

Epiphany 7C, 2/20/2022

I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?

Epiphany, our church season of signs and wonders, is drawing to a close. Next Sunday we will hear the story of the Transfiguration, and the following Wednesday will be Ash Wednesday. Today, we have Joseph revealed to his brothers. They are in deep need due to a famine, and have just experienced an epiphany, seeing that the despised brother they betrayed by selling him into slavery years and years before is now the person in authority who can save them. When Joseph asks if his father is still alive, they are so dismayed that they cannot answer.

I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?

Before revealing himself to his brothers by telling them that he is Joseph, he sent everyone else out of the room. He had not been Joseph for many years. He had been given an Egyptian name when Pharaoh made him second in command. He was now Zephenath-Paneah, greatly feared and respected. His intellect and skill interpreting dreams had led to his rise from a slave to this position.

We may not have changed identities in the dramatic way that Joseph did, from favored son to slave to prisoner to second-in-command of a kingdom, but I bet you have had different identities. We all play different roles. At St. David's I'm Pastor Elizabeth, but with my parents I was always their baby daughter, and to my siblings, even though we are all now well into middle age, I am still the baby and they try to protect of me. I'm Pastor Elizabeth but I'm also Aunt Biz and Gary's wife. I'm invested in my identity as The Rector Of Saint David's, and I am also a writer with an MFA and I'm a lung cancer survivor.

I'm not Mom or Grandma and never will be, but many of you are, or Dad or Poppa. Sometimes one identity obscures others. Sometimes kids take a long time before they see their parents as people other than their parents. Sometimes people think that about pastors and teachers, too. I once encountered a preschool child and his mother at the grocery store, and the kid was very confused that I was there instead of the church. Or when I was in high school and briefly worked at McDonalds, my young nephews got upset when their parents went to pick me up for church at my parents' house. "She lives at McDonald's," they protested.

Very rarely, when I am in Phoenix, someone calls me Betsy. If they call me Betsy I know that they knew me before I was in high school and began insisting that people use my full name. But did I ever stop being Betsy? Am I still Betsy Marshall, along with Pastor Elizabeth and Aunt Biz and Mrs. Felicetti and Elizabeth Felicetti Writer?

Who knows how long it had been since Joseph had spoken the name his father had given him that day when he sent all of his underlings out of the room so that he was left alone with his brothers, the ten who had betrayed him as well as his beloved full brother, Benjamin. When Joseph had first seen Benjamin in Egypt he had to leave the room and weep, but then washed his face and returned. When he served them dinner he gave five times as much to Benjamin as the rest of them. He had schemed to keep Benjamin with him in Egypt and send the others away

with food, but they begged him not to for the sake of their old father. That's when he sent everyone else out of the room and cried loudly.

When Joseph had transformed into Zephenath-Paneah, he had surely given up on ever seeing his father again. But now, hearing about how grief-stricken the old man will be if they don't return with Benjamin, he says, I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?

Claiming his identity as a detested younger brother and beloved son in a large clan enables him to become vulnerable, to ask whether his father is still alive. When he became Zephenath-Paneah he probably stuffed Joseph as far down in his body as he could. Forget Father, he probably told himself back then. Try to forget Benjamin. Now you have all this power. Forget Joseph.

Most of us have multiple identities. Back when I was actively fighting cancer, I asked you all not to mention it on Sunday morning in the greeting line because it was hard to me to serve as Pastor Elizabeth who preaches, celebrates the Eucharist, and makes the services run on time when I was also Elizabeth with Cancer. But when I was in a hospital robe in the ICU with all kinds of tubes sticking out of me, no one called me Pastor Elizabeth. When I was Just Elizabeth, alone in the hospital during a pandemic, I could cry. Claiming that identity made it easier for me to cry.

Claiming his birth name enabled Joseph to ask what was on his heart. Is my father still alive?

His father was still alive, so Joseph immediately sent for him, with twenty donkeys piled with gifts and sustenance for his journey. When the donkeys approached, and Jacob learned that Joseph was still alive he went to him right away. Along the way God called to him in a dream: Jacob, Jacob. He answered, *hineni*. Here I am. God said not to be afraid to go to Egypt, and that when Jacob died, his beloved son Joseph would be the one to close his eyes.

All of that came from Joseph claiming his name, asking the question that was most on his heart. I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?

We are all children of God, as I say in the final blessing that I have been using these past weeks: "live simply, humbly, and joyfully, for you are a child of God." Do you claim that identity as a child of God? When you embrace that identity, or another identity that you may be suppressing, what wonderful things might open up for you?