

More to This Story Than You Think

Sermon by John Strommen on Genesis 39:1-23 Sept. 23, 2018

Sometimes, I have had conversations with church members, past and present, about what their everyday life has to do with God's mission. And whether that person is a business man or woman, a contractor, an electrician, an attorney, a truck driver, this conversation about what God is up to in the midst of their daily grind usually starts with "crickets." Blank stares. It is hard for the average person to know what God has to do with their everyday world – a world that is not exactly spiritual and godly.

Our story today – which is part of the saga of Joseph and his technicolor dream coat – is firmly planted in a broken world of people behaving very badly. It reads a bit like "House of Cards" or something.

Here's the basic story: Joseph was the great grandson of Abraham. Joseph and his eleven brothers are the genealogical origins of the twelve tribes of Israel. As you probably know, Joseph was special and his father, Jacob, knew it. Joseph's brothers knew that dad knew it, and they were jealous of their brother. When Joseph had dreams about his brothers bowing down to him, that was the last straw. One day they threw Jacob into a pit, stole his beautiful coat of many colors, sold him into slavery, told their father that a wolf had killed Joseph, and that his coat was all that remained.

Nobody ever said the founding fathers of Israel were saints. Hamilton's got nothing on these guys.

Joseph's captors then sold him to a powerful Egyptian official named Potiphar. Joseph found favor and promotion in Potiphar's house.

Enter Potiphar's wife, who had too much time on her hands and an active imagination. She wanted in on this handsome newcomer, but despite her best attempts at seduction, Joseph did not stumble. He had boundaries, you see.

Isn't it refreshing to have a biblical character that's *not* tragically flawed, who actually does the right thing?

You know what happens next: Potiphar's wife becomes spiteful, accuses Joseph of rape and Potiphar has Joseph imprisoned. *Again* in a pit, and *again* his own garment is used as a prop to frame a false narrative. But it says Joseph then found favor with the jailer, as he did with Potiphar. So much so that the chief jailer basically put Joseph in charge of the prison!

This story would be great on Netflix or HBO: It's about power, manipulation and lies; spite, retribution, prisons and human trafficking. On the surface, it would seem God is not a part of this story, *unless, of course, you were listening carefully* as the lesson was read. Look at the lesson in your bulletin now and circle how many times the Lord or God is in the text.

OK, how many times did you circle? There are 9 references to God. What is God doing here? These aren't his people, the Jews, and yet there God is! And these actions - slavery, attempted seduction and framing - yet God is in the middle of it. This tawdry tale is, strangely, part of God's story, too.

No more floods. I'm part of this saga, says God.

These 9 references tell us that God was with Joseph, and that through Joseph, God was blessing people. Blessed to be a blessing. Sound familiar? It's what God told Abraham. Joseph knew it too. That somehow his story was a part of God's story.

So, let's add God's story to Joseph's story. It says that Potiphar could see that there was something special about Joseph. In fact, he knew that God was with Joseph, even though that wasn't his religion. So Potiphar put his household in charge of Joseph and God blessed this household and everyone in it.

We know already that Joseph was loyal to God. For Joseph, that meant being loyal to Potiphar, too, because God was at work in Potiphar's house.

Now, Potiphar may have perceived God's presence with Joseph, but Potiphar's wife was oblivious to it, seeing only someone who could be manipulated for her own purposes! She wanted to share in his potency, but she totally misread what that potency was. For Joseph, it was God.

So Potiphar's nameless wife frames Joseph and he ends up in prison. And while this may seem once again that God had abandoned Joseph, even prison was a sign of God's blessing, because if a servant is accused of raping an Egyptian captain's wife and the captain believes it, execution is usually the result.

And there's more: God made Joseph prosper - even in jail! Eventually Joseph is practically running the joint and he's still officially a prisoner.

Here's what I think all this means: there's always a bigger story going on than just yours - God's, for instance. Does it make a difference to you if your story is intertwined with God's story?

Several points here: I know that some of you may feel when life gets really rough, maybe that means God has wandered away from you because you're not all that you should be. Or maybe God wants to hang out with the winners in the world, so you are left to your little godless corner of the world by yourself.

Joseph had an unshakable belief that somehow God was with him and that he was a part of a larger story. This belief sustained Joseph while he was thrown in a pit, sold down the river, faced with seduction and tossed in prison. Jesus' words today, "blessed are you when people persecute you," had not been spoken yet, but Joseph believed them already!

If we're in a pit, we naturally wonder where God is. When your story is the pits, God has claimed it as part of God's own story. In fact, Jesus was in a bigger pit than you, which means your suffering, too, will be redeemed! When do you exclude God in your imagination because you think God would never be stuck in the muck with the likes of you?

And sometimes we may think God has nothing to do with a world like ours, where many don't believe in Jesus and many, many more don't act like him. It says in our story today God was at work in an Egyptian home with Egyptian people, blessing them. God's vision and activity is a bit bigger than you might think. Do you limit the scope of God's love and activity in your world?

Most people in pews across America believe that pastors are the ones who have callings, but everyone else? They're just trying to make a living. It's not a calling. And Luther is rolling over in his grave. Luther famously said that God calls all of us to our vocations, jobs, stations in life. That means a truck drivers' calling is just as important as a pastors' - *in God's eyes* it is as important.

People usually think the mundane work of keeping your house clean, trying to cook meals, doing laundry, paying bills, overseeing schedules of children, etc. is outside the scope of God's concern. Think again. In our story today, God was at work in Joseph as he manages Potiphar's household, and everyone in the household was blessed. What might it mean for you to recognize that managing a household and a family - or managing anything - is a calling from God? You don't have to be Joseph for God to bless your housework!

And God even blessed a prison! Prisons in this world are probably necessary and the people who are there – prisoner and jailer both - certainly matter. To God they certainly do. So if the jailer who promoted Joseph thought for a second that his work or his prisoners didn't matter, well, he was in for a surprise. Surely God was even in that place. Do you think of this world and your job in it as secular and mundane? It is not. It is sacred and a calling by God to make the world a better place.

Finally, one could conclude that Joseph was just along for the ride, that God was going to do what God was going to do and it didn't matter what Joseph did. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Just because we have a gracious and forgiving God doesn't mean we can't contribute. God can work through scoundrels and corrupt systems, for sure. But it is a lot easier for God to accomplish God's purposes when we, his flawed agents, are loyal to God. When we are faithful and do the right thing. When we say no to Potiphar's wife, even if it costs us. God's work is enhanced when we are a full and willing partner, not an obstacle to be overcome. So it matters what we do in our daily lives! God desires a partner in each of us, a willing partner. When and where can you take a stand in your world – one that may not be easy – all out of your loyalty to God? Remember, your world, your mundane, godless world, actually belongs to God, and he cares what happens in it. Amen.