

Trinity United Methodist Church

August 16, 2020

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Scripture: Genesis 39:1-6a and Genesis 39:20-23 (NIV)

Genesis 39:1-6a: **1** Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there. **2** The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. **3** When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did, **4** Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. **5** From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. **6a** So Potiphar left everything he had in Joseph's care;

Genesis 39:20-23: **20** Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined. But while Joseph was there in the prison, **21** the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. **22** So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. **23** The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

Sermon

We are walking through the story of Joseph in three weeks. The story of Joseph takes 13 chapters in the Old Testament. And so the scripture readings and my sharing is selected. It's not the whole story, but it's one of the most amazing stories in the scripture, and it certainly takes some time to tell.

So last week we talked about dysfunctional families. We talked about how Esau tried to kill his brother, Jacob. Their parents played favorites with the kids, and so Jacob ends up playing favorites with his kid, Joseph, who his brothers then wanted to kill, but they ended up selling him into slavery in Egypt. A real tragedy of a story. And at this point, the brothers have sold him and they've convinced their father that he's dead, because they took his special robe and dipped it in animal blood and shredded it and

said, “Is this his robe?” So Dad thinks Joseph is no more, where in reality he’s a slave, now in Potiphar’s house.

Joseph clearly keeps his faith through the betrayal of his brothers, through almost losing his life to his brothers. And even though he’s enslaved in a foreign land, he maintains his faith in the one true God, Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Not an easy thing to do, with the crises that he faced. But the Lord honored it, because the Lord was with him. Fascinating scripture – it says that the Lord was with him so that he *prospered*. He’s in slavery, but he prospered. When the master saw that the Lord was with him and gave him success in everything, he put him in charge of everything. Joseph had favor in the eyes of Potiphar. And so even though he’s descending into slavery, God is with him through that hard time and using his life and revealing himself through Joseph.

It even says in the scripture that both the house of Potiphar and the field of Potiphar were blessed because of Joseph. So Potiphar is prospering, and he knows that this guy has a lot to do with it. He’s gifted as an administrator, as a leader, and everything is maintained in order. All the crops, everything is growing well.

But he’s a slave. Not good.

And so, one of the things that we have to hold on to here is: God is up to something. Even when we can’t see it, God is up to something, bringing blessings in the background. Giving favor. So stay faithful regardless of your circumstances. Somehow in this country we think it’s all going to be prosperity and advancement and climbing the social and economic ladders. And we don’t tend to think that life’s going to be difficult. But it *is* difficult.

So the profound lesson here is, for Joseph, he didn’t let it get to him. Don’t judge your relationship with God by your circumstances. I’ve been there, where bad things tend to happen, and I start thinking, well, God doesn’t love me, or God’s got something against me, or things aren’t going well, and so things are hard. My wife and I went through a season of infertility, where we really felt like God had forgotten us. God did not forget us at all, but it felt like it, and those are hard times. We have three children now. And so God will bring you through them. So don’t judge your relationship with God by your circumstances. Life is full of difficulties.

And Joseph, as bad as it is, enslaved—it gets worse. The plot thickens. So he’s serving Potiphar faithfully. And Potiphar’s wife—it’s not in the text, but it’s in between—has an eye for him. And she’s an aggressive woman, and she’s a persistent woman. And it says she propositioned him, and Joseph says no, but she continued. And Joseph says to her, “My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you’re his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?” Notice the language.

Joseph doesn't say "sin against Potiphar." He says, "how could I sin against *God*?" Here is a man who is very aware that God is ruling over and is with him. And so Joseph wants to be found faithful, and he refuses.

But Potiphar's wife was persistent and aggressive. Day after day she approached him and pursued him, and then one day she caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me." He ran. He left his cloak in her hand.

So how's your relationship with God when temptation comes? Are you like Joseph? Get out of Dodge as quick as you can? Do you have a sense of if you say "yes" to temptation you would be doing a wicked thing against God? Or do we just kind of think, "well, what are the consequences for *me*?" We need to learn from Joseph. He's a man who is very aware of the presence of God, and he didn't want to live a life against God.

And so, it gets worse. Potiphar's wife has his cloak, having tried to entice him into an adulterous relationship.

