

Genesis 39:1-23

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 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.

This week's narrative picks up midway through the story of Joseph. We drop in on Joseph after he has been betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery. 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 to be blessed, and to be a blessing, are a family. This family has grown from a childless old couple into a 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 and present them as false witness to their father, saying that Joseph is dead.

As the story of Joseph continues in Potiphar's house, Potiphar's wife tries to force Joseph, now a high-ranking servant in the household, into a sexual relationship. Joseph is purchased by Potiphar, a captain of the guard. He is purchased from the Ishmaelites. 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 and 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 – Potiphar didn't need to know. But he decides to take the difficult path – and it 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. All of these characters reject powerful forces that would subject them to degradation, and all pay a price for their integrity. Joseph and Hagar are vindicated by divine favour, but it does not lessen the real cost to them personally.

Joseph ends up in prison – not only because of his "no", but also because of his clothes. Or, more precisely, someone taking his clothes.

History repeats itself, at least in poor Joseph's life: earlier his brothers threw him into a pit/prison, taking his fabulous garment – in order to convince Jacob that his beloved Joseph was dead. Now Potiphar's wife takes Joseph's garment – in order to perpetuate a deception that will land Joseph in prison – and once again his clothes betray him! For a guy, whom we are told repeatedly is favoured by God, he has a pretty hard life.

The number of biblical figures who are falsely imprisoned is remarkable – apart from Joseph: 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 Semetics librarian at Harvard, a refugee from Hungary who had studied organ building under Albert Schweitzer, and 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 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 this is important – 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 received blessings – through Joseph. In this way, God was fulfilling the promise to Abraham – that he and Sarah and their descendants would be blessed and that 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 til 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.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

O God, rich in mercy, you look with compassion of this troubled world. Feed us with your grace that we may have the courage to face the pain in our communities and in our world. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. **Amen.**