

“Rise and Fall”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 23, 2018

18th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 5:1-12

Rev. John Wahl

Genesis 39:1-23

Everybody loves a good “rags to riches” story – one where a poor man (it is usually a man in these stories) who works hard strikes it rich. The person who helped to plant these stories in the American imagination was Horatio Alger. His books, written in the 19th century, would focus on teenage boys who worked hard or committed some act of bravery that brought them stature and wealth. The moral of the story was that if you work hard, then good things happen.

On its surface, the Joseph story seems like a Horatio Alger story. This was the second youngest of twelve sons who was sold by his jealous older brothers into slavery. But in Egypt, fortune steps in and he ascends to a place of honor. Nevertheless, as we heard in this morning’s story, he doesn’t stay there; the lesson here is not so much about Joseph working hard as it is God being with Joseph in good times and bad.

Before we go into today’s text, some back-story. In last week’s lesson, we heard God speaking to Abraham and Sarah about being the founders of a great nation. After a long wait, God’s promise came to fruition through their son Isaac; who himself had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Joseph was a son of Jacob and thus the great-grandson of Abraham. God is keeping the promise of a nation being built through Abraham and Sarah’s family.

Jacob doted on his son, Joseph, keeping him close to home rather than asking him to do hard work. It was upon Joseph that the coat of many colors was bestowed. Joseph had dreams about his brothers bowing down before him and showed little discretion in telling them about it. They hated him for his favored status and what they considered to be his delusions of grandeur. So, after one of the brothers, Reuben, talked the others out of killing Joseph, they ended up selling him to foreign traders. They dipped his colorful coat in animal’s blood, showed it their father, and told him that Joseph was dead. Our text finds Joseph in the next chapter of his life, as a slave in Potiphar’s house.

So now Joseph is in Egypt; he is far from home, far from family, and far from his easy, favored life. But even when things might seem dark for Joseph (and they will get dark again), we are told that “the Lord was with Joseph.” That same phrase is used four times in this chapter: three times when Joseph finds success, but for the fourth time when Joseph faces adversity. Hard work does not ensure good fortune and God was not Joseph’s good luck charm, but something very different.

Joseph raises to become the personal attendant of Potiphar and in charge of the day-to-day handling of Potiphar's house. Later in Joseph's saga, after he falls and rises again, he will become Pharaoh's second-in-command and be in charge of managing all the grain of the land, guiding Egypt through years of famine and offering salvation to his brothers who come begging for food. His whole family moves to Egypt and, after Jacob dies, his brothers wonder if he holds a grudge; to which Joseph responds: "even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as is being done today." (Gen 50:20)

But this is getting far ahead of the story. In chapter 39, Joseph, while a slave in a land far from home, has risen to some success in Potiphar's house. Things seem to be going pretty well; but here is where the story switches from riches to rags, and back towards riches again, to something akin to a soap opera; and, if not that, maybe something ripped from the news headlines. Potiphar's wife, watching Joseph at work, is attracted to him and starts to beg and plead Joseph to take part in some hanky-panky.

This put Joseph in a pickle. As a slave, he had been entrusted to look after Potiphar's household, and thus he was also obligated to obey Potiphar's wife. But as a Jew, he remembered his covenant with God, saying, "How could I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9) But, she remained persistent in trying to tempt Joseph until one day, when she grabs him, he literally jumps right out of his clothes to get away from her.

These are the kind of things that happen all-too-often on television, and as we all know, in restaurants, workplaces, and the halls of power as well – although it's much more often the man in power pursuing the woman subordinate. Joseph could have said "yes" to the temptations that stood before him, but because of his character – and his loyalty to God – he had to say "no."

