

“Steadfast Love”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 25, 2022

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 146

Genesis 39:1-23

Introduction

Last week we heard about Abram and Sarai traveling to and through the land of Canaan, following where God shows them. Today, we listen to part of the story of Abraham’s great-grandson, Joseph, the eleventh of twelve sons of Jacob, and the favorite. Jacob gave his son Joseph a fancy, long-sleeved coat. The other brothers were jealous, and, one day, they conspired to get rid of him. They sold Joseph to passing traders, and took his fancy coat, dipped in animal blood, home to their father and told him Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. Jacob was inconsolable. We pick up the story today in Genesis chapter 39, beginning at verse 1; listen for God’s word:

Read Genesis 39:1-23

One of the advantages to following the Narrative Lectionary is having the opportunity to read long passages of scripture. This story of Joseph in Potiphar’s house is a part of the lengthy Joseph narrative, which begins in chapter 37 and continues through Genesis, to chapter 50. Here, we find Joseph working as a foreign slave in an Egyptian household. We are told, in the opening verses, that the Lord was with Joseph and made him prosper, meaning that he was given greater responsibility within the household. In fact, Potiphar made him overseer of all that he had, such that all Potiphar had to worry about was what to eat.

Everything was placed in Joseph’s hand – except Potiphar’s wife. After noticing the “handsome and good-looking” Joseph, Potiphar’s wife commands him to “lie with me!” This is not seduction, not an expression of desire, this is about power. She is the master’s wife and he is a servant. Day after day, she presents her demands to Joseph – which he considers to be a “great wickedness and sin against God” – and she refuses to honor when he says no.

One day, when the two of them were alone in the house, Potiphar’s wife grabs Joseph’s garment and commands him again to “lie with me!” As he flees, she

holds his garment in her hand. As Joseph's brothers had presented Joseph's robe dipped in blood to their father as false testimony to his demise, now Potiphar's wife will present Joseph's garment to her husband in falsely claiming that he had assaulted her.

In the Qur'an, the story goes a little differently. As Joseph attempted to escape the grasp of his master's wife, she "tore his shirt from behind" as they raced toward the door. They run into Potiphar as he is entering the house. Joseph has the opportunity to deny her accusation of assault and is judged innocent because the tear in his shirt indicated he was running away.¹

In our story, the two are not caught red-handed. Potiphar's wife could have given Joseph his garment back and pretended that nothing had happened. But, whether out of embarrassment or spite, she tells her husband that Joseph had attacked her, saying "the Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me." She insinuates that because Joseph is a foreigner, and a slave, he must be dangerous; he cannot be trusted.

His master, Potiphar, believing his wife and assuming that the trust he placed in Joseph had been abused, puts him in prison. His prospering ends and, once again, Joseph's movements are dictated by others. Like so many who are considered the other, and possess no power, Joseph has no defense against even a baseless accusation; his word would carry no weight.

We are told that, in prison, "the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love." This Hebrew word *hesed* conveys loyalty, care, and provision. Joseph has gone from being a highly trusted slave in charge of the household of a high government official to confinement in jail. How are we to understand this divine presence with Joseph?

In Joseph's case, we are told that God helped him find favor with the chief jailor, who entrusted everything into Joseph's care; and in all that Joseph did, the Lord made him prosper. As before, in Potiphar's house, Joseph is not free; his position is tenuous, at best. But, God's presence with Joseph is not merely a presence. Instead, it makes a difference; it moves towards some particular end. God meets Joseph in his suffering, but God does not leave Joseph there. God enters into the suffering in order to bring Joseph out of it, to another and better place. And in the process, God will bless others through Joseph.

¹ Elna K. Solvang from *WorkingPreacher.com*

This is what God's steadfast love, God's *hesed*, looks like. The presence of God cannot be separated from God's agency. Not only is God there, God is also acting with care, compassion, and provision. Of course, with those who are suffering, the way that God works almost never seems fast enough. Some will say, "God's timing is always the best time," but this rarely seems to case for the oppressed. Even after the fact, many who suffered wonder why God could not have acted more quickly.²

Joseph's greatest prayer, whether as a servant in Potiphar's house or as a prisoner in jail, may have been for freedom. Our story ends with this prayer seemingly unanswered. Still, no matter where he goes – or, more accurately, wherever he is sent – God remains with him and God's favor allows him to prosper in his circumstances. Those who know the rest of the Joseph story will remember that he will one day be released from prison and rise to become overseer of all the Pharaoh's storehouses. When a famine comes, and his own brothers – those who had sold him into slavery – come before him to beg for food, Joseph is able to help them – and forgive them – saying, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good." (50:20)

But, let's not jump ahead too quickly. At the end of today's reading, Joseph has been unjustly accused as a foreigner with nobody to come to his defense, and imprisoned indefinitely. He was a victim of prolonged sexual harassment and assault, seemingly based only on his exotic good looks. Try to imagine, if you can, if his name instead was Josephine, and his attacker a male who had ripped off her clothes. Whose side would likely be believed, even today?³

There are multiple social forces at play in this story: gender, ethnicity, power inequity. Today we call this *intersectionality* – when multiple factors compound to make oppression and suffering even more pronounced. Poverty is often compounded by ethnicity or gender to create even more inequities in income, health, violence, and education. It is important to consider how the intersection of Joseph's suffering – the multiple factors that led to his vulnerability and lack of power – caused him again and again to fall back to the bottom, into greater suffering.

The intersectionality of power dynamics plays out in all our lives. Who, we must ask, are we placing in positions where they cannot win; where they remain vulnerable to losing it all no matter what they do? We believe that God remains

² Rolf Jacobsen from *WorkingPreacher.com*

³ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

with those who have no power; and that, from the outside looking in, it is impossible to know who God is allowing to prosper. We are called to show mercy and compassion to the oppressed, to those treated unfairly, unjustly condemned, and imprisoned; to the poor, the stranger and the foreigner; to those lacking access and opportunity, voice and power.

The biblical witness does not agree with the Buddha's *First Noble Truth* which teaches that "life means suffering." But scripture does not deny that suffering is a reality – that all life includes at least some measure of pain. From the beginning of today's text to its end, God remains with Joseph no matter what unjust circumstances he faces. God's answer to Joseph's prayer is not release, not an Exodus, but instead *hesed* – steadfast love.

The biblical promise to be found here is that God meets us in our suffering and does not leave us there. God's presence is not limited by social, ethnic or economic status – even when they intersect to create greater inequities. God is present in places of separation, rejection, abandonment, betrayal, and despair. God is with the marginalized and the vulnerable and allows them to be channels of divine blessing which extend beyond themselves, even beyond God's people.

Joseph's story – and this small piece of it – reminds us that God's presence can be felt in your life when things are working for good and even when you have been thrown down from the top; in success or in a prison; whether literal or one of our own making. God remains with us; but that is not all. God is also at work – in and through and sometimes despite our suffering or success – with *hesed* – steadfast love: loyalty, care, and provision that does not end. Though we may not see or feel it soon enough, God is with us; seeking to bless us and others through us. Thanks be to God. Amen.