

Genesis 39:1-23 (Joseph's Integrity)

The story of Joseph is one of the longest sustained narratives in the Hebrew bible, and the longest in the Book of Genesis. So why study the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible at all? Some people mistakenly see the Old Testament as law and the New Testament as gospel. But, that is not the way it goes. Our New Testament echoes or repeats all the major themes, teachings, relationships between God and humanity in the Hebrew Bible. The New Testament takes the four-thousand-year Old Testament story, and makes it current and relevant for the times of Jesus as is evident in our weekly pairing of Matthew's Gospel and our Old Testament narrative. In the same way, we take the two-thousand-year-old story that is the New Testament, and make it relevant to our time and place. The prophets, Jesus, theologians, past and present, remind us and make relevant for today, God's message to humanity.

The theme of the story of Noah, the flood, and the promise of the rainbow was **hope**. In the Call of Abraham with the promise of land and descendants, the theme was **blessing**, blessing to the nations. With the story of Joseph's unjust imprisonment, the theme is **integrity**.

This week's narrative picks up midway through the story of Joseph. In the wider context of the book of Genesis, Joseph's story brings the "family" story of Abraham and Sarah to a culmination. In Genesis, the people whom God elected in order to be blessed and to be a blessing are a family. This family has grown from a childless old couple into a fairly large extended family, but they are still a family. Remember, God gave up on creation as a whole and changed his focus to a single person, a single family that would be a blessing to all the nations. This family has grown by marriage and by procreation, but it is still a family. At the start of the Book of Exodus, which follows Genesis, the family has become a nation.

The first major theological issue in Joseph's story, is the theme of human unfaithfulness. Why is Joseph a slave in Egypt? Because Joseph's brothers have been unfaithful. They have betrayed him by mugging him, stripping him, and selling him into slavery. And just to dress up their betrayal for dinner, Joseph's brothers take Joseph's clothes, covered with animal blood, and present them as false witness to their father, saying that Joseph is dead.

Joseph was a favourite of his father, Jacob, because "he is the son of his old age" and likely because he is the only son of Jacob's favourite wife, Rachel. Jacob gave his son Joseph a "coat of many colours." The half brothers were jealous and angry because Joseph brought a bad report about his brothers to their father. He also described two

dreams where his brothers were bowing down to him. And so his brothers decide to get rid of him by selling him as a slave to the Ishmaelites.

Joseph is purchased from the Ishmaelites by Potiphar, a captain of the Egyptian guard. Joseph is the great-grandson of Abraham. Abraham's son was Isaac who fathered Esau and Jacob, who is Joseph's father. Ishmael was Abraham's other son, whose mother was the servant Hagar. Ishmael became the founder of the tribe of Ishmaelites. So, the Hebrew slave, Joseph, was installed by Potiphar as an overseer in his house. The story repeats that God is active in Joseph's life, making him successful in all his undertakings. Potiphar, noticing his success, wants the success to rub off on him and his household. So he raises Joseph into a position of power within his household.

Potiphar's wife is also attracted not only to Joseph's good looks, but also to the success that emanates from Joseph. She uses her position to try to compel him to do her will, and when rejected, has Joseph put in prison.

In politics, those at the apex of power today may well stumble tomorrow, land in the pit of disgrace, only to rebound back into power after a decent interval. In this sense, Joseph's story is a familiar one; it is replete with imagery of ascent, descent, and return to the heights of power. Even the scourge of human trafficking, exemplified in Potiphar's purchase of Joseph, is still prevalent in our twenty-first century life.

A key difference between Joseph's story and politics today is Joseph's integrity. Most of the politicians who fall from power today do so because of their own failings, their own capitulation to corruption, greed, or lust. Joseph, on the other hand, falls from power because he dares to say "no" to corrupting power. He could have had a sweet deal, sleeping with Potiphar's wife, running his house, and Potiphar didn't need to know. But he decides to take the difficult path which leads him to prison.

Joseph's "no" is reminiscent of Vashti's "no" in the book of Esther, and also of Hagar's "no" to Abraham and Sarah's abuse. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said "no" to the Nazis and lost his life. Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, also known as the Bishop to the poor, denounced the killings, the torture and the disappearances of community leaders. He said no to the Civil War raging in the country, supporting the Civil Rights Movement. Consequently, he was forbidden from saying the mass by those in power. He said "no" and pushed past the guards, as he entered the church. During the Eucharist he was shot in the heart by an assassin. Jody Wilson-Raybould said "no" to unethical and even illegal requests made by a corporation and some Liberal leaders. She was removed from Caucus for saying "no." All of these characters rejected powerful forces that would subject them to degradation, and all paid a price for their integrity. Joseph and Hagar are

vindicated by divine favour, but it does not lessen the real cost to them personally.

