

Sermon, Rev. Leigh Brown, Coralville UMC, September 6, 2020

### **Part 1 – Sermon Body**

So Pharaoh had not only freed Joseph from slavery, he had promoted him to Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, which in Egypt in a time of famine made Joseph his right-hand man.

Years later, Joseph's brothers, who probably had tried for years to forget about Joseph – if only their father Jacob would let them – came to Egypt at their father's urging to seek grain for their own people, because the famine existed in their homeland too. Joseph knew who they were right away, but because he was wearing his fancy uniform and speaking Egyptian, they didn't recognize him.

Joseph couldn't resist getting a little revenge. We think of Joseph as the hero of this story and pure, but remember that from the beginning of the story, his thoughts are not always pure. He accuses the brothers of being spies. After they volunteer the information that they are brothers and that their youngest brother is home with their father, he takes one of them, Simeon, hostage, and demands that the others go home, fetch the youngest brother Benjamin, and return if they want to see Simeon released. That Benjamin is home at all is a sign that the old family dysfunction continues. Benjamin is Joseph's only full brother. They are the sons of Jacob and his favorite wife, Rachel, and apparently Benjamin has replaced Joseph as the favored one. No wonder Jacob didn't want to send him off on an adventure with his brothers!

Anyway, Joseph sends them on their way, with sacks full of grain, but first hides some silverware in each of their packs. So when they get home and tell their father Jacob the story – that Simeon is being held hostage and they must return with Benjamin – they unload their packs and a bunch of silverware comes clanking out. It looks a little suspect for them. Jacob, certain that they have sold their brother Simeon for some silver, is disappointed. Now they have taken two of his children. But he refuses to send them back with Benjamin – he is not going to risk his favorite child.

Until he has no choice. As the famine drags on, Jacob tells his sons to load up their packs, including the silverware from Egypt they brought back from the first trip and a substantial gift from Jacob's household, get Benjamin ready, and be on their way.

When they arrive in Egypt they knock on the door and begin with their story to Joseph's household manager. They come in peace. They don't know how the silverware got in their packs, but they've brought it back. They have the younger brother. They've brought a gift. They're groveling, and they brace themselves for the wrath to come. But instead, they get only welcome and understanding. Of course the silverware was placed there by God. No hard feelings. Come on in. Have dinner. Now, Hebrews in that time did not sit down with Egyptians for dinner, so the brothers couldn't believe what was happening. But there they were, seated at this Egyptian's [Joseph's] table, in order by their birth date, while food was brought to them. Benjamin was brought 5 times more food than the other brothers. Some things never change.

Then after dinner he fills their sacks with grain again, and has his cup of silver placed at the top of Benjamin's sack. As the brothers are on their way, Joseph pretends to suddenly notice the missing cup, sends his servants after the brothers, and threatens in mock disgust and anger to imprison Benjamin. The brothers plead with him – there must be some mistake! Finally, Judah offers himself in exchange for Benjamin.

At that point, Joseph breaks down, and the reconciliation begins. He told them who he was, and they all fell into each other's arms and wept. Joseph invited his brothers to come live with him in Egypt and to bring Jacob along with them too. Jacob was so happy to find Joseph alive after all these years that he didn't even seem too upset about the trick that had been played on him with the bloody shirt when he was first told by his sons that Joseph was eaten by wild animals.

The real moment of truth came, however, when Jacob finally died. Generous and forgiving as Joseph had been, his brothers couldn't avoid the fear that once the old man wasn't around anymore, Joseph might remember what it had felt like when they tossed him into that pit and decide to pay them back. So they went to see him, fell down on their knees, and begged for his forgiveness and mercy.

Joseph's answer brings the story to fullness. "Don't be scared. Of course you're pardoned," he said. "Do you think I'm God to grovel before me like that?" In the old days, of course, God was just who Joseph had rather suspected he was, and the dreams in which his brothers had groveled to him were his all-time favorites. Just as Israel was saved from famine and extinction in this story, Joseph was saved as a human being.

This story is rich with meaning. I would like to focus on what the story says about God, and the sovereignty of God. A close reading of the encounter of Joseph's revealing to his brother – the scripture that Debbie read for us today – tells us that Joseph saw his life, including his brothers' act of violence against him, as really a part of God's plan. In other words, the violent act really wasn't the brothers' doing, it was God's doing. We have to be careful here. In ancient times, all evil things that could not be explained, such as famines and disasters, were typically ascribed to God. To think otherwise was to place oneself in the hands of the fates, or to think that the fates of the world were more powerful than God, and neither of these thoughts were acceptable. Both concepts are based on the idea that God is all-powerful, and that God intervenes in creation in a direct and deliberate way, sort of like a puppet-master pulling the strings. But in tension with the power of God is the goodness and love of God, and the free will that God has designed into creation. Why does our loving, forgiving God allow bad things to happen? Why doesn't God intervene when possible?