Realizing that she was never going to successfully seduce Joseph, Potiphar's wife goes to her husband and makes up a story about Joseph trying to take advantage of her. And so, his days at the house of Potiphar were over; Joseph is sent to prison. History has repeated itself; earlier, his brothers threw him into a pit, taking his coat of many colors in order to convince Jacob that his beloved Joseph was dead. And now, Potiphar's wife uses Joseph's clothes as proof in her deception that again lands him in prison.¹

Still, we are told, the Lord was with Joseph. The standard punishment for rape, or even attempted assault, in that day would have been death, not imprisonment. We are told that Potiphar was angry but why didn't he have Joseph executed: was it because Potiphar knew what his wife had done and opted for the least bad option? Or was it

¹ Jacqueline Lapsley from *WorkingPreacher.com*

because of the loyalty and hard work Joseph had shown? Or was it simply because God was with Joseph?

And this is where the story – at least for today – ends. Joseph seems to be back at square one; he went from running the house of one of the most powerful men in Egypt to being falsely accused and wrongfully imprisoned. And yet, we are told, Joseph gained the trust and favor of the chief jailor and ended up being the person in charge of all the other prisoners. The Lord was with Joseph and, we are told, “whatever (Joseph) did, the Lord made it prosper.” (Gen. 39:23)

Four times this text tells us that the Lord was with Joseph. We generally believe that when life is good, the Lord is with us. But how many times, when disaster or illness, misfortune or injustice strikes do we say, *the Lord is with us*? Joseph suffered in multiple, dehumanizing, painful ways; he was a victim of human trafficking, slavery, sexual assault, wrongful accusation, and unjust incarceration. The idea that working hard and living faithfully for God always and only results in good things happening in life is shown to be a myth.²

There is a saying that I’ve often heard at youth conferences over the years that goes like this: *God is good; all the time. All the time; God is good.* Sometimes, we have a difficult time believing this. We might wonder where God was during certain points in our lives: where is God when the diagnosis of cancer comes? Where is God when your job has been eliminated or when you find yourself in the midst of a divorce? Where is God when an innocent child dies? But, the truth of the matter is that we believe God is good, not because God is a spiritual Superman that swoops in and saves the day. No, God is good because we are neither forsaken nor forgotten by God; just as God remembered and never left Joseph.

There is a common understanding among many people, including many Christians, that God’s blessing equates to happiness and wealth. When good things happen to them, they believe, God is blessing them. But is blessing only about good things? When he was a child, Joseph was a recipient of good things – exemplified by the beautiful coat gifted to him by his father – though it could be questioned whether it equated with his goodness as a person. In his brothers’ eyes, Joseph did not work as hard, and yet thought he was better than them. It’s hardly a surprise that they threw him in a pit and sold him into slavery.

In Potiphar’s house, Joseph is described as a good person: hard-working and honest, faithful to his master and to God. But that didn’t prevent him from being falsely accused and ending up in prison. God blessed Joseph by being present in Joseph’s life

² John Dobbs, “Joseph’s Run”

when he rose and when he fell; and Joseph responded by following God, even though it meant losing everything.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he says in chapter eight that "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28) The point of this verse isn't to justify horrible experiences as being good, but that God remembers us in good times and bad; and that God has been, is, and always be at work in the world. God is present in our suffering and in our joy; in our successes and in our failures. The circumstances change, but we can always trust in the promise of God's presence.³

This, of course, should not change our commitment to working for justice. In this story alone, we encounter issues of injustice that are very timely in today's world: slavery and human trafficking, allegations of sexual abuse, false testimony and incarceration. Elsewhere in Joseph's story, we find drought, famine, family separation and forced migration. We live in the midst of these same problems and challenges today. And as we learned in last week's lesson on the call of Abraham and Sarah, we are blessed by God not for our own sake, not to prove that rags can turn to riches, but in order to be a blessing to others.

We are blessed in the good days: when we have good health and a nice home, and we are no less blessed when we are laid off or dealing with a chronic disease. In all times and in all circumstances, God is working for good, seeking to remind us that we are loved by God and that God is always with us. And just as God has loved us, so we are called to also love one another: by listening to their stories, by recognizing injustice, by advocating for change, by working for reconciliation, by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the incarcerated, by praying for peace. This is our calling; both our joy and our responsibility, as those who are blessed by God's presence with us always. AMEN.

³ Gregory Rahn, "Joseph's Hope"