

The Big Reveal

In the name of him who commands us “do good to those who hate you”, dear friends in Christ: As I’ve mentioned before, the theme of the Christmas season is that God has become man in the infant Jesus. The theme of the Epiphany season on the other hand is the unveiling of the secret that this very ordinary looking man, Jesus, is God. So it is that we see him performing divine miracles of healing and driving out demons, and also teaching the Holy Scriptures with divine authority. People marvel at his words as well as his miracles. But the biggest secret remains veiled to them: his true messianic mission to suffer and die for the sins of the world and to rise again on the third day – that remains hidden to their eyes even though he states it clearly to his disciples numerous times. It’s not until the resurrection itself and his appearance to his disciples that the secret is fully revealed to them.

But this idea of a hidden savior working in plain but misunderstood sight to perform his mission and then suddenly revealing himself is a consistent biblical theme. A great example of this is today’s Old Testament lesson in which the patriarch Joseph reveals himself to his startled and then terrified brothers. Let me set this up:

Joseph, you will recall, was the 11th and most dearly loved son of Jacob. He was also the first and for a long time the only son of Rachel, Jacob’s most dearly loved wife. He had three other wives whom he cared for, I’m sure, but Rachel was the only one he really wanted to marry. (Yeah, I know: how does a guy end up with wives he didn’t intend to marry? Let’s just say it’s complicated.)

Anyway, it’s Jacob’s obvious favoritism for Joseph that provokes his older brothers’ envy and hatred. Those feelings of animosity are exacerbated when Joseph has a pair of dreams that imply his brothers will one day bow down in reverence to him. Oh, they hate that. The last straw is when Jacob rewards his favored son with a magnificent, intricately decorated robe. It’s the visible sign of the father’s love. When Joseph wears it, for the brothers, it’s like waving a red cape in front of a bull.

The day comes when Joseph’s ten older brothers are tending the family’s sheep herd some distance away from their encampment. Jacob, the father, sends Joseph to check up on them. To the brothers, when they see him coming, he is dad’s spy. And he just happens to be wearing the robe that marks him as dad’s favorite. It infuriates them. They decide to murder him. Reuben, the oldest, steps in to prevent it. As the eldest, he’s in charge. He doesn’t want his brother’s blood on his hands. So, instead he suggests they drop Joseph down into a dry well while they figure out what to do. His plan is to come back later and rescue Joseph, supposing that the scare of the ordeal will be enough to put him in his place. Meanwhile, the other brothers hurl insults at Joseph and speak loudly of the horrible things they might do to him. Joseph literally from the pit of despair pleads with them for pity and help. His anguished cries are like sweet music to their ears.

Well, it happens while Reuben is away doing a routine check on the herd that another opportunity presents itself. A caravan of Ishmaelite traders is passing by on their way to Egypt. Their camels are loaded with spices the Egyptians use for their elaborate embalming rituals. Judah, the 4th oldest son of Jacob, has an idea. Let’s sell Joseph as a slave to them. We’ll avoid the guilt of killing him and make a handsome profit to boot. It’s a win-win. The others readily agree. They yank Joseph up and out of his makeshift prison and sell him for twenty

pieces of silver. Off he goes to be a slave in a land where slaves usually endure very short and bitter lives.

Reuben returns to discover what the others did in his absence. Now what are we going to do? What are we going to tell dad? They hatch another plan. They kill a goat and soak Joseph's fancy robe in it. They bring it back to Jacob and say, "We found this. Do you recognize it?" They knew their father would be upset, but nothing prepared them for the inconsolable agony Jacob expresses. He melts before them in tears of torment. He refuses to be comforted. "I'll go to my grave still mourning my son." And it's this suffering they inflicted on their father not on Joseph that begins to eat away at their consciences. Every time they see him moping about and see his tear stained cheeks they are forced to realize we did that to him.