Now listen, I want to pause here and just say this. I think people who are in the church would probably all react very negatively if somebody tried to convince you, "Adultery's not *that* bad. I mean, come on, you know? You've got to live a little. There's worse things." I think we'd all be like, "Wait! No, no, no." But have you ever noticed that if you put that to music, people will listen to it? Have you ever noticed that if you put it on the television or other places, people are drawn to it?

Adultery, we know from the scriptures—it's one of the Ten Commandments that we're not to commit adultery. But you listen to the music, and it's there, and it's glamorized, and it's glorified. You watch television, and sometimes it's lifted up as a good thing. Now, I have no problem with realism. This is a realistic story, and some of you have probably watched the musical, *Hamilton*. My wife and daughter have watched it, pretty sure it's 320 times at this point. And they got to see it in New York as well. Here's a great story, and you see the adulterous affair in that story being told accurately. It's horrific, and it's devastating. I have no problem telling that. But I have a problem when it's glorified and lifted up. And our culture lifts it up.

Let's be very honest: We live in a hypersexualized world, where chaos in that area of life is reigning, it seems. Pornography has flooded the culture. The commodification of sex, where it's no longer about love and family, but it's about money—this is a sickening twist on the good thing that God gave us that we might be blessed. And that's what the enemy always does: He takes a good thing that God has given us and he twists it, he distorts it and brings it down.

There is an epidemic, I would say, having worked with college students, having lived life in this. If you look at the numbers of pornography in our world, there is an explosion. Monetarily, the proliferation of it. Parents, grandparents—it's scary. You need to be aware. There's great movements against this called Fight The New Drug and Covenant Eyes, other places like that. There's always going to be a healthy curiosity about sex, God's good gift to humanity. But if we let the world teach us, we'll pay a very, very high price.

So, note, when temptation came, Joseph ran. When adultery was proposed, Joseph ran. We can learn from that. And I would suggest that if you're struggling in that area in any way, don't just run away. Certainly run to God, but find a friend. Find a pastor. Find somebody that you can find some strength and get some support there. We all need help from a brother, from a sister.

So, here's where it gets worse. Potiphar's wife holds on to his cloak, and when her husband comes in, she says, "He tried to rape me." She falsely accuses him, saying that his intention was to take advantage of her. And so for the second time in Joseph's short life, he's pleading for his life about a false accusation. About something that he hasn't even done wrong. He's thrown into the pit by his brothers, and now he's about to be thrown into prison by Potiphar, though he is innocent.

Remember that life lesson? Don't judge your relationship with God merely by your circumstances outward. Too many of us think God owes us something. If the Son of God went through life, and it says in the scripture, "learned in obedience through what he suffered," why do we think that we'll get through this life unscathed? Jesus had obstacles and opposition. He was betrayed and accused. Why do we think that our life will be easy? It's coming. Difficulties are coming for all of us. We need God and we need the church for strength and family, certainly.

The beautiful thing is that *no matter how hard life gets, God is with us through it*. That's the thing. In this country we're used to those *Avenger* movies, right? I can't even keep track of how many there are now. But those tell the story of when injustice or problems come, here comes Thor with his hammer and he settles it, right? And we kind of want our God to be like that. "Bring your hammer, God, and take care of my enemies. Take care of this situation. Fix it." But the God who created the heavens and the earth usually doesn't work like that. Usually He's with you through it. He solves the problem of evil and suffering...by *suffering*, and dying, and then rising from the dead. He's not Thor with a hammer. He's the loving, awesome Son of God, who gives His life on our behalf. And so He's with us through it.

He says in Isaiah, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have summoned you by name. You are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you. When you

pass through the rivers they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned. The flames will not set you ablaze, for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel.” That’s how our God is different. *He’s with us through it.* I have not experienced, generally, God just tapping things and problems disappearing. But He will be with you through it.

So I wonder if you can identify at all with Joseph. Have you ever been falsely accused? I suspect nobody in this congregation has been trafficked into another country, betrayed and thrown into a pit and sold. But can you identify with being falsely accused? An incredibly painful thing if it’s happened to you, where you oftentimes come to this point where it’s your word against somebody else’s word. Where you certainly have to call on God and ask for God to vindicate you.

