

Promise in Prison
Matthew 5:11-12, 43-45
Genesis 39:1-23

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Pastor Doug Browne
September 23, 2018

Matthew 5:11-12, 43-45

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

Genesis 39:1-23

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 he 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 he 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.

Last week, on *Game of Sandals*, we spoke about the call of Abraham and Sarah. They left their home and their families and went to the place that God showed them. God promised Abraham and Sarah three things: descendants, land, and a blessing. To people in that time, that was everything they could want; who could ask God for anything more?

We're skipping over a lot of story here, but they did have a son, as God promised. His name was Isaac, and he, too, had a son, whose name was Jacob.¹ Jacob had twelve sons.

Abraham and Sarah's descendants don't have a land yet, but they have had the blessing, and now they have descendants. Two out of three promises kept so far.

Jacob had twelve sons, and Joseph was the favorite.

I don't mean that Jacob tried hard to be fair, but he had one son that he loved best, despite his best efforts. I mean that Jacob was incredibly blatant about it.

When Joseph was a teenager, Jacob had a special coat made for him that had every color in the rainbow and long sleeves, sleeves that nearly covered his hands. This coat showed that he was not a laborer, like his brothers. He was management. This was the coat of many colors, or *Joseph's Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.²

Joseph started having dreams and interpreting them for his brothers, who were capable men, many of them significantly older and more established than he was. Dreams that, as he told

¹ I'm skipping over Esau and all the other parts of the story that don't directly bear on this piece of the story.

² All references or allusions to this musical in this sermon should be assumed to be intentional.

them, meant that they would bow down to him, nearly the youngest of the twelve, and he would rule them. This was perhaps the one thing that could have made the dysfunctional family dynamics worse than they already were. The eleven decided that the dreamer had to go.

They hit him over the head, took his coat and ripped it, and sold him as a slave to some Ishmaelites, nomadic distant relatives. These Ishmaelites took him to Egypt.

Egypt was not a place Joseph was keen to go, and it wasn't just because he didn't speak Egyptian very well.

Egypt, as a culture, was fascinated by death. Most of us, if we think about Egypt, we think of the huge monuments. All those monuments are to death and to dead people. The Pyramids are amazing structures, wonders of the ancient world. They're tombs.³ All the famous murals in the Pyramids, depict the Underworld, their understanding of life after death.

So Joseph has been sold as a slave into a land obsessed with death.⁴

He is sold to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh. Potiphar sees that Joseph is literate, not a universal thing in those days, so he installs him as an overseer in his house. Over time, Joseph impresses his master, and he puts him in charge of the entire household. Joseph succeeds in this position, running everything well.

Our story this morning is not one that we usually teach our kids. I re-watched the Veggie-Tales version of Joseph's life this week, and they changed this part.⁵ There are good reasons for

³ I won't even discuss Dr. Ben Carson's theory that the Pyramids, despite everything that archaeologists have found, are really grain storehouses built by Joseph. There are "alternative facts," and there are ridiculous lies.

⁴ Thanks to Kathryn Schifferdecker, on the Narrative Lectionary podcast, for this insight.

⁵ *The Ballad of Little Joe* rewrites the event as Potiphar's wife, jealous over Employee of the Month status, framing Joseph for theft.

that. It would have at least a PG-13 rating. This story has already had dysfunctional family dynamics. Now we add human trafficking, sexual harassment, and attempted sexual coercion and extortion. The innocent victim ends up in jail. This sounds more like grown-up cable TV fare, maybe *House of Cards* or *Game of Thrones*, than it does like little kids' stories.

But there's nothing here that doesn't happen today, every day.

Human trafficking, people being sold into slavery, happens all over the world, including here in the United States. Since it is illegal in most places, it is now almost always under the radar and for the purpose of prostitution. The Ohio Attorney General's Office estimates that a little over one thousand children are victims of human trafficking every year here in Ohio.⁶

The Presbyterian Church is involved with the Central Ohio Rescue and Restore Coalition, an organization that works to help find these people and restore them to normal life. The Coalition also works to advocate for punishment for "traffickers," the modern word for slavers, and for treating the victims as victims, not as criminals themselves.

What Potiphar's wife does to Joseph is not acceptable, and it would not be, no matter who the people involved were. We're comfortable saying that, but we're much more used to stories where the genders are reversed, where it's the man demanding sex, "or else."

Our discomfort is natural. The point here is that sexual harassment, coercion, and rape aren't really about sex. They are about power and about lack of accountability. Potiphar's wife has both; Joseph doesn't. It has always been more usual in our society for men to have that kind

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_trafficking_in_Ohio

of power over women, and that lack of accountability, than the reverse. The various men who have recently been accused or convicted of truly vile behavior toward women had power. Their victims, women who worked for them or wanted to work for them, didn't. And they believed that they would never be held accountable for their actions. It is wrong, but, unfortunately, not entirely surprising that they used that power and lack of accountability in disgusting, sleazy, evil ways.

Shameful behavior, sexual and non-sexual, by people who have power over other people is not a new thing. What's new is more of those powerful people being held accountable. As they should be.

Joseph has more integrity than anyone else in this story, and he ends up in jail. He is the first person named in the Bible to be imprisoned unjustly, but he's far from the last. Jesus, Jeremiah, Daniel, John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul are a few other examples.

“Oh, that'll be all right. God doesn't send you more than you can handle.”

If I could remove one empty platitude from the language and from the minds of every single human being, this would be the one. It is contrary to Jesus's own words that Carolyn read this morning. It is theologically untrue. It is contrary to our experience of life. It releases from responsibility people who hurt other people, and it reveals a terrible understanding of how the world works.

God did not send evil into Joseph's life.

There certainly was evil there. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery and told their father that he had been killed. Potiphar's wife abused her power and the lack of accountability

given her by her position to demand sexual favors and to get Joseph thrown in prison for refusing.

Each time, Joseph was blessed with God's presence, and he rose above these problems. But that does not mean that God created the problems.

Joseph's brothers were responsible for their actions. God did not force them to violate God's laws and the laws of humanity by selling their own brother into slavery, so that God could achieve God's goals through Joseph. Potiphar's wife was responsible for her actions. God did not force her to proposition Joseph, and God did not force her to lie and get him thrown into prison when rejected.

God does not send evil into our lives. God sends good into our lives.

Many bad things just happen. God does not send storms, for example, to punish cities. Storms happen to bad people and good people, usually at the same time. God does not send cancer to punish bad people. Cancer happens to bad people and to good people. Some bad things are due to human action. We human beings have free will, and we send evil into the lives of other people all too well. We are responsible for our actions, and so are they.

No, instead, listen to what is nearly the last thing Joseph says in the Bible before his death. He tells his brothers, the people who sold him into slavery, that "You planned something [evil] for me, but God produced something good from it."⁷ God works with the situations we human beings find ourselves in, whether they are our own fault, someone else's fault, or no one's fault.

⁷ Gen 50:20a (CEB).

God saw the situation Joseph was in, and God worked with it. God saw Joseph sold into slavery, and God used that evil that his brothers had done, for good. God helped Joseph be in the right place at the right time to save his entire family from the famine that was coming in the land of Canaan where they lived.

God used the evil things done by some of God's people to another. God used those things to keep God's promise to all of God's people. God promised Abraham and Sarah descendants, land, and a blessing. God's blessing continued through Joseph, who preserved those descendants and moved them one step closer to getting the land that God promised.

God does not put evil and hardships into our lives. They happen. Some of them happen naturally, and some by human action, but God does not cause them for you. God walks with us and helps us work with the situations we're in.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.