In Egypt Joseph is sold to a high ranking military officer named Potiphar. He's the commander of the Pharaoh's elite guard. Joseph shows himself to be an intelligent, hardworking servant. Recognizing his qualities, Potiphar promotes him. Before long he is the head servant of the household, managing his master's estates and vastly increasing his wealth. Unfortunately, Joseph's outstanding qualities are also noticed by Potiphar's wife, who, it would seem, was a very lonely woman. While her husband is away at court, she attempts on numerous occasions to seduce Joseph, who refuses her each time. They say hell knows no fury like a woman scorned. She accuses Joseph to her husband of attempting to rape her. And Potiphar places his once trusted head servant in the deepest pit of the Pharaoh's prison.

But Joseph, blessed by the Lord, has a way of rising to the top wherever he is. The warden notices Joseph's usefulness. He puts him to work managing the prison from the inside, charged with the care and keeping of the other prisoners. Joseph displays the same efficiency as before, but this time with substantially fewer assets at his disposal. The Pharaoh doesn't like to spend much on prisoners. So, Joseph has gained valuable experience managing resources when they are plentiful and when they are few. This will serve him well in the future the Lord has planned for him.

Fast forward several years. You remember the story: how the Lord gives Joseph the key to interpreting the Pharaoh's troubling dreams. There will be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of severe famine. It's a death sentence for a nation. Joseph calmly proposes a solution. Pick a man to oversee the harvests during the years of bumper crops. Store away the excess. Then distribute it as needed in the years of famine. The Pharaoh is amazed at the simplicity of the suggestion – but also well aware of the complexity of carrying it out. Who better to do it than the man who proposed it? He appoints Joseph the second in command of all Egypt. He is made the lord of the harvest and the savior of the nation.

Fast forward again about eight years. The famine extends far beyond the borders of Egypt. Jacob and his family are facing starvation. But he has heard that there is grain in Egypt for sale (at premium prices you can be sure). He sends the ten older sons to buy some. His youngest son, Benjamin, the only other son of his beloved Rachel who died in childbirth and his new favorite since losing Joseph, he keeps close by. He's not about to go through that kind of loss again. It would kill him.

When his brothers arrive in Egypt, Joseph recognizes them immediately. But they don't know him. He looks and acts like an Egyptian. He speaks Egyptian and communicates with foreigners like them through an interpreter – though unbeknown to them, he understands them perfectly. He orders them pulled out of the line to buy grain and arrested as spies sent to discover the weakness of the nation. They protest, no, we are the sons of one man. There

were twelve of us. One brother was lost. The other is with our father in Canaan. Joseph refuses to hear them. No, you are spies. He has them locked up. The tables have turned.

Joseph listens as they discuss their unhappy fate. Our sins have found us out. We're being punished for what we did. They recall with shame how they laughed at Joseph's pathetic calls for help. It's a good sign. Feelings of remorse are the first step toward true repentance. After three days in the cooler, Joseph has them brought before him again. Look, he says, I'm a God-fearing man. I'll give you a chance to prove yourselves. Go back to Canaan and return with this other brother you say you have. Then I'll know you are telling the truth. In the meantime, one of you will stay here as my hostage to ensure your return. He chooses Levi, the hot-headed third eldest son of Jacob.

The others return to Jacob, their donkeys loaded down with a year's worth of grain for their families. They also have the silver they were sent to buy it with. Joseph ordered it hidden in their sacks of grain. It looks bad to Jacob. You went to buy grain, return with it *and* the money – but without one of your brothers. What did you do? No matter how much his sons protest their innocence, Jacob isn't having it. Oh, and by the way, Dad, to get Levi back we have to go back and take Benjamin with us. Jacob's like no way. Not in a thousand years.

