

NL #3 Joseph in Prison Oct. 2, 2022

My 91 year old Dad drove up and visited with Phil and me last weekend; some of you saw him at church on Sunday. We had a great time together doing a variety of activities, but for me at least, the most memorable thing we did together was to look through some old family history and photographs. There is something so meaningful about tracing family history through generations and discovering new things about the past and the present-- and how they are related. We came upon an old picture of my great grandmother, for example, seated at the piano from which she gave music lessons to students in the early 1900s. It was fun to think that gift has passed from her to my grandmother to my mother and to me. Our Narrative Lectionary is essentially walking us through some *ancient* family history these weeks. And just as is true in our families, we can see how traits and traditions get handed down, both for good and for ill in this Biblical family. The family involved is that of Abraham and Sarah. Last week we encountered this older couple as they responded to God's call to "Go"-- and they went, migrating into the land of Canaan. We marveled at their courage and faith in answering God's call, and we also realized that just because we are responding to God's calling doesn't mean things will go easily for us. Abraham and Sarah had more than their share of hardships, and yet their faith enabled them to be a part of God's intent to bless the world through them. Now just one week later, we are encountering their great grandson, Joseph, made famous in the popular musical, "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat". But what happened between our original ancestral couple of Abraham and Sarah and this sudden introduction of their great grandson?

As you recall, Abraham and Sarah were eventually blessed with a son in their old age, Isaac. Isaac marries Rebecca, and they have twins, Esau and Jacob. The two boys are in continual rivalry, culminating in Jacob stealing his twin's birthright and blessing from his father with his mother's conniving assistance; talk about family dysfunction!. Jacob, also known as Israel, becomes the father of

the 12 tribes of Israel through his 12 sons. Israel translates as “one who wrestles with God,” and among Jacob’s adventures are a night of wrestling with God. He and his brother do eventually reconcile, but Jacob gets a taste of his own medicine from his Uncle Laban. Jacob wishes to marry the beautiful Rachel, but Laban manages to substitute his plainer and older daughter, Leah, instead. So, Jacob ends up working many years for his uncle to earn his bride, Rachel.

Jacob has many children, including twelve sons, and he favors his son by Rachel, Joseph. As we know from the musical, Joseph receives a beautiful and colorful coat from his father and swanks about in it, arousing the resentment of his many older brothers. He also tells them about dreams he has in which they bow down to him. Naturally, they detest him and want to knock him down a few pegs, but they come up with a rather extreme solution-- a plot to get rid of him. They fake his death, bringing back his coveted colorful cloak covered in an animal's blood, and telling their father that he had been mauled to death by a wild animal. In reality, they sell him into slavery, and so he goes to Egypt, where we meet up with him in our lesson. Phew! I mean, what a family! And isn't it both interesting and significant that there had been bitter sibling relationships in each successive generation of this family, a kind of generational trauma that kept getting played out again in the next generation? One lesson learned—no matter how dysfunctional you may think your family is, it pales in comparison to our ancestors in faith! And yet, God worked through them.

Our particular ancient text for today has again some startlingly current themes, doesn't it? Human trafficking, slavery, sexual harassment, unjust imprisonment. Joseph's story is filled with drama, with upheavals and triumphs, and strangely, with cloaks. That beautiful multicolored cloak that Joseph's father, Jacob, gave him stirred the resentment of his brothers and was then covered in animal blood and used as false evidence to convince their father that Joseph had been mauled to death by an animal. But in today's text, years later, Joseph's *Egyptian* cloak ends up in the clutches of Potiphar's wife, and she uses

it to substantiate a false claim of attempted sexual assault, so that Joseph is unjustly imprisoned.

Perhaps we should be more careful about our outerwear! But what happened between these two cloak incidents? Quite a lot, as it happens.

Certainly most foreign slaves in the ancient world did not fare well. Joseph, as a young and vulnerable Hebrew among Egyptians, traumatized by violence and betrayal from his brothers, and not speaking the language or understanding the ways of this new nation, seems a very likely candidate for misery and obscurity. But that's not what happens! And why? Because, as we read repeatedly in our lesson today, the Lord was with Joseph. In these darkest and most traumatic of times, God was powerfully present with this young Hebrew man. And as a result, Joseph grows from being that arrogant, swanking young man who aroused the hatred of his brothers into a man of integrity, trustworthiness, competency, and faith. He so impresses his Egyptian master, Potiphar, with his organizational skills and trustworthiness, that he is placed in charge of Potiphar's estate. Later, when he is unjustly imprisoned, he again so impresses the chief jailer with his organizational skills and trustworthiness, that he is again placed in charge. Later yet, when he successfully interprets some dreams for the Egyptian pharaoh, he will find his way to a high administrative position over the land of Egypt, from which he will work to avert mass starvation in the face of an oncoming famine. God's presence in Joseph's life, and Joseph's awareness of God's presence and his faith in God, transformed Joseph into a man of strength and honor. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. How does Joseph come to be unjustly imprisoned?

As it happens, we are told that Joseph is handsome and good looking, not at all the kind of scriptural detail we usually are given. It seems that Potiphar's wife was quite taken by Joseph and began a campaign of sexual harassment towards him. We more often think of sexual harassment as happening on the part of men towards women, but obviously it can happen in both directions, as it does here.

Joseph, because of his faith and integrity, refuses her unwelcome advances. He does not wish to betray his master's trust, nor does he wish to sin against God. Potiphar's wife, who remains unnamed, escalates her sexually abusive treatment and actually tries to physically engage with Joseph against his will. This is the cause of him running off from her, leaving his cloak in her hands; she then claims that she took his cloak from him while screaming as he attempted to sexually assault her. We might wonder why her false claim was so readily believed, but maybe that's a little naive on our part. She was the person with power in this situation; he was but a slave. And not only a slave, but a foreigner, a "Hebrew", as she points out in her false testimony several times. She is, in fact, manipulating the situation by inciting racism, the hostility Egyptians felt towards Hebrews. Not unlike a white woman might have done if making a false charge of rape against a black man during the years of slavery in our nation; almost certainly she would have been believed regardless of the true circumstances. Joseph stood no chance of being believed and was imprisoned. And yet, even in prison, we read that the Lord was with him, and Joseph's merit is again recognized and his skills are valued and utilized.

As referenced earlier, Joseph eventually interprets some dreams for the Pharaoh involving an upcoming time of widespread famine, is released from prison, and is promoted to a high position of authority. Due to Joseph's presence and ingenuity, Egypt prospers during the time of famine. Which means folks from all over that region must come and purchase grain from them. Among those who come, in an amazing example of karma, are Joseph's brothers. Times are hard back in Canaan, and they wish to purchase grain from Egypt and bring it back to feed the family. When the brothers come before Joseph to buy the grain, they don't recognize him; why would they? It's been decades, and from their perspective, he could be serving as a slave anywhere in Egypt or be quite likely dead from the hardships of slavery; they certainly wouldn't expect to find him amongst Egyptian royalty, second only to the Pharaoh in power. *They don't recognize him, but he recognizes them.* After a bit of time and a few

brotherly payback moments, Joseph reveals his identity. He speaks truth to his brothers about their past sin—“You sold me into slavery”, he says. But then he forgives his brothers and assures the survival of his family, and through them, the survival of the Hebrew people. He does this by inviting all of them to come to Egypt and escape starvation from the famine. He includes everyone in that invitation from the patriarch, his Father Jacob, to the brothers, and on down to the children and grand-children of his brothers; thus four generations are involved. Which suggests that by his act of forgiveness and reconciliation, Joseph will reverse the generational trauma and model a different way of relating as a family, all the way to that youngest generation. Joseph breaks the cycle of rivalry, violence, and retribution. Furthermore, many lives in that region were saved because of Joseph’s wise stockpiling of food prior to the famine. Truly, he has become a good and honorable man, as a result of God’s presence with him and his faith in God. So what might be a few takeaways for us from this truly remarkable story about a remarkable man?

We see that many of our current societal ills have been present for literally thousands of years, including racism, human trafficking, sexual harassment, and unjust imprisonment. Sad, but true. We see that families throughout time, including in the scriptures, are capable of and impressive degree of dysfunction. Sad, but true. But, we also see that God is present with us in the darkest and most miserable times of our lives. We see that God can work through us, even in the midst of unjust circumstances or massive familial or systemic dysfunction, to bring good to the world. We see that God's presence with us and our faith in God can be transformational in our lives; like Joseph, we can grow up and become better versions of ourselves. We see that when we may feel most abandoned, despairing, or alone, God's love is powerfully present for us. Amen.