Joseph isn’t the only one that’s gone to prison falsely. Even in our own country, we have found that we have put many innocent men and women in prison. In our own country, we’ve actually found out that we have executed innocent people. DNA tests later on, after the execution, find that it was the wrong guy. So we should question capital punishment for that reason alone.

There’s a story that I heard a couple of years ago about Jameel McGee, who was framed by a police officer who had gone crooked, Andrew Collins. Jameel spent three years of a ten-year sentence in jail on false charges that Andrew Collins later said he made up. He felt pressure to get another arrest, to get his reputation higher. So it went really bad. Jameel, while he was in prison, said he made up his mind that when we got out he was going to harm the officer. But then he found out he was going to be a father, and he said something changed in him. And during his three years of incarceration, though he was innocent, he started reading the Bible. And as he read the Bible, he yielded his life to Christ. And he says all this hurt and bitterness, “I’ve given it all away to Christ.”

I don’t know if you’ve seen the stories of people coming out of prison, sometimes a lot longer than three years. What amazes me in so many of these cases is, they’re not bitter. They’re not full of hate and revenge. God meets us in our losses, in our pain.

The story has actually been put on video. I’ll post it to the Trinity Facebook page. One of the most amazing, redemptive stories that lines up with Joseph’s story as well.

So Joseph is now in prison, and it says even there, while he’s in prison, the Lord was with him. Again, not snapping his fingers getting him out, but He’s with him through the hard time. And the Lord showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden, so that the prison warden put Joseph in charge of all those he held in the prison, and he was made responsible for everything done in the prison. So even in jail, Joseph has God’s favor, and the warden trusts him. God is up to something always,

bringing blessings in the background, giving favor. We, God's people, are to stay faithful regardless of our circumstances.

I don't know if you all have heard the old story of the guy who was shipwrecked. He's on the island in despair, barely clinging to his life. So he starts to pull things together and find some food in his desperation. He's living on water and coconuts. Then he gets resourceful in prayer and finding some things. Finally he starts building a little hut, some shelter from the sun and the elements. And so he's got a hut and he's kind of proud of himself, and he continues to call on God for help. He's on the other side of the island when a storm comes over quickly and lightning strikes. As he gets back to the other side of the island, his little hut, his shelter, is on fire. And he desperately tries to get water from the ocean to put it out, unsuccessfully, and he's at the end of himself, yelling out to God: "It's bad enough that I'm shipwrecked! I just needed a little hut, and now I have nothing! Why are you doing this to me?" And for the next day or so he just stewed. Then late the next day, in the distance, he saw a boat. And the boat came and the boat rescued him. And in his excitement he cried out, "How did you know I was here?" And they said, "Well, we saw your signal fire. That was a great idea, by the way." Then he had to take everything back.

God is working in ways that we cannot see, behind the scenes. Don't judge your relationship with God by your outward circumstances. If it's clear cause and effect – *I robbed a bank, now I'm in jail* – and you're mad at God for that; hey, that's cause and effect. You did that to you, right? Repent! Don't rob banks any more.

But so many times things come about and we don't understand it, and there's mystery. Don't judge your relationship with God by the outward circumstances.

And so, in prison, something fascinating happens. The cupbearer to Pharaoh and the baker to Pharaoh are thrown in prison with Joseph. And he's in charge down there, so he's caring for them. They both have a dream on the same night, and Joseph sees them dejected and asks what's going on. And they said, "we both had dreams and we don't understand them." And Joseph says to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams." Again, a man of God, in touch with God, who knows God will reveal things. And so the cupbearer tells his story. "In my dream there were three branches and a vine of grapes came and grew quickly. And then I squeeze the grapes and put them in a cup and gave it to Pharaoh." And Joseph said, "The dream means that in three days—three branches—you'll be restored, and you'll again be the cupbearer to Pharaoh." And then Joseph tells him, "When you get there, don't forget me, because I'm here even though I'm innocent. Tell Pharaoh about me." But the cupbearer forgets him.