That thousand years becomes just one because the famine continues and their grain supply runs out again. Jacob tells his nine older sons to take another trip to Egypt. They protest we can't go without Benjamin. The man in charge down there said that without him we dare not see his face. Judah, whose plan it was to sell Joseph, speaks up. I will personally guarantee the boy's safety. Jacob knows he's trapped. If they don't go, we all starve. If they take Benjamin, I might lose him – a thought too painful to bear. But at last with great reluctance, seeing no other way out, he is forced to concede.

The brothers arrive in Egypt. Joseph sees them standing in line to buy grain and has his servants take them away. The brothers think they're being arrested for having taken back the silver they paid for the grain the first time. This time they brought double. But the head servant tells them no, your grain was paid for – no doubt by Joseph, their unseen savior, who unknown to them paid their debt. The brothers are reunited with Levi and discover that instead of going to prison, Joseph has laid on a feast for them. They are to be his guests – a great honor. Yes, their hidden savior ends up feeding them from his own table (almost sounds like Holy Communion).

The next morning they are hurried off, their donkeys again loaded with grain. But Joseph has arranged a test for them. He's had his servant hide his own valuable silver chalice in one of the grain bags on Benjamin's donkey. They've only gone a short way before they are arrested by soldiers. How dare you repay our master's kindness by stealing his cup. Who, us? No! We're innocent! If you find this cup of yours with our things, then go ahead and kill the one who stole it and the rest of us will be your slaves. One by one the soldiers check the bags, coming to Benjamin last. There the cup is found. The brothers are devastated.

You see what Joseph is doing with this test: before they got rid of the father's most loved son to make (or so they thought) their own lives better. Now the current most loved son's apparent sin has put all of their lives in jeopardy. What will they do? Will they throw the father's beloved son under the bus to save themselves? Or have they learned their lesson? Have they changed? Will they sacrifice themselves to save their brother's life and their father from further anguish?

Having been escorted back to Joseph's estate, he confronts them for their treachery. The man who did this will be my slave, he says. Again it's Judah who speaks up. No, we'll all be your slaves! He can't bear the thought of returning to his father without Benjamin. Joseph says no, that wouldn't be right. Only the guilty one will be my slave. Once more it's Judah: No sir, please. My father once lost his most loved son. It will bring him to his grave if it happens again. Take me in my brother's place. Take me and let him go free.

This is the moment of the big reveal that we heard about in today's reading. Joseph now knows that they have changed. He has his Egyptian servants sent out so that he can deal with his brothers in private. I am Joseph, he tells them. Is my father still alive? They are startled to hear this Egyptian lord speaking in fluent Hebrew. But even more startling to them – and deathly frightening – is *what* he says. Joseph, the brother we mistreated and sold. Joseph, the brother we told our father was dead, indeed, the brother we thought to be long since dead: here, before them, in the flesh, with the power to pay them back in full and more for what they had done to him.

It's easy to see the connection between this revealing of the hidden savior and the revelation of the Lord Jesus to his disciples on the evening of the day of his resurrection. They were behind locked doors, in fear of their lives. And suddenly standing before them is the man they had called Lord and Master, the man they said they would stand with to the very end even if it meant their deaths, the man they all abandoned and denied when the heat was on, the man they all lost faith in when he died on the cross and never expected to see alive again.

Both Joseph and Jesus answer their fears with words of peace and forgiveness. Both Joseph and Jesus assure their hearers with the truth that this was God's doing, not yours. He used your evil for good, for the salvation of many. And now I've prepared a place for you in my kingdom. I will take care of you and your families there.

We see both Joseph and Jesus fully revealing in their actions the Christian virtues Jesus speaks of in today's Gospel: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. For so doing you show yourselves to be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. And we see both Joseph and Jesus in their big reveals changing the people they are dealing with by their actions that show forth divine love. We too have been changed by this love of God in Christ Jesus. For his sake he has forgiven our sins, filled us with his Spirit, and made us his own holy children. Therefore may we in our lives also show forth these virtues of divine love. And so through us may the Lord Jesus make his big reveal of God's love for the world. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!