And so throughout the ages this question has haunted Christian believers and theologians – does God cause things to happen, especially bad things? Is God pulling the strings of our lives? In the scripture Joseph stated exactly how he understood the events that brought him to Egypt. We never know what the brothers think of Joseph's interpretation. It isn't part of the story.

The problem with believing that God directly causes painful or disastrous events is easy to see. What kind of a God would do something like that? Surely not the God of love and mercy that we proclaim. Equally problematic is the belief often lifted that God has directly saved one person from disaster over others. If God saved you from the train wreck, why didn't God save my beloved daughter? Again we are questioning the very nature of God.

Another way we can look at Joseph's interpretation is from a psychological approach. Humans seek to make meaning from the world. We know bad and evil things happen. Joseph focused on the good that came from his brothers' evil act, instead of remaining angry over the act itself. He looked at the evil thing that had happened to him, and assigned meaning and purpose to that thing. Of course, too much whitewashing over evil or disaster is not good from a psychological point of view either. We must to some degree at some point acknowledge and experience what has happened to us.

So how are life's events and God's will related? How do we talk about it among the faithful? Joseph's story leaves us deep in the mystery of God and God's interactions with humans. Some folks see God directing their lives, while others express God's presence in other ways.

Joseph is able to interpret the dream of his life as being all about God's good intention. That is not to say that God intended the harm that came to Joseph. Rather, it is to say that God's good intentions for us have the potential to be more powerful than our bad intentions towards one another – that God can use our hurtful actions, even our cruel and angry and self-serving behavior – to do good. Similarly God's renewing power of creation is more powerful than that which destroys, and God can use the disasters that occur in this world – those to which we contribute and those that occur naturally – to do good. God takes the broken pieces of our lives and puts them together to create a gorgeous mosaic beyond our wildest dreams and imagination. Thanks be to God for that. Amen.

## **Part 2 – Action Response**

This pandemic seemed to drop down from the sky. Oh, there were inklings of trouble in late January and February – trouble over there – trouble somewhere else – but it was on that weekend of March 14 & 15 that I remember trouble dropping straight down on us, in our community, in our neighborhood, in our church. "Close everything down now!" were the words of wisdom from on high. And that's what we did. We closed down for the next four weeks, or so we thought. It seemed like one day life was normal, and the next day that life as we knew it had disappeared.

Our scripture today tells us that hope too can seem to drop down from the sky. It can come in an unlikely and unfamiliar guise, in a way that we least expect.

And if you are thinking, well, that's great, Leigh, but this is an ancient story, and we're here today in 2020, and I need an example that's just a little bit more recent... well, I do have one for you.

But I'm not going to tell you about it today. I'm teasing you. You are going to be receiving a letter soon – a letter about a new opportunity for the church. It's exciting. It's risky. It's a little bit scary and new. I'll be very interested to hear what you think of it.

In the meantime, in your own lives, keep an eye out for things that are outside of the box. Things that bring you hope, but are definitely not within your comfort zone. This world is getting a good shakedown. The pieces may not be put back together in the same familiar way. But God is at work here and we will rise from these ashes like the phoenix – that's how it is with God. It may not be the same, but it will be good. It will be very good. Don't be afraid to dream. Don't exclude any possibility.

Meanwhile, we build resilience. Resilience is our ability to adapt to adversity. We've talked about four ways of building resilience: learning from our past experience; building strong, positive relationships with loved ones and friends; assigning meaning and purpose to life's events; and being proactive in changing the things that we *can* change. Today we will consider a fifth and a sixth way. The fifth way is to take care of yourself. Eat well. Sleep. Breathe. Practice stress management and relaxation techniques. And do things that you enjoy doing. This fifth way of building resilience – self-care – is critical to the sixth way, and that is remaining hopeful.

Our theme scripture from Isaiah promises that if we place our hope in God, our strength will be renewed:

*They will soar on wings like eagles,  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint.*

God will make a way for us. Have we not been trying to let go of old ways, to change and to grow? God is opening new doors to new ways of being. We need to expand our vision.

For the song that John is going to sing for us, Bono, the songwriter, wrote the lyrics based on two notions. The first is the notion that in Belfast, Ireland, it's possible to identify a person's religion and income based on the street they live on. The second is the notion of how in the desert we meet God, and we discover who we are. Bono was witness to both of these realities when he was writing the song. The 1980s were the height of The Troubles in Northern Ireland; and Bono, an Irishman, wrote the song on an Air India flight, on sick bags, during a trip to Ethiopia after the Live Aid concert, when so many people were starving to death in that country.

And so the song combines these two themes – tearing down barriers that divide us, and meeting God in the midst of the most barren and troubled of times, to discover anew who we are. What a beautiful vision of hope. May it be so, in the life of our community, in the life of our church, and in our own lives.