And then the baker says, “Hey, well, tell me my dream too. I was baking bread for Pharaoh, and I had three baskets. And one was on my head and I was carrying two, and the birds came and ate the bread out of the basket that was on my head.” And Joseph said, “Your dream means this: Three days and you will be lifted up. But Pharaoh will kill you, and the birds will eat your flesh.” He wished he didn’t ask, right?

And so it comes to pass just as Joseph interpreted the dreams, but the cupbearer forgets him. And then two years go by, and Pharaoh has these haunting dreams. And Pharaoh’s dreams are this: Pharaoh sees seven sleek, fat cows coming up out of the Nile River, and then they start grazing on the reeds. And then out of the river come seven ugly, gaunt, thin cows, and they come up on the banks and they eat the seven fat cows. And even though they’ve eaten them, they still look skinny and gaunt. And then Pharaoh has another dream. Some wheat grows up with seven grains, and they look fresh and healthy. And then on the stalk, seven other grains that look wasted away and withered come, and they eat the healthy grains, and they look no better for it. And Pharaoh asks, “Can anybody tell me what these dreams mean?” And he gathers all his wise men and magicians and everybody, but nobody can tell him. And the cupbearer is hearing all of this, and the cupbearer says, “Pharaoh, I forgot. Forgive me. There is this Hebrew down in the dungeon where you sent me when you were angry with me. And he interpreted my dream, and he interpreted the baker’s dream exactly.” Pharaoh said, “Bring him to me.”

And so Joseph cleans up a bit and he presents himself to Pharaoh and hears the dreams. And Pharaoh asks him first: “I had a dream and no one can interpret it, but I’ve heard it said of you that when you hear a dream, *you* can interpret it.” And Joseph says, “I cannot do it, but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.” Do you see his faith again? It’s not him, but God working *through* him.

And so Pharaoh tells him the dream, and Joseph interprets it well. Seven years of prosperity and harvest and wonderful crops—that’s the seven healthy cows and the seven healthy grains of wheat. But then seven years of famine and drought will follow it, and it will be so bad you won’t even remember the seven good years. And Joseph not only interprets the dream, but he says, “You need to act. You need to put somebody in charge so that during these seven years of prosperity and harvest and growth, you set aside a fifth of all the grain that you grow, 20 percent, and store it in all the cities, so that when those seven years come, you will have enough.”

And Pharaoh? He’s impressed. He’s really impressed. So Pharaoh says, “Can we find anyone like this man? One in whom is the Spirit of God? Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you.”

Wow. So from the pit to enslavement to the dungeon to the second highest in Egypt. God is up to something *always*. God is bringing blessings in the background. And so we can't just judge our lives by what's happening. God is at work. Stay faithful regardless of your circumstances.

Now, probably none of us are going to be put in quite the same situation as Joseph and raised up to second in command of the nation. But, there could be somebody here. I don't know. But here's the principle that you've got to hold on to: *God is up to something in your lives. God has a plan for the planet, and you are a part of it. You are not excluded. You are needed.* God is drawing men, women, boys, girls to Himself, that they might be changed in His presence, that they might know His truth and His goodness. Know His love and His mercy, and they might be agents of the kingdom. Agents for God, ambassadors for Christ.

And so, you probably have some hard times coming. I've probably got some hard times coming. But if we prepare ourselves that when that comes, I'm going to stay faithful like Joseph. I'm going to walk through it. I'm going to call on my sisters, my brothers, for prayer. But I'm going to be faithful through it and not judge my relationship with God by outward circumstances. **God is up to something in your lives. He's bringing blessings in the background, and He's wanting to use your life. So be available.** Amen? Amen.

Closing Prayer

Jesus, we do call on you. You are the One who has defeated death, and You are at the right hand of the Father. Jesus, there are so many distractions in this world, and our eyes aren't always fixed on You. But please help us to fix our eyes on you, Jesus. You are the author and perfecter of faith. And so work in us. Tune us in to the whispers of Your Spirit, and let Your redeeming work be effective in our lives, that we can then offer redemption to neighbors, to family, to friends, to strangers. Bring Your kingdom, Jesus, and use all of us to that end. We pray for Your glory and in Your Holy Name. Amen.