

## When Dreams Do Come True

Genesis 45:1-15

To his credit, Joseph didn't gloat the day that his brothers threw themselves at his feet to beg for food, making his dreams come true – literally. A lesser man would have thrown a verbal barb or two at them. A lesser man would have taken great pains to refresh their memories, just in case they had forgotten how they had mocked him and his dream of them bowing down to him.

But even if Joseph had, we would probably have forgiven him for it. No one could say they didn't have it coming. It was because of them that he had been sold into slavery in Egypt. It was because of their malice and treachery that he had been treated unjustly, imprisoned unfairly, and left there to rot for the rest of his life. If he had come out of all that on the other end a bit bitter and angry, no one would fault him too much for that. And now, in the irony to beat all ironies, those very same brothers who were ready to leave him to die had come to beg him for mercy so they could live. You bet those guys had a verbal jab or a raised eyebrow coming.

But they never got it. Joseph might very well have turned out bitter or vindictive or self-serving, but he didn't. He was generous and wise and full of grace. So how'd that happen?

There are two refrains running through those three chapters that chronicle Joseph's years of hardship: "But the Lord was with Joseph," and (my paraphrase here) "It wasn't me, it was God." I think those two phrases explain how Joseph turned out to be, well, Joseph.

Each week we begin our Middle School Sunday School class by asking the kids a question: where did you see God at work in your life this week? Do you ever ask yourself that question? Where and how did I see God's presence this week? Here's what most of us do: we think back to the best things that happened to us that week, and we point to them. We see God in the high points, the highlights. The test results came back negative and I felt God's hand in that. I got to spend time with an old friend, and felt God's presence. I was worried about the bills but a check arrived unexpectedly in the mail and I knew that God was looking after me. A friend was really sick, but she's better now.

But what about in the rocky times, when nothing changes or gets resolved, and there are no high points or highlights? That's how Joseph's story reads for about 13 years. God was with Joseph... but he was still a slave. God was with Joseph... but he was still a prisoner in jail. The circumstances of Joseph's life didn't change. You read those chapters and it's still a story of jealousy and violence and injustice and political intrigue and scheming; it is still a dark story about the evils that 'normal' people are capable of. God doesn't punish offenders or spring Joseph from his cell or come to Potiphar in a dream and tell him to emancipate him. Joseph is still in the same boat he was in before.

But, God was with him. And that's the part that the storyteller emphasizes. Joseph wasn't left alone to be shaped solely by the adverse situations he found himself in. Maybe God wasn't changing Joseph's circumstances, but God was changing him so that he wouldn't just survive, but thrive in the life he found himself in. That's often how God works, isn't it? God doesn't make life easier for us, make the bad things go away, but somehow, in the midst of all of it, we suddenly realize that how we face them has changed, that we have been given the strength and the grace and the faith to deal with it.

The other phrase we hear repeatedly comes out of Joseph's own mouth: "It wasn't me, it was God." Joseph has a very strong sense not only that God was with him, but that any particular gifts or opportunities or skill or wisdom he had didn't come from himself, but from the hand of God. God gave dreams, and God gave Joseph the gift of interpreting those dreams. Nature would send drought, but God would provide a way to feed Egypt during the famine. Even the names he gives his sons point to God: Manasseh, meaning "God made me forget all my hardship", and Ephraim, "God made me fruitful."

Joseph sees the world around him perfectly well – the violence, the corruption, the evil that humans are capable of and responsible for – he's not a Pollyanna. But what was more real to him was what was going on in the world that couldn't be seen – God, constantly at work, healing, mending, binding up all things that we have broken. In Joseph's eyes the power of God is far more real, far greater than the power of humans. There's no contest. The dangers of the natural world and the evils that we are capable of will never be able to outmatch God's intention to bring about good.

You know that I like questions. I like to find the questions that scripture asks us to wrestle with and search our hearts to answer. For me, the question that this story poses is, "What will you become?" Joseph became a wise, powerful, merciful leader, not just despite, but because of the terrible things that happened to him. What will you become?

If you think back to the description of the circumstances in Joseph's life, that pretty well fits the world that we have been living in the past few weeks: violence, injustice, political intrigue and scheming. A helicopter was shot down in Afghanistan killing 31 Navy Seals, the highest single day casualty rate yet in a war we've been in for nearly ten years. Our nation's leaders can't seem to lead, casting global doubt on our ability to move the economy forward, and prompting the stock market to take us (and our money) on a roller coaster ride this week. The unemployment rate is approaching 10%, the highest it's been in three decades. England is rioting. Somalia is quietly starving to death. Closer to home people are dealing with financial problems, health, loneliness, grief, burnout, and a whole host of other concerns. The world we are living in, the world we see, is not in great shape right now.

So what will we become because of the situations we find ourselves living in? Will we lose hope? Become cynical? Anxious? Embittered? Apathetic? Angry? Any reasonable person would tell you that those are legitimate responses to the events of the world as we see them. But the story of Joseph invites a different response.

Joseph says something very important to his brothers: *what you meant for evil, God meant for good. I ended up down here in Egypt as a slave and a prisoner because you meant to hurt me, to get rid of me, but God meant to use me to save lives.* The Apostle Paul said the same thing a little differently a few thousand years later: “all things work together for good for those who love the Lord.” When we talk about the providence of God we usually think about it in terms of God tinkering with circumstances and events to accomplish his will. But I think what happens more often is that God tinkers with us, so that we carry out God’s will.

Joseph could have easily spent his days going over and over his brothers’ brutality and the incredible unfairness of his situation and become self-absorbed and angry, and no use to anyone at all. But he didn’t. He was keenly aware that God was with him, and at work in his life, and God was able to use him to prevent a famine in the Near East, and bring peace to his own family.

And Joseph is, by no means, alone. In the 60’s there was a civil rights activist by the name of John Perkins who, like many others, was brutally and repeatedly beaten and jailed. But instead of letting the experience break him or make him bitter, he went on to found several organizations that helped lift African-Americans out of poverty and into a life of dignity.

If you went to Julia Trifiletti’s funeral last month you were privileged to hear Charles read *The Journey*, a moving piece he had written about the difficult journey of a caregiver and the toll it takes over the years. I won’t read the whole piece to you, but I want to read from the last part: “As with all journeys, sooner or later the trip ends... At this point, the caregiver’s job is to tell others about the journey. Perhaps he can reveal where the rocks and the holes are, so that the travelers who follow behind will not stumble. Falls can be very painful sometimes. If he can show his fellow travelers how to avoid those rocks, then his job will be done. I promise to start tomorrow.”

What will you become? The world we see doesn’t look so great. But behind the scenes God is quietly at work bring good out of evil, life out of death. Maybe not by magically disarming roadside bombers or convincing the good folks at Standard & Poors to add another ‘A’ to our nation’s credit rating, but by working in you, and on you, and through you, so that you are bringing good out of evil, life out of death. Where have you seen God at work in your life this week? If someone asks you that, I hope you can tell them. I hope you are as aware as Joseph was that God is with you, making you people of hope and healing.