The number of biblical figures who are falsely imprisoned is remarkable. Apart from Joseph, there are Jeremiah, Daniel, Peter, Paul, and Silas. A shocking number of those in prisons today worldwide are incarcerated because of false evidence, coerced confessions, procedural malfeasance or other legal incompetence, or in some cases, all of these.

In Joseph's story, we see that God is at work in the lives of those who act courageously, with integrity, in the face of seemingly hopeless situations. Another Joseph, Joseph de Somogyi, was a Semitics librarian at Harvard, a refugee from Hungary. An Islamic scholar of distinction, Joseph de Somogyi was a devout Lutheran as well as a scholar. When Nazism began to permeate life in Hungary, he laid his open Hebrew Bible on his university desk. Other professors would ask: "Joseph, is that not Jewish?" "Yes," he would reply. "It is the most Jewish of all things Jewish!" They would challenge his temerity and urge him to be more careful. His response: "I am a Christian. Aren't you?"

One evening a policeman appeared at his door. He informed Joseph that he would return later with two Gestapo agents. His advice: "I would appreciate it if you would disappear." For some time Joseph lived in hiding with peasants in rural Hungary. His life work lay buried in scholarly manuscripts in an orchard in anticipation of a day when his country would again be free. Nazism passed, and he returned to his university post. Then the Soviet Union moved against Hungary. One hundred and twenty-seven women and children sought safety in the basement of Joseph's villa on the Danube. The target of the Soviet bombers was a munitions factory across the river. Joseph's name soon appeared on the list of those to be arrested and shipped to Siberia.

A conference of Semitic scholars was scheduled in Vienna. Joseph applied for a visa to go. He was refused. After three more refusals he decided to visit personally the office of the individual responsible for all visas. The office was on the fourth floor. Joseph was so angry that he did not take the elevator. He took the stairs to cool off.

At the second landing, he bumped into a former student. After a warm embrace, the student asked, "Doctor, what are you doing here? Can I help you?" Then Joseph learned that this former student's fiancée, was the personal secretary of the official he had come to see. The student took Joseph to the fourth floor, introduced him to his fiancée, and urged her to grant the visa to his old professor. She paled and replied: "You know I can't. His name is on the proscribed list." At that, Joseph's former student said with some emotion: "Give the doctor a visa, or cancel our wedding plans." The fiancée, shaken, arose, walked to the window, and stood for a long time. Then she returned to her desk

and granted the visa.

When Doctor de Somogyi arrived in Vienna, he found a message from H. H. Rowley, the British Old Testament scholar. It said, "I do not have a position worthy of you, but we have a stipend that can keep you alive until something appropriate comes." That stipend enabled him to survive until the positions at Harvard and Brandeis opened for him. Was it an accident that Joseph took the stairs that day instead of the elevator? Or did God have other plans for him?

At the beginning of our story, we found Joseph in prison because of his brother's unfaithfulness. At the end of the story, it is Potiphar's wife who is unfaithful. She betrayed her husband's trust by trying to lie with Joseph, then betrayed Joseph when he denied her. She took Joseph's clothes and presented them as false witness to her husband, saying that Joseph tried to rape her. Joseph suffered in prison for two more years.

The second theological issue in this narrative is the theme of God's presence in the midst of suffering and God's activity where suffering is present. At the start of Joseph's story there are signs that God has special plans for Joseph and has given Joseph special gifts, special, divinely sent dreams. Then we read that God was with Joseph in slavery and was there as he became a successful man. Potiphar was aware that Joseph's God was with him and caused all that Joseph did to prosper in his hands. God was with him and showed him steadfast love. In jail the second time, God was with Joseph and again he prospered. God was there with Joseph in his suffering.

The point of God's presence cannot be separated from God's agency. God is present with Joseph toward particular ends and purposes. God's presence is not merely a presence. God's presence makes a difference. God meets Joseph in his suffering, but God does not leave Joseph there. God enters into Joseph's suffering in order to bring Joseph out of it, to another and better place. And in the process, God blesses others through Joseph, just as God did through Abraham.

Once again, not only does Joseph prosper and thrive, but through God's presence with Joseph and the blessings that result, others are blessed: first Potiphar and his household, later the chief jailer and all those in prison, and finally, Pharaoh and all of Egypt. By this time Joseph was thirty years old and had spent thirteen years in Egypt. In the end, even Joseph's brothers receive blessings through Joseph. In this way, God was fulfilling the promise to Abraham, that he and Sarah and their descendants would be blessed and through them, all the nations of the earth would be blessed in turn.

