

“Down”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Genesis 39:1-23

September 23, 2018

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Last Sunday we heard about God’s promises to Abraham: descendants, land, and blessing. The story we’ll focus on today is about one of his descendants — his great-grandson, Joseph. To get to Joseph, we’re skipping a whole lot — twenty-five chapters of family dysfunction, treachery, misogyny, and violence. Those promises to Abraham are threatened at every turn, but they remain, somehow.

Abraham was father to Isaac and Isaac was father to Jacob and Jacob was father to twelve sons, each the patriarch of a tribe of Israel. And already we’ve left out the women, and the other sons and daughters — Hagar and Ishmael and Esau and Tamar, and their stories are fascinating and important and sacred, but they are not the story we are telling today.

Joseph was one of the sons of Jacob and his tale is one of rise and fall, ascent and descent, up and down. He is born into a charmed life, the very favorite son of his father, the son given a fancy coat, the son given his own Broadway musical. He was on top of the world, but he was kind of a little punk. He tattled on his brothers. He wasn’t particularly pleasant to be around. He had these dreams about how his whole family would end up bowing down to him and he told them to his jealous brothers, and “they hated him even more.”

The brothers get to a breaking point and they plot to kill him and throw him down into a pit and they say, “we’ll see what will become of his dreams.” Except Reuben stops them, saying that they shouldn’t kill him, they should just leave him in the pit. The other brothers strip him of his fancy coat and toss him into the pit. Then along come some Ishmaelite traders who were heading to Egypt and the brothers realize they can make a few bucks — twenty silver pieces, to be exact — off the dreamer’s life. They draw him up out of the pit and sell him into slavery, down to Egypt, to that culture of towering monuments to death.

Reuben had been plotting a rescue, but he finds that Joseph is not in the pit. In despair, he tears his clothes. The brothers take Joseph’s robe and cover it in goat’s blood and deliver it to their father. Jacob believes his beloved son has been killed by wild animals, and he tears his clothes and mourns. Things are looking down for the dreamer and for his father Jacob, who was given the name Israel after wrestling with God’s angel. Things are looking down for the promises made to Abraham. And this is when we turn to the text for today. Listen for God’s word:

Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the LORD was with him, and that the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. So Joseph found favor in his sight and

attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. From the time that [Potiphar] made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had, in house and field. So [Potiphar] left all that he had in Joseph's charge; and, with him there, he had no concern for anything but the food that he ate. Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking.

And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her. One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house, she caught hold of his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside.

When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, she called out to the members of her household and said to them, "See, my husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice; and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside." Then she kept his garment by her until his master came home, and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me; but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside."

When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, "This is the way your servant treated me," he became enraged. And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison. But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. The chief jailer committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper.

There are a couple of temptations after hearing this story. The first, I think, is to move swiftly past it. Let's ignore this problematic incident and let's get Joseph out of jail - let's end on an "up" instead of a "down." It's true that Joseph will use his dream interpretation skills to get out of jail and rise to an even higher rank, becoming Pharaoh's right hand man. And he will save his family from famine, though with a good bit of drama and chicanery. Of course, that'll mean that the future of Israel will be in Egypt, which is how we end up here in Exodus with God calling Moses to lead the people to freedom.

But it seems to me there is benefit to hanging out with Joseph behind bars for a bit, particularly since God does precisely that. There is something holy about remembering that God is not held by prison walls — not held in *or out*. It's not pleasant or comfortable to think

about, but God — the very same God that we worship in freedom — is in city jails and state penitentiaries and for-profit corporate prisons, from sea to shining sea. Day and night, God is there, with those who have committed horrible crimes and with those who await execution by the state and with those who are trying to reform their lives and with those who were in the worst place at the worst time and with those who took a plea deal despite innocence because they could see the writing on the walls of a system stacked against them and with those who are simply innocent and with those waiting helplessly in detention centers, held without due process for daring to dream. We can separate children from their parents — nearly five hundred children remained in government custody without their parents at the end of August — but we cannot separate God from God's beloved.

The second temptation with this text — which has been on the docket for this Sunday for months — would be to let our minds run with the idea that this story of a woman making a false accusation against a man somehow speaks *against* the #metoo movement. This is not a tale of a woman trying to take down a powerful man or to make a name for herself. It's the story of a person in power — Potiphar's wife — using her dominant position to get what she wants from someone with nowhere to turn. She seeks to exploit Joseph. When he will not simply let her have her way — when he resists and will not give himself over to the whims of the empire — she ruins him. This smells like the stories we've heard of Hollywood moguls and media big shots with special locks on their office doors and millionaire comedians who trampled the careers of the non-compliant. Joseph, though successful, was still a foreign slave. He had no voice in this matter. He couldn't report it. Joseph in Egypt has shades of Emmett Till in Mississippi and Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

So we've resisted temptation and all I really want to do right now is tear my clothes and grieve. This world has a habit of such cruelty and an addiction to compounding it. I find myself deeply concerned about how we talk about power and bodies and what we teach our children. I see government leaders suggesting that teenage boys are not responsible for their bodies while firmly asserting that teenage girls are responsible for theirs. And here sits Joseph, jailed for standing up to power. And my job is to bring you the Good News.

Descendants and land and blessing. Being chosen by God sounded pretty wonderful when there was just Abraham and Sarah and a bunch of stars and a dream. Descendants are bound for conflict — over birthrights and petty jealousies and the last brownie in the pan. Land, it turns out, is finite and needs working and some of it is desert and other of it is occupied by people who like their houses. This blessing, it seems, doesn't work like a force field or an invisibility cloak, shielding from all harm and making everything just dandy. There are ups and downs with this blessing, just as there are ups and downs without it. Joseph's descendants will flee a different Pharaoh and then wander and die, but their descendants will find the Promised Land and they will take it and then they will breathe for about four seconds before three thousand more years of troubles begin.

And God is with them and God is with Joseph and God is with the prisoner and the accuser and the accused and God is with our leaders and God is with those who fight daily for justice and God is with those at the end of their ropes and God is with those who weave rope for a living. God is with you and God is with me.

Why tell this story, O Israel? Joseph's a bit of a dork and his brothers — the fathers of Israel — are pretty awful and Joseph ends up as the Don Corleone of Egypt and that ends up a bad place to land his people. We know that these stories are *about* God, not *about* Potiphar's wife and jealous brothers and fancy coats. But couldn't we come up with stories that are a little less complicated, a little less ambiguous, and a little less hard to swallow?

I suppose we could. But the people of the Book have always known that a God who will hang with you through the most grisly tales, the most confusing struggles, the times of oppression and unfairness, the moments of doubt and fear — that's a God you can count on. That's a God who will show up and argue with earthly kings and who will make a way in the harshest desert and who will stand up and ask why hypocrisy has more currency than justice. That's a God who will feed and heal and pray in the dark of night for another way. That's a God who will forgive and who will tear the curtain in the temple and who calls us by name. That's a God who can lift us up, because this God knows so well what it is to be down.