

Faith in the Darkness
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Genesis 40

Joseph's life was not turning out the way he had dreamed. He lay in his cell and listened to the sound of the prison guards laughing in the hallway. He watched the flies swarm on his empty food dish. He closed his eyes and he remembered. He remembered the old stories his father Jacob had told him in the safety of their tent, back in Canaan. He used to crawl up into his father's lap, and Jacob would tell him stories; stories about the wonderful things God had done in the life of his great grandfather Abraham. "Joseph, my beloved son, have I ever told you about how my Grandfather left his home in Ur and about the great promise God has made to our family? Joseph, did I tell you how God gave Abraham a son in his old age? Joseph, did I tell you the story of how God rescued Abraham from trouble so many times! Joseph, we serve a good God, and we are his people. He will take care of us." Joseph loved those old stories; he believed those old stories; he set his whole life by those stories. And curled up in his Father's lap they all seemed completely true.

But now he was as far from his father's lap as he could possibly be. He was lying on the hard stone floor of an Egyptian prison, surrounded by dust and darkness. Sitting in this prison, he felt an enormous gap between the promise of those stories and the dead end of his life. There was a chasm between their promise and his reality.

And it wasn't because of anything he'd done. He'd tried to be faithful and good, but everything seemed to turn against him. His brothers hated him. They sold him into slavery. They seized him, stripped him of his clothes and threw him in a hole. He went to Potiphar's house and he had a miserable time there. He worked hard and tried to be faithful, but Potiphar's wife kept making passes at him. And when he said 'no' she got angry. She said that he made the advances. She accused Joseph of sexual harassment and got him thrown in prison.

Then in prison there was the cupbearer and his dreams. He thought for sure that this was his lucky break. He thought for sure that here his luck was going to change. He had been a friend and counselor to one of Pharaoh's highest officials. They had been brothers in suffering. He had shown kindness to the man, interpreted his dreams. And on the day he got out Joseph had embraced the cupbearer and said with something close to desperation: "Remember me when it is well with you; please do me the kindness to make mention of me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this place!!" After that day, for the next several weeks, Joseph woke up every morning expecting that today would bring good news! A guard would come to his cell and say, "Joseph you're free. A special pardon from Pharaoh! Somebody up there likes you!" But the days turned into weeks which turned into months. It was clear: there would be no good news. He had been forgotten. The distance between those old stories and the reality of Joseph's life had never been wider.

And it's clear that Joseph feels that gap. I think this was the first time I'd read through the Joseph story when I really noticed verses 14 and 15 when Joseph pleads with the cupbearer to remember him. Maybe you sensed from the way I tried to read it, I think there is a note of desperation in Joseph's voice. "I have done nothing that they should put me in a dungeon!" It's Joseph's lament. "My God, my God why have you forsaken me!?!"

We can identify with the Joseph of chapter 40. We know about this gap between promises and reality. We may never have been in a dungeon, but we know about this gap between the old stories of salvation and the actual stories of our lives. We read and sing, “The Lord will not let your foot stumble or slip.” But then we see a young mother taken away from her children by cancer when they clearly needed her. We read “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it! God is in control,” but then we watch the man-made chaos in Afghanistan, or we see the natural chaos – an earthquake followed a tropical storm – that devastated Haiti. We hear Jesus say, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” But then we see a friend lost in a sea of depression who tells us that he cannot hear God’s voice and he feels completely alone. There’s a gap. We live with a gap.

Well, so far I think we’ve seen pretty clearly that this isn’t a particularly cheerful chapter, but take heart: this story isn’t meant to make us feel blue, it is meant to give us hope. There are two things we can point to in this story that give guidance and encouragement to people who feel, as we do, the gap between God’s promise and our hard reality. The first hopeful thing is Joseph’s life. The more I study this story, the more impressed I am with the way Joseph handles his situation. Joseph has had a terrible life. Joseph has been pushed around by lying, ruthless, selfish people. But he refuses to respond in kind. He feels the push of the darkness and the weight of the darkness, but he lives out of the light.

You see that in four ways. In the darkness, Joseph manages to be compassionate. Did you notice in verse 6 and 7 how Joseph moves toward the trouble of his neighbors? “When Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw they were dejected...so he asked them, “Why do you look so sad today?” I know it seems like a small thing, but that is a remarkable act of compassion. Joseph’s compassion puts most of us to shame. When I am busy with a sermon and feel the relatively small pressure of getting this thing done, that little bit of anxiety is often enough to kill my compassion. I don’t like it when I’m interrupted. I complain when the phone rings. I become irritable. My head is full of my own worries and I am far less inclined to ask a neighbor: “Hey neighbor, you look glum. Is there anything wrong?” Joseph is dealing with much more than an unfinished sermon! Yet, in the middle of all his stress, he somehow manages not only to ask about their sadness, but also to help when the trouble is revealed.

In the darkness, Joseph keeps his moral focus. When Potiphar’s wife propositions him, it would have been a simple thing for him to give in. He had endured so much; what was a little dalliance on the side. It wouldn’t mean anything. Life owed him a little fun! Didn’t he deserve some happiness?! The door was wide open for rationalization, but Joseph refuses to walk through that door.

In a ruthless world, Joseph practices forgiveness. When he impales the baker, Pharaoh shows us one kind of approach to those who sin against you. Pharaoh rules by raw power and ruthlessness. Pharaoh takes brutal revenge on people who cross him. But Joseph will not live Pharaoh’s way. His brothers wished him dead and sold him into slavery and prison where he languished for 13 years. And yet when they show up, and he has the power at his fingertips to reap revenge, Joseph freely embraces them and forgives them.

And, in the darkness, Joseph keeps speaking his faith. Remember how he told the cupbearer and the baker, “do not interpretations belong to God?” I know that seems like a small thing, but given his circumstances it’s not small at all. It’s an amazing sign of faith. He’s still giving God the glory and credit. It doesn’t take very much trouble for most of us to say, “God what are you doing!?! Why have you let this terrible thing happen!?!” We are allowed to do that of course. And in verse 14 and 15 we get a hint that Joseph was frustrated, that maybe some of these wild

“Why!?!” questions did pour out of his heart at night when he was alone in his cell. But whatever his frustrations, Joseph keeps looking to God, keeps seeking his face. He keeps saying: “God is good. He is able.” “God is good. He is able.” “God is good. He is able.” And there’s something inspiring about that. I’m pretty sure that I don’t do as well as Joseph with my trouble. But his kindness, his forgiveness, his patience, his grace in the middle of the darkness is an encouragement. It shows me who I want to be.

So Joseph’s life is one hopeful sign in this passage. The second hopeful sign is deeper and more substantial. We started the sermon by saying that sitting in prison, the stories that Joseph heard on his Father’s knee probably didn’t feel like the real story of his life. Sitting in prison after all those disappointments, it probably felt like the real story of his life was the story of Pharaoh’s ruthless power. A story where the strong dominate the weak and take what they want. Or maybe it seemed like he was in the middle of a chaos story – stuff just happens in this world and there is no meaning to it, no sense to it. Meaningless, meaningless everything is meaningless. Sitting in prison I’m sure one of those stories would have seemed like Joseph’s reality.

But all through Joseph’s life another story keeps asserting itself, showing itself, and it shows itself in those dreams. Joseph is the dreamer. His whole life he has had these dreams, or people tell him their dreams. And in each of these dreams it’s like the surface of reality is pulled back, like a curtain is pulled to the side and the deeper story of the world is revealed. Stronger than the chaos, stronger than Pharaoh, these dreams show us that rumbling beneath the surface of things, the great promises of God are moving. Cupbearers forget their promises. Pharaohs forget their promises. Earthly brothers and sisters are not steadfast in their love, but beneath all of that and above all of that the love and promises of the Lord endure forever. These dreams are a sign that God is there and he’s working for Joseph’s salvation.

Of course, Joseph doesn’t see that clearly until chapter 50. Joseph has been rescued from the pit, he’s become Pharaoh’s right hand man, he’s been reconciled to his brothers, he’s saved his people, he’s saved Egypt; God has used him to save the world. Joseph looks back and he sees that God has been with him his whole life, the living God has moved and transformed and shaped and led, and ultimately blessed. He tells his brothers, “You intended this for evil, but God intended it for good!” At the end of his life he looks back and he sees that he has always been in the hand of God. He can see the dreams were always pointing him to the truth. In the bottom of the well, it was God’s story. In Potiphar’s house, it was God’s story. In Pharaoh’s dungeon, it was God’s story.

The dream is still stirring beneath the surface of the world. In the June issue of “First Things” there is a wonderful essay by the essayist and poet Paul Kingsnorth. Kingsnorth describes his upbringing in Britain in the eighties as the kind of upbringing completely devoid of religion. He took it for granted that there was no God. He took it for granted that the only solutions in this world were political and economic. And yet something inside him still stirred.

As a younger man he kept going into little English churches, drawn to the feeling of the place. “Like the narrator in Philip Larkin’s poem “Church Going,” I would venture into any church I found, standing ‘in awkward reverence . . . wondering what to look for,’ drawn by some sense that this was ‘a serious house on serious earth.’ Obviously, there was no God, but still: the silence of a small church in England had a quality that couldn’t be found anywhere else.” He felt the same dream stirring in nature. “Trudging across moors, camping by mountain lakes as the June sun set, I could feel some deep, old power rolling through it all, welding it together,

flowing from the land into me and back again... Nothing humans could build could come close to the intense wonder.”

Kingsnorth carried his atheism into middle age. Eventually his restlessness drove him to activism, then to Buddhism, then to Wicca, but even in these other religions he remained haunted by this sense that there is more. Then one night, right before he is supposed to go to a wiccan ritual, he dreamed of Jesus. Jesus came to him and spoke to him and it was like all his ancient longings got a face and a name. Kingsnorth became a Christian and he says he’s finally found the path that leads home. “Like C.S. Lewis, I couldn’t ignore the steady unrelenting approach of ‘Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet.’ In the end I didn’t become a Christian because I could argue myself into it. I became a Christian because it was true.” The true story of the world, the story of a world transformed by the grace of Jesus Christ simply asserted itself in his life and Paul Kingsnorth surrendered to it. You don’t choose this story. It chooses you. You don’t consider it like some offer of employment, this story comes upon you like an inevitable tide and you either surrender to it, or it sweeps you away. Beneