

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, February 14, 2021

Hymns: 472 – We Are God’s People; Cornerstone / Solid Rock; 792 – Let Us Hope

Scripture: Genesis 37:1-8; Acts 7:9-14

Sermon Title: Hoping When Hope Seems Hopeless

Genesis 37:2-8 (NLT)

This is the account of Jacob and his family. When Joseph was 17 years old, he often tended his father’s flocks. He worked for his half brothers, the sons of his father’s wives Bilhah and Zilpah. But Joseph reported to his father some of the bad things his brothers were doing.

Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other children because Joseph had been born to him in his old age. So one day Jacob had a special gift made for Joseph—a beautiful robe. But his brothers hated Joseph because their father loved him more than the rest of them. They couldn’t say a kind word to him.

One night Joseph had a dream, and when he told his brothers about it, they hated him more than ever. “Listen to this dream,” he said. “We were out in the field, tying up bundles of grain. Suddenly my bundle stood up, and your bundles all gathered around and bowed low before mine!”

His brothers responded, “So you think you will be our king, do you? Do you actually think you will reign over us?” And they hated him all the more because of his dreams and the way he talked about them.

Acts 7:9-14 (CEV)

Joseph was also one of our famous ancestors. His brothers were jealous of him and sold him as a slave to be taken to Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. God made him so wise that the Egyptian king Pharaoh thought highly of him. The king even made Joseph governor over Egypt and put him in charge of everything he owned.

Everywhere in Egypt and Canaan the grain crops failed. There was terrible suffering, and our ancestors could not find enough to eat. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our ancestors there for the first time. It was on their second trip that Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph’s family. Joseph sent for his father and his relatives. In all, there were 75 of them.

Last week, we heard the story of twin brothers Jacob and Esau, sons of Isaac and Rebekah, and how God uses the shifty Jacob for God’s good purpose. Today, our focus shifts to Jacob’s twelve sons, particularly the second-youngest of the bunch, a fine looking fellow, apple of his father’s eye, and hero of our story this morning – Joseph!

Jacob, son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham, is now himself an old man, and is

spending his Golden Years dotting upon his spoiled teenage son Joseph, whom the rest of the family, particularly Joseph's brothers, have learned to hate. Not surprising, given that we read, "*Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other children.*" It seems that either Jacob failed to learn from his own life about the pitfalls of parental favoritism, or perhaps was simply doomed to repeat the mistakes of his own parentage. Joseph, the favourite, didn't help matters by reporting to his father all of his brothers' many misdeeds and shortcomings. His father interprets this as demonstrating natural executive ability, and promotes Joseph to overseer status, confirming the position with a coat made just for the purpose, famously known in our time as the "Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." Joseph's elder brothers, in itchy and scratchy hand-me-down workman's clothes, learn to hate the new suit almost as much as the guy inside it. Or, as the Bible puts it, "*they could not speak peaceably to him.*" I know families like that.

And then there are the dreams. He dreams dreams, this Joseph, and over breakfast shares them with his family, and his brothers choke on their Wheaties as Joseph tells a dream in which he is the undisputed star, while around him kneel his brothers in adoration and praise. Given this kind of endless goading, it is small wonder the brothers were filled with a constant jealous rage, which finally boiled over in what happened next.

The brothers were pasturing the flocks far afield, several days journey away, and their father Jacob was growing anxious. He decides to send favoured son Joseph after them to have a look and report back. Joseph sets off, suit freshly pressed, eager to play the foreman over his older siblings. He's still a good way off when his brothers spot him, recognizable even from a distance in his natty threads, and it is then, far from home and fresh with loathing and resentment, they decide to kill him. "*Let's fix this dreamer once and for all,*" they conspire, "*we'll throw him into a pit and say a wild animal got him, and then we'll see where his dreams get him.*" No sooner is this plan hatched, than in saunters the young executive, Joseph himself, with a cheery, "*Morning, boys, and I suppose you call this standing around, working?*" At which point they fall upon him, strip him of his cherished and hated robe, throw him into a pit, and, happy as larks, settle down for a bite to eat, serenaded by the cries of their brother's despair.

When what to their wondering eyes should appear, but a caravan of merchants on their way to Egypt. It is Judah who realizes that there is, to add to the sweetness of revenge, a dollar to be made (Genesis 37:26-27): *Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh."* And his brothers agreed.

Off the caravan goes, while back at camp, the brothers slay a goat and sprinkle the blood upon Joseph's famous robe, which they then return empty to their father, claiming to have stumbled upon it accidentally, and gee, does it look familiar to you, Dad?

Assuming Joseph to have been devoured by a wild animal, Jacob tears his own clothes, covers himself with sackcloth, and descends into a grief that would span the years – a grim revenge for his own many deceptions and misdeeds.

Little does Jacob know, but it turns out Joseph actually lands on his feet. He was sold to a fellow named Potiphar, an Egyptian government official, who soon recognized Joseph's natural executive abilities and promoted him to chief steward of the household, where Joseph managed affairs in such a way that the house seemed blessed by God. But trouble was ahead. The worst kind of trouble. Woman trouble.

It seems this Potiphar had a wife, a wife with a wandering eye, and it soon rested upon Joseph, who is described for us as *“handsome and good-looking,”* or *“well-built and handsome,”* or *“handsome in form and appearance,”* depending upon which translation you might use. Whatever he was, it worked for Potiphar's wife, who dispensed with any of the standard formalities and cut to the chase. *“Lie with me,”* she said, *“sleep with me, come to be with me, make love to me,”* she said, again depending upon your translation. I prefer *“Lie with me,”* because it conveys an appropriate double-entendre: it incorporates both the act and the deceit which accompanies it. But our hero is unswayed by her many appeals (Genesis 39:10): *“And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.”* Smart boy, our Joseph. And in his answer, he gives the reason for his stalwart refusal (Genesis 39:8-9):

“With me in charge,” he told her, *“my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?”*

There is a lot in this answer. Joseph points out how he is in a position of trust, and he is not about to betray that trust, no matter how alluring the opportunity. But even more importantly, he sweeps all potential rationalizations aside, and says, quite simply, that to succumb to temptation's siren song would be to betray not only Potiphar, not only Potiphar's wife, not only himself, but, as he says, *“How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?”*

Not, “what if I get caught.” Not, “what if Potiphar somehow finds out and has me strung up.” Not, “what if you get pregnant.” No, Joseph sums it all up by saying that it is, in essence, wrong, and as such is a sin against God. Maybe Potiphar wouldn't know, but by golly God would know, and that is good enough for Joseph. With all clarity, he held on to the assurance of his convictions, and when even that didn't suffice, he ran. Smart boy, this Joseph. He didn't flirt with temptation. He ran from it like a scalded cat. If more people would have the good sense to run, a lot more people would be better off.

But back to our story where, it seems, no good deed goes unpunished. Potiphar's wife, stung by rejection, cries “Rape!” and before you know it, Joseph is in the dampest,

darkest corner of the deepest, darkest dungeon. Where, thanks to his natural abilities and the blessing of God, wins the trust and the admiration of the Warden, and before you know it is running the place.

The years pass, and inmates under Joseph's care come and go, but a couple of new fellows enter the scope of our story. They are the cupbearer and baker to the Pharaoh himself – his wine steward and his pastry chef – and they've been tossed in jail for offending the Pharaoh in some way. Sour wine and stale biscuits, probably. One morning, they look even more glum than normal, and Joseph asks what's wrong. Bad dreams, it turns out, and both of them are baffled as to what these dreams might mean. "*Let me try,*" says Joseph, no stranger to figuring out dreams of his own. "*Do not interpretations belong to God?*" So they tell him their tales.

"Good news," he tells the cupbearer. "Your dream means you'll soon get your old job back. And when you do, maybe you might mention me to the Pharaoh." The wine steward is, of course, overjoyed. The baker can hardly wait to hear his interpretation.

"Bad news," Joseph tells the baker. "Within three days, you'll be hanged, impaled, and left for the birds." The baker is, of course, not overjoyed. Particularly when Joseph is proven right.

Two long years pass, and now it is the Pharaoh's turn to dream. And these were no ordinary dreams. Listen (Genesis 41:1-8)

Pharaoh had a dream: He was standing beside the Nile, when seven healthy-looking, well-fed cows came up from the Nile and began to graze among the reeds. After them, seven other cows, sickly and thin, came up from the Nile and stood beside those cows. The sickly, thin cows ate the healthy, well-fed cows. (Another similar dream followed.) Then Pharaoh woke up. He was troubled, so he summoned all the magicians and wise men of Egypt. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but none could interpret them.

If only there was someone who could interpret dreams! The Baker, suddenly remembering, mentioned this guy Joseph he met in jail. Immediately, Pharaoh sent for our boy. He said to Joseph, "*I had a dream last night, and no one here can tell me what it means. But I have heard that when you hear about a dream you can interpret it.*"

"*It is beyond my power to do this,*" Joseph replied. "*But God can tell you what it means and set you at ease.*" And so Pharaoh told him his dreams, and God did, indeed, give the interpretation. Listen to Joseph's response (Gen 41:28-36):

God has shown what he intends to do. For seven years Egypt will have more than enough grain, but that will be followed by seven years when there won't be enough. The good years of plenty will be forgotten, and everywhere in Egypt people will be starving. God has given you two dreams to let you know that he has definitely decided to do this and that he will do it soon.

Your Majesty, you should find someone who is wise and will know what to do, so that you can put him in charge of all Egypt. Then appoint some other officials to collect one-fifth of every crop harvested in Egypt during the seven years when there is plenty. Give them the power to collect the grain during those good years and to store it in your cities until it is needed during the seven years when there won't be enough grain in Egypt. This will keep the country from being destroyed because of the lack of food.

And who wiser, who better to appoint than the interpreter himself? Before you know it, our hero is the number two man in all Egypt, answerable only to Pharaoh himself. The storehouses are built, the grain is collected, and if you travel through Egypt the foundations of these very granaries are still visible today.

Seven years of plenty, seven years of storage, and then, just as predicted, the famine hit. The sun burned, the wheat withered, the Nile dried to a trickle. And who was sitting on a mountain of grain? Who is sitting upon his gilded throne, resplendent in linen white as the clouds, headdress of turquoise and gold gleaming like the sun, sceptre in his hand, servants at his side, Egypt awaiting his every command? It is Joseph. He cornered not only the market, he cornered the world, and they come from every land on bended knee, loaded with gold, begging for grain.

And yet, despite his success, as he sits upon his throne, he weeps. His wife, his children sit at his feet, and as he looks upon them, his heart breaks, torn between joy and sorrow, for in the faces of his children he sees the faces of his brothers, in his wife he sees his mother, and in his mind's eye he sees only home, and the tears soaking the beard of his dear old Dad. And then one day...

The reception hall was once again filled with petitioners from home and away, seeking grain, when Joseph heard a strange but familiar sound. It was the language which first caught his ear, the dialect, the phrases, the accent, the tone. His eyes snapped open, searching the throng, following the oddly familiar voices. And there they were - his brothers! It must be them! The moments dragged until at last it was their turn, until at last they knelt before him, faces to the ground. His eyes cut through the fabric of years, and he recognised them all, but as they looked upon him they saw only the blinding light of his glory; they saw the throne, the headdress, the glorious robes, the smooth, oiled skin. It was like looking upon a god, which was the effect intended. They had no idea it was the annoying little twerp they had thrown down the well, and good riddance to him.

It all flashed through Joseph's mind: the happy years of his youth, the joy of his father's love, the coat of his father's favour; the cruel jeers and laughter of his brothers as they cast him into the pit, the haggling with the slave traders, the long march to Egypt in chains. Sold like cattle to Potiphar, the warmth of Potiphar's trust, the heat of Potiphar's wife. The injustice of accusation, the hopeless years of prison, the day of Pharaoh's dream. And now a dream come true, the dream he dreamed as a boy, the dream when,

like stalks of wheat, his brothers bow down before him.

After a series of adventures (too long to go into now) through which Joseph gets his revenge, finally the reunion is complete. Clapping his eyes on the sorry lot of bedraggled brothers, he bursts into tears, and, it says (Genesis 45:2), "*Joseph cried so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and the people in the king's palace heard about it.*" Through his tears, in the language of home, he tells the incredulous brothers that it is he, Joseph, their brother, their long lost, long-suffering brother. Ah, to see their faces then! Joseph sends them home with instructions to hurry back with dear old Dad, who just might survive the shock, and to bring their families too, everyone, and soon they are away, loaded down with wagons and carts and a treasure-train to rival the wealth of kings. A happy ending at last, to an amazing story.

An amazing story. Through it, we witness the plan of God carrying on, carrying forward, unquenched by drought, undaunted by famine, overcoming treachery and ruin, thriving in the midst of chaos. God will have his people, his chosen people, his messengers of faithfulness and good news to the nations, and jealousy, fratricide, kidnapping, slavery, falsehood, lust, politics - nothing of our story will get in the way of God's Story, of God's plan to bring us home. God will have us, will make use of our poor yet hoarded talents, and through us, through his people, will bring hope to the world.

An amazing story. Through it, we learn from Joseph, who never lost hope, who never gave up, who always knew, even in the deepest pit, the darkest dungeon, that God's promises were for real and for good; Joseph who, in his moments of victory, gave credit to God, proving himself a child of God; Joseph who, when confronted with temptation, resisted and ran, proving himself wise; Joseph who, in his moments of failure, his all too easy conceit and his thirst for revenge, proved that he, too, was human. God promises to be with us, beside us, around us, within us at all times, no matter the circumstances; in our victories, our temptations, our failures, our humanity, God's love will not let us go.

An amazing story. A story of the People of God, and so it is not just a story, but our story, our history, our dream, our promise. Stephen's sermon in the Book of Acts, of which we heard but a small part, drew the unbroken line of faith and hope from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and Moses and David and Solomon and the rest, all the way through to Jesus, and all the way through to you and to me. It is all one story, that of Joseph, of Jesus, of us. It is all one story, one history, one promise. A promise that has survived the ages, a promise that will never die; that God will be our God; that he will never leave us or forsake us; that in his love he will never let us go. An amazing story. Our story.

Thanks be to God, by whose Spirit is with us, beside us, around us, within us at all times, no matter the circumstances; thanks be to God, who in our victories, our temptations, our failures, our humanity, will never let us go. Amen.