotation of learning workshops on the 4th floor. I hope that this becomes a favorite story for them too. The story of Joseph is actually thirteen chapters long, from Genesis 37 to 50. The story is beautifully and artistically woven together like a novel.

When I read a novel, I sometimes—actually almost always—take a peek at the ending. My husband just shakes his head when I do this, but reading the ending usually doesn’t deter me from going back and reading the whole novel. Today, that’s what you and I are going to do. We are going right to the ending/the climax. When we take our peek, we discover Joseph having a reunion with his half-brothers. These are the same brothers who sold their teenage brother Joseph down the river/sold him into slavery.

Imagine these brothers blustering about why they did it:

“I hated him.” “Dad loved him best.” “He had the fancy robe, and wouldn’t get his hands dirty.” “The kid drove me crazy with his dreams.” “Thought he was the king of us.”

And imagine them explaining just how they pulled it off:

“We thought about killing him.” Wanted to throw dream-boy into a pit.” “Yeah, kill him and throw him inapit.” We’ll say that the wild animals ate him.” “But Reuben said no—said we shouldn’t kill him.” “So we stripped him and we sold him.” Yeah—sold him to some Ishmaelites.” Got 20 pieces of silver for him.” Pretty good money.”

Today’s Story: After many years these once treacherous brothers have a surprise encounter. They came to Egypt seeking help from Zephaniah who is in charge of the Egyptian economy—the second most important man in Egypt—who even wears Pharaoh’s royal signet ring. Zephaniah is the one who fashioned the plans to grow and store enough grain during the seven years of plenty. When the great famine came, all the nations came to Egypt to buy food. The famine was so great that it eventually affected Joseph’s family in Canaan. These brothers have come to Egypt seeking help from. Zephaniah which is Joseph’s Egyptian name. Joseph recognized his brothers but they didn’t recognize him. Joseph slyly asked questions about the family. Was their father still alive? Did they have any other brothers? He gave them some grain to bring home but he held one half-brother hostage until they returned with Benjamin who was Joseph’s younger brother with the same mother. When they come back with Benjamin, then he would then give them more grain.

This first encounter with his half-brothers makes me wonder about the scars that Joseph has. **Scars!** You know there would have to be scars. All those years of hatred and jealousy, abuse and violence, the constant taunting when he was a child, the plot to murder him, the heartless sale into slavery. Even once in Egypt, Joseph experiences many ups and downs, at some times

being a servant and, at other times suffering sexual harassment from his boss's wife, and being accused and thrown in prison. **Scars and resentment!** There would have to be scars! All of us harbor some type of scars. All of us have those vulnerable spots.

The half-brothers do come back and bring Benjamin, and Joseph does a few more things to make his half-brothers squirm until they are really frightened and sure that God is punishing them for what they did to Joseph so many years ago. They discuss their feelings of guilt in selling Joseph so many years ago. Finally, Zephaniah eventually reveals his true identity as Joseph. Overwhelmed with emotion, Joseph says to them ***“I’m your brother,” and now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.***” (Genesis 45:5)

The climax is full of emotion. The scripture tells us that Joseph and his brothers reconcile, and they kiss and weep and talk. But the scars that this family bears are not easily pushed away

Joseph's scar won't go away! He knows it won't, and he doesn't pretend that it will. In fact, he points to his scar and reminds his brothers that they sold him into slavery. Joseph forgives but he makes no attempt to airbrush the fact that something terrible was done to him. A U.S. psychiatrist Thomas Szasz said this about forgiveness: “The stupid neither forgive nor forget; the naïve forgive and forget; the wise forgive but do not forget.” Furthermore, Desmond Tutu, South Africa's prophet for peace and justice, says that “forgiveness and reconciliation are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth.” (p. 270 *No Future Without Forgiveness*)

So in spite of this history with his brothers, Joseph is somehow able to heal, to work at forgiveness and move toward reconciliation with his brothers.

How does he do it? By seeing that a spiritual scaffold has been erected by God.

South Africa's prophet for peace and justice, Desmond Tutu, in his book *No Future Without Forgiveness* feels that “there is a movement, not easily discernible, at the heart of things to reverse the awful centrifugal force of alienation, brokenness, division, hostility, and disharmony. God has set in motion a centripetal process, a moving toward the center, toward unity, harmony, goodness, peace, and justice, a process that removes barriers.” (p. 265)

Looking back over his life, Joseph sees that God has managed in a truly mysterious way to bring good out of evil, using even the awful act of his jealous brothers to put him in an important position in the land of Egypt. **“God sent me before you to preserve life,” Joseph explains to them all. “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.”** (v. 5-7)

The spiritual scaffold doesn't remove the scar, but changes its appearance. You might say that it camouflages it and makes it look like something else. What first looked like a heartless and hateful act on the part of Joseph's brothers now looks like a graceful, heartfelt, and loving act on the part of a loving God who wanted Joseph to prosper and save his family from famine.

God brings healing!

The scar is still there. But now it looks beautiful, not ugly. God's spiritual scaffold has changed its appearance forever.

Does this mean that every tragedy we experience has a silver lining? That all evil is really good, and that all suffering is somehow being orchestrated by God? **Not at all!** The world is full of senseless violence, horrifying hatred, and a whole range of actions and attitudes that attempt to thwart the will of God. Evidence for this is everywhere, even in our own church.

Both the Hebrew and Christian Testaments teach us that God has the power to transform human evil into divine good. God used the slavery of Joseph to save a family, and God transformed the death of Jesus into the salvation of the world. Never should we ask for a scar to be removed. Joseph didn't. Jesus didn't, and neither should we. But God can create a life in which our wound is camouflaged and transformed into something good, and we are propelled toward new and abundant life.

The question is **HOW?** In his classic book *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen reflects on what it means to minister in a hurting and alienated society. He recommends prayer, not "as a decoration of life," but as the breath of human existence. "A Christian community is a healing community," says Nouwen, "not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision."

Take a look at your scars: physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual. How can they be openings or occasions for new visions?

Joseph looked at the scar of his sale into slavery, and saw that God had a saving plan for his life. Perhaps some abuse you have suffered will enable you to serve people who have been abused; maybe some hurt you have endured will equip you to ease the pain of another; it could be that some loss you have experienced will put you in a powerful position to assist those who are grieving. By prayerfully reflecting on human scars—instead of ignoring them or wishing them to disappear---we can discover new opportunities for Christian service.

The greatest transformer of scars is, of course, the Divine Physician, Jesus Christ. It is by his wounds that we are healed, and by his sacrificial death that we experience everlasting life. I believe the story of Easter would be incomplete without those scars on the hands, the feet, and the side of Jesus--- a permanent reminder of his suffering.

Because of Easter, you and I can hope that the tears we shed, the blows we receive, the emotional pain, the heartache over lost friends and loved ones, all these will fade into memories, like Jesus' scars.

Jesus does not remove our scars/our wounds, but builds a spiritual scaffold over them---one that shows us that healing is always a possibility, even when it comes in surprising ways. Jesus builds a scaffold over our scars. It's called the cross. Easter is several church seasons away, but we Christians are Easter people, and are reminded that in being in touch with God and keeping keep Easter in our hearts and minds, help is close by. All this can make a difference in scar fadeout, as well as making a difference in our lives.