

I. Set Up: Over the years, we've taken different approaches during the four weeks leading up to Christmas. We've looked at the Gospel accounts of Christ's birth, explored major themes – like the Incarnation or Virgin Birth. We've explored the theology behind the most popular Christmas hymns and looked at Old Testament prophecies about the arrival of the Messiah. This year we are looking at four different characters – Abraham, Joseph, Mary and Simeon and Anna, doing so more of an Advent vibe than a Christmas one – that is, focusing more on waiting than of the party. Today we will be in Genesis and Mike will be reflecting on Joseph.

## II. Intro

A. Greetings to those watching at Vernon Hills, The :01, Highland Park and Crossroads. For many of you this is the first time seeing the Advent stage design here at Lake Forest. Eighteen Christ Church artists worked on this. Each panel is made of electrical tape and theater gels, and backlit to create the effect of a stained-glass window. Thanks to all the artists who worked to introduce more depth and beauty for our Advent season.

B. We've been focusing on Advent this year – the four-week run up to Christmas. And we're trying to be old school about this, which means, the vibe isn't "Merry Christmas." We are not skipping right to the happy – to the office party, egg nogg, year-end bonus festive energy. We're not jumping to "Merry Christmas." We're slow-walking through the season in an effort to capture what it was like for a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew to be waiting (and waiting, and waiting) for the Messiah to show up.

1. As you know, their great, great, great, great, great, great ancestor, Abraham had entered into a special deal with God. He'd agreed to leave his home and follow God. And in exchange, God had promised land and descendants and to bless the whole world by sending The One who would defeat evil and re-establish God's rule – sending this person through the Jews. But time had marched on and it hadn't happened. And so they were waiting. (That is part of what Advent is about).

2. The deal between God and Abraham had been updated a few times – covenants had been made with Moses and David, and New Covenant announced by Jeremiah. And additional descriptions of the Messiah had been given – prophecies noting that the Promised One (the Messiah, the Christ) would be in the blood line of David and born in Bethlehem, to a virgin. Other details about his life and death had been made by the Old Testament prophets.

3. And there had been a season when it looked like God was keeping his promise. Back when David and Solomon were king. The Jews had become a superpower. They had lots of money and a mighty military. It had been easy to believe they were God's special people. But then everything fell apart, and they'd been overrun. First by the Assyrians. Then the Babylonians. Then the Persians. Then the Greeks. At the moment, it was the Romans. They were living in the land God had promised, but they were not in charge. The Romans were. And it was bad.

a) There was no such thing as human rights. There was no such thing as due process. There was no universal education or free markets. There was no social security.

b) One of the reasons Tom Holland took a step towards faith a few years ago was that he realized that as fascinated as he was by the Romans, he was horrified by much of what they did. For instance, he didn't think Caesar killing a million Gauls was a good thing. He realized he had bought into the changes Jesus had made – like humility and human rights.

c) In Kyle Harper's, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality* (a 2013 Harvard Press book), he writes about the first sexual revolution in the 60s. Not the 1960s - with the pill and Woodstock and free love – but in the 60s, as Christianity challenged the assumption that a Roman man could have sex with anyone he wanted to if they had less social status than he did. Women had no rights. Slaves had to rights. And there was nothing sacred about sex or marriage. Those ideas come as Christianity spread.

4. Perhaps the easiest way to note how unthinkable bad things were for the Jews is to note that when Herod – who had had his wife and own children killed because he worried that they threatened his power - heard that a king was being born among the Jews, he had all the Jewish boy babies under the age of two in Bethlehem to be killed.

a) I was listening to an interview with Peter Williams – the Cambridge scholar who we have had here at a Lakelight event – answering questions from those who claim that the Nativity story doesn't hold up. People argue that there are differences between the Matthew and Luke accounts, and otherwise challenge the historical viability of the birth narratives. One of the charges leveled against the story is that there is no extra-biblical account of the slaughter of the innocents. He casually dismissed this, noting for starters that Bethlehem was small at the time. So, it was probably only 20 or so kids. But mostly noting, it didn't get written down because this kind of thing happened a lot. Herod had people killed and tortured. Including his own wife and two of his sons.

5. That was life then. The Jews were tired of it. They wanted their Messiah – who they thought would be like David (they missed the prophetic line about him being a suffering servant – but that's a different sermon).

C. We are doing Advent – trying to capture some of the anxiety and confusion of the Jews living in the run up to the birth of Christ. We are trying to capture some of exhaustion of the long, long wait. “God, where are you? When are you going to show up?” And we are doing so because there is a lot of waiting in the Christian life. Many of you are asking this question yourself right now. “God, when are you going to answer my prayer?”

