

*Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?"*

---

The sordid saga of Joseph and his brothers begins in the 37<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis with the reading we heard last weekend: there we saw Joseph as a seventeen-year old spoiled brat whose most favorite thing in the world is to report back to daddy whenever his shepherd brothers screw up! So Joseph's brothers are not very fond of him. In fact the Bible uses a word that most of us who are parents forbid our kids to use. It says his brothers "hated" him. In fact, that they hated him enough to want to kill him, but in the end settled for throwing him into a pit and then selling him off as a slave to some foreigners. If it happened today an Amber Alert would be issued within a few hours and Anderson Cooper would do a special investigative report on the family and the chances of ever seeing Joseph alive again would be slim. This is no fairy tale; it is every parent's worst nightmare.

So that is where we left Joseph last weekend: sold to those Midianite traders for twenty pieces of silver. (Genesis 37:28). Briefly let me fill you in on what happens between then and today's Old Testament reading. The brothers return home and tell their father that a wild animal has killed their brother. As evidence of Joseph's death, in a world before DNA testing, they offer Jacob that "amazing technicolor dreamcoat" smeared in blood. Jacob is a mess, as any parent who loses a child naturally would be. Except that in this case, it is all an elaborate and horrible lie.

The narrator takes us back to Egypt, where Joseph has been sold to a man named Potiphar, a captain in Pharaoh's guard. The two get along quite well. The narrator tells us that Joseph was "handsome and good-looking." (Genesis 39:6b) To be honest I am not certain what the difference is between "handsome" and "good looking"—it sounds kind of redundant to me—but maybe that's the point.

Apparently, things aren't going very well between Mr. and Mrs. Potiphar. So that's not exactly the right time to have a young good-looking assistant move into your home. One day after Joseph comes out of the shower, Mrs. Potiphar chases him around the house. He has nothing on but a towel but he insists that he isn't interested in her. Furious, she grabs the towel. Which leaves him...well, are you still with me here? He runs outside and *she* accuses *him* of sexually assaulting *her*. As readers we know what has really happened. (Or at least we know the official story that the narrator has given us. I remember when the film *Disclosure* came out in 1994 and you'd get into these discussions about that film and it became clear to me that men and women were seeing a very different film, and with varying degrees of culpability assigned to the characters played by Demi Moore and Michael Douglas. But I digress...the point is simply that we cannot know "objectively" what transpired between Mrs. Potiphar and Joseph; all we can say for sure is that the narrator sees him as the innocent party.) Either way, this is a he said/she said case and he's a foreigner without a green card and she is, well, she's Mrs. Potiphar. Joseph ends up in jail for a crime he apparently didn't commit.

His cellmates turn out to be the cupbearer and baker of the Pharaoh. They got put in jail because one night Pharaoh got drunk and angry with them. As with Joseph the suggestion implicit in these stories is that justice is not always served, and especially when the powerful and the powerless cross paths and bad stuff happens and the powerless get a public defender while the powerful hire the best advocate

money can buy...well, it's nothing new when the powerless are the ones who end up in prison. Anyway, I'm sure you all saw it coming: both of these other prisoners have these strange dreams. And Joseph, the dreamer, interprets them. The meaning of the dreams is that the baker will get the death penalty and the cupbearer will get out of jail. Sure enough those two things happen and Joe says to the cupbearer, when he is paroled: "hey, if you get the chance, put in a good word for me with Pharaoh if he's ever looking for someone who can interpret dreams." But unfortunately he completely forgets Joseph.

Two whole years pass and Joe is still in jail when the Pharaoh has this strange dream about seven fat cows and seven skinny cows and another one about seven full ears of corn and then seven skinny ears. No one seems to be able to understand what it all means. And that is when the cupbearer says, "oh yeah...I remember this guy I was in prison with...maybe he can be of some help here."

This dream interpretation stuff is easy for Joseph—and to be honest it's more about sound economic policy than Jung anyway: seven years of good crops will be followed by seven years of an economic downturn. So if Egypt is smart they will save up during the good years in order to be prepared for the lean ones. Joseph is promoted to become Secretary of Agriculture under Pharaoh to oversee that process.

Isn't this great stuff? Someone really should turn these chapters into a script and set them to music so we could see it all unfold on the stage!

In the meantime, Jacob and sons have moved on with their lives. But they have hit upon tough times back in Canaan. So Jacob sends his sons to Egypt looking for some economic relief, wondering if there is an economic stimulus package in the works coming out of Cairo...and that brings us to where we are today. *Joseph recognizes his brothers immediately.* But remember that when they last saw him he was just a kid. Now he is a successful and powerful political appointee and they simply do not recognize the man before them as their brother. If he has harbored bitter resentments toward them for all these years, now is his chance to get his pound of flesh. Now is his opportunity to have them thrown into a dark pit and left for dead and see how they like it...

But of course he doesn't do that. And what I tried to suggest last week is that the main reason he doesn't do that is that he's been able to see God at work in the events of his life—even (and especially) during the hard stretches. One of two things can happen after someone spends some time in a hole in the ground or in jail (and I think those both function as metaphors, so that at some level none of us completely escape days where our nightmares threaten to trump our dreams, and that is, I think, the point here.) If you let your nightmares win you come out embittered and blaming the world.

But if you can praise God in the midst of it all, then you can begin the process of claiming new life. Or as Andy Dufrane puts it in *The Shawshank Redemption*, "you can get busy living or get busy dying." Truly, then, I think this Joseph story is an Easter story. It is about redemption and healing and new life and just as importantly it is about trusting that God is with us in the pit or a prison cell and in the depths of our deepest fears and pain—even unto death on a cross on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

Last weekend I quoted Walter Brueggemann, who says this story is about the challenge to live our lives "between the hint of the dream, and the doxology of disclosure." That's just a fancy way of saying, "get busy living!" The Bible is no fairy tale. You can cover the entire Joseph story in two

weekends—Andrew Lloyd Weber put it all on stage and in two and a half hours you reach resolution and the happy ending of this tearful reunion we heard about today.

But the truth is that life lived one day at a time is much more complicated. Joseph spent two years in prison—I wonder what the ratio over those 730 days and nights was of dreams to nightmares. It is easy to come unglued, to be undone by the real pain and struggle and fear of our lives. The text isn't precise but it's something like at least twelve or more years that passes between that awful day in the pit and the reunion we heard about this morning. It's hard to keep faith when you aren't sure how the story will end; it's hard to live toward doxology by trusting in our dreams when fear threatens to undo us.

It is hard to praise God in all things. Most of us suffer from a kind of amnesia from time to time even on bright sunny days when there is good food on the table and everyone has their health; even then we sometimes forget to say, "thank you God." But it's even harder when the clouds come rolling in or when we are in real pain—whether physical or emotional pain or spiritual. It's hard in the pit or in a prison cell to give thanks.

Yet it goes to the heart of the Christian faith. We do have witnesses who help us to imagine what it would be like to live our lives like that. Do you remember St. Paul, sitting in a prison cell nearly two thousand years ago, hardly able to contain himself?

I thank God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now...I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel...  
(Philippians 1:3,4,12)

From prison he writes that! Or, in more recent memory, I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, or Martin Luther King, Jr., writing from Birmingham jail. Or Nelson Mandela imprisoned for twenty-seven years in South Africa. Each faced that same choice Joseph must have faced: to get busy living or to get busy dying. They chose life. They chose to see God at work in their lives, as present with them even in those prison cells. They chose doxology. You and I are invited to follow their example.

And so our summer days with the Book of Genesis draw to a close. Next weekend we'll move on to Exodus, when a new Pharaoh arose who didn't know Joseph. And that Pharaoh will let his fears, rather than his dreams, define his policies and corrupt the way he uses his power. But all that in due time. Over these past three months as we've heard these readings from the Book of Genesis, we've considered new ways that these old stories of God's relationship with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob might have something to do with us. That is the claim we make every time we read from the Bible and someone says, "the Word of the Lord" and we respond, "thanks be to God:" that these stories have everything to do with us, that there is a word of life here for us, a word of hope, a word that brings good news to our lives and to our world, and sustains us for the journey that is ours in Jesus Christ.