God's presence with those who are suffering and the way God works almost never seems

fast enough for those who are suffering. The psalm writers usually scream, “HOW LONG, O GOD, HOW LONG!?” Some people in the tradition have said that, ‘God’s timing is always the best time,’ but this never seems the case for those who suffer. Even after the fact, many who have suffered wonder why God could not have acted more quickly.

Nevertheless, the biblical promise is that God meets us in our suffering. And God does not leave us there. God meets us in suffering and moves us to what one psalmist called more “pleasant places.” And in the process, God will bless others through us. As Jesus said in today’s Gospel: “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil things about you falsely on account of me. Rejoice and be glad because your reward is great in heaven, for they persecuted the prophets before you in the same way.”

God was with Joseph! This is a story of God’s faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham. This points us to abide in Christ until he comes spreading the Kingdom as we go through the mundane things in this life. The movements in Joseph’s life from exaltation to humiliation, then back to exaltation, points forward not only to how God will act in Israel’s life as a people, but beyond Israel to the Son of God himself who came to earth as a humble peasant baby, who would grow up and gain a large following based upon his dynamic preaching and his mighty miracles only to be abandoned by his followers and tortured, crucified, and buried. THEN, he is resurrected and ascends to the Father in glory.

In this story we see God keeping his promise to Abraham. Abraham’s descendant, Joseph, has God with him and is a blessing to all peoples, pointing to the greater Descendant, Jesus, who will be the biggest blessing for all people. And God keeps his promise – to be with us to the end of time. **Amen.**

Prayers of Intercession – Orange Shirt Day, Sunday, September 25, 2022

(Prayers were provided by the BC Synod and adapted)

Holy God, God of love,

You are the Creator of this land and all good things.

We acknowledge the pain and shame of our history on Turtle Island/ Canada, and the suffering of Indigenous peoples and their communities, especially children.

Lord have mercy.

Lord have mercy, hear our prayer.

Holy God, God of love,

We thank you for the resiliency of Indigenous cultures that have survived despite immense harm done to them through centuries of colonization and the harmful actions of settlers.

Our hope is in you because your son Jesus Christ came to reconcile the world to you.

Lord have mercy.

Lord have mercy, hear our prayer.

Holy God, God of love,

Teach us to respect and value the richness and diversity of all cultures.

Help us to bring about meaningful and enduring spiritual and social change.

Lord have mercy.

Lord have mercy, hear our prayer.

Holy God, God of love,

Open up our hearts

so that we may hear the message you teach

of a world in which the wrongs of the past are recognised, where forgiveness is sought and received, and the ongoing work of reconciliation continues.

Lord have mercy.

Lord have mercy, hear our prayer.

Holy God, God of love,

Help us to reach out to a world in which a reconciled people walk and talk together sharing stories, being good neighbours to one another. Help us to reach out to a world in which all burn with the desire to have your peace and justice reign.

Lord have mercy.

Lord have mercy, hear our prayer.

Holy God, God of love,

Renew your creation where it has been damaged by natural or human created disasters. We pray for the people and communities of the Maritimes, and wherever the force of hurricanes has left destruction. Restore calm in the midst of chaos. Encourage communities and people and animals in their efforts to rebuild; bring trees and plants again to thrive and blossom, sea life to grow in abundance; pastures and grainfields to increase their crop yield, to support wildlife and herds raised for human food.

Support the work of people and organizations who blaze paths of diplomacy and peace among the nations. Strengthen and sustain them in times of weariness and discouragement, that they may fulfill the calling you have given them.

Lord have mercy.

Lord have mercy, hear our prayer.

Holy God, God of love,

Create opportunities for healing conversation and comforting, loving kindness and hospitality in nursing care, in long term and assisted care facilities, hospitals, group homes, temporary shelters, and private homes. Bring joy and peace to those burdened by illness, disease, disabilities, or injuries. Pour out your abundant grace and healing on all who call upon your name, heal their sicknesses and injuries; comfort them in the challenges they are living with both physical and emotionally. Bring comfort to those experiencing grief and loss. Lord have mercy.

Lord have mercy, hear our prayer.

Holy God, God of love,

Set your church as a sentinel to watch for signs of your coming into the world. Urge us to announce to others your gracious presence among us. With your Holy Spirit, fill our hearts with love, grace, and acceptance in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, our Rock, Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.

Amen