D. This year during Advent, we're looking for insights about how we should think and live from various biblical figures. Today it's Joseph. Not the Joseph of Mary and Joseph. We're looking at the Joseph of Genesis fame. The one born to Rachel – the wife Jacob loved. The one who had the coat of many colors to. The one who was sold into slavery by his brothers. The one who climbed up the ranks of slaves in Potiphar's house, before Potiphar's wife got mad when he rebuffed her advances and had him thrown into prison. The one who spent years in prison before being elevated by Pharaoh to the second highest office in the land.

E. This Joseph had a life that was full of unfair setbacks, but he rises above them. How does he do it? Grit? Natural talent? Dumb luck. God’s help? All of the above?

F. We pick up in Genesis 50.

1. Genesis 1-11 sets up the rest of the Bible. It talks about Creation, the Fall and the promise. If the Bible was a movie and you walked in two minutes late, you would not understand what was going on. Genesis 1-11 sets it all up.

2. Genesis 12-25 is about Abraham – it starts with the deal I spoke of and then follows his life as God sets things up. We then get two chapters on Isaac before we get 10 on Jacob and then 23 on Joseph. (He is the main human character in Genesis).

3. I’m going to start reading in Genesis 50:12. Verses 1-11 of that chapter deal with Jacob’s death.

III. **Gen. 50:12: So Jacob’s sons did as he had commanded them: They carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre, which Abraham had bought along with the field as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite. After burying his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, together with his brothers and all the others who had gone with him to bury his father.**

IV. **When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?”** Joseph’s brothers – who had sold him into slavery and then told their father that he’d been eaten by a wild animal – they were worried that Joseph had only been playing nice for his father. And now that their father (Jacob) had died, Joseph would exact his revenge.

V. **V16: So they sent word to Joseph, saying, “Your father left these instructions before he died: ‘This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.’ Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.” When their message came to him, Joseph wept.** When Joseph gets the note from his brothers saying, “Dad says, be nice to us.” He weeps because he could see how bad things still were. He had forgiven them, but things were still broken.

VI. **V18: His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. “We are your slaves,” they said. But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. (Remember, he had become Pharaoh’s number two after interpreting Pharaoh’s dream. And in that place he’d been able to stock pile food for the famine). So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.**

VII. We can learn from Joseph. He did a lot of waiting and it seems to have served him well. There are three things to see – three ways he emerged from his trials better not bitter.<sup>1</sup> He goes into them a bit of a jerk. He comes out a different man, one who:

A. Leaves the righting of wrongs to God.

- B. Adopts God’s perspective on things.
- C. And one who repays evil with forgiveness and kindness.

VIII. Number One: Joseph doesn’t play God. He left the righting of wrongs to God.

A. Look, putting ourselves in the place of God is the root of all kinds of problems. This is where things initially went wrong. It’s what we read about back in Genesis 3, where Adam and Eve want to be like God. They took upon themselves that which was reserved for God. We do it as well. We think we know best. We become our own moral authority. We assume we know better than the Word of God.

1. One of the ways we do this is by seeking to get even or to hold a grudge. Joseph does not. He forgives. He says, “Of course I forgive you. Am I in the place of God?”
2. In Romans 12 we are told, “Vengeance is mine says the Lord.” We might read this as God saying, “Stay out of my chair.” When we sit in judgement of others we are playing God. Only God has right to sit in judgement. Only God has the knowledge to judge. We don’t know what they deserve. We deserve to be judged.
3. And only God has power to sit in judgment without being corrupted. Judging others – treating them harshly – shapes us. It misshapes us. Our heart becomes darker, harder and colder. We become self-centered. What we do shapes us.
4. And by repaying evil for evil, we become evil. This is the plot line for *The Lord of the Rings*. The only way to deal with the ring of power is to get rid of it. If you take the ring of power from the Dark Lord, you become the Dark Lord. The only way forward is to throw ring it the fire.
5. The fastest way to become like Satan is to try to become like God. And the fastest way to become like God is to refuse to be God. (read Milton)

- B. The first thing Joseph does right is he refuses to sit in judgment of his brothers.

IX. Point Number Two: Joseph takes God’s view (v20)

A. If you are hiking and you get lost in a valley, the first thing you need to do is get out of the valley so you can get some perspective. The view from on high helps.

B. In a similar way, in order to better understand our life, we need the view from on high. We need God’s view. This is what Joseph adopts.

C. Optimists can see the good. They see trouble as an anomaly. Pessimists do the opposite. They see bad everywhere and think trouble is the norm. Most of us are either one or the other. But Joseph held them together. He sees both. He doesn’t deny the bad. He doesn’t deny the evil. He doesn’t call evil good. He says, “you meant it for evil.” And it hurt. But God is bigger than that.

D. Now, I just want to say, trying to wrap your mind around this is vexing. If you’ve not gone down this rabbit hole, be forewarned – you are not going to be able to tease this out. We are not God.

E. For example: think of Jacob. He lies to his family and his life blows up. He has to flee. Many bad things happen. But, he meets Rachel – the love of his life – and they have children through whom Jesus descends!

F. So, was his sin part of God’s plan?” No. But, God is big enough to pull off his plan. We get a bit of that here. Joseph says to his brothers, “You intended to hurt me and you did. And that hurt was real. But, I can forgive because you can’t mess up my life. You meant it for evil, and it was, and it hurt. But God is bigger than that.” This is very freeing!

G. I heard Tim Keller tell a story about this. It was on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Redeemer – or something like that.<sup>2</sup> And he asked, “Do you know why you are here?” And then he relates that some years ago he and his wife planted Redeemer because:

1. He had taken a certain class from a certain professor, who had persuaded him to become a Presbyterian (Church of America). And that this professor was teaching the class because at the last minute he had been able to get into the country, because he had been granted a travel visa. And that he had been granted a travel visa because a student in the school had connections in DC, because his dad was President of the United States (his name was Mike Ford, he was the son of Gerry Ford). And the reason Gerry Ford was president was because Nixon had resigned. And Nixon had resigned because of Watergate. And – and he played this out a bit further, but basically he said: Watergate happened for you.

2. Now, he didn’t really think that, but he said – we have to trust that God has control of these variables and that his plans are going to be accomplished, and not play God ourselves. We need to forgive like Joseph forgives, and we need to adopt God’s perspective.

X. Point Number Three: Point 1 – Joseph doesn’t play God. Point 2 – He takes hold of God’s perspective. And now, point 3 - Joseph images God’s love. In verse 21, Joseph tells his brothers – who have wronged him, “Don’t be afraid I will provide for you and your children.” He is loving his enemies.

A. The years of trials changed Joseph. They gave him the opportunity – which he took. Many do not. Many do not grow better they grow more bitter. He did not. But his suffering helped facilitate a more honest look at his life. He started to see his blind spots. He realized he had been a jerk. He was humbled by all of this – it shaped him in ways which allowed him to forgive his enemies and even be kind to them.

B. Some of you have a problem with forgiveness. It seems a bridge too far. I get that. And so I am going to go right at it.

1. One of my Sabbatical goals is to map out the next five years of preaching. There are books I have not preached yet. I want to preach through Revelation and Romans and to take a deep dive into forgiveness. But I already know some of you will check out.

C. So – what can we learn from Joseph as we take a next step into Advent. We learn that the waiting can be just what we need. The waiting he endured shaped him in ways so that: He left the righting of wrongs to God; He adopted God’s perspective on things; and he not only repaid evil with forgiveness, but also with practical affection.

XI. OK, there is one more thing here as I wrap up. I said there were three things, but there are four – and the fourth is big. We look to Joseph to help us walk through Advent, but also because he is a sign pointing to Christ.

A. I want to be sure you realize that just as the prophets, priests and kings pointed ahead to Jesus – the ultimate prophet, our High Priest and the King of Kings. All kind of other things also point to Jesus.

B. Jesus is the true and better Adam who passed the test in the garden and whose obedience is imputed to us.

C. Jesus is the true and better Abel who, though innocently slain, has blood now that cries out, not for our condemnation, but for acquittal.

D. Jesus is the true and better Abraham who answered the call of God to leave all the comfortable and familiar and go out into the void not knowing wither he went to create a new people of God.

E. Jesus is the true and better Isaac who was not just offered up by his father on the mount but was truly sacrificed for us. And when God said to Abraham, “Now I know you love me because you did not withhold your son, your only son whom you love from me,” now we can look at God taking his son up the mountain and sacrificing him and say, “Now we know that you love us because you did not withhold your son, your only son, whom you love from us.”

F. Jesus is the true and better Jacob who wrestled and took the blow of justice we deserved, so we, like Jacob, only receive the wounds of grace to wake us up and discipline us.

G. Jesus is the true and better Joseph who, at the right hand of the king, forgives those who betrayed and sold him and uses his new power to save them.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Tim Keller for his outline of this passage. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcNIyJZ2bbU>

<sup>2</sup> <https://gospelinlife.com/series/the-gospel-according-to-joseph/> 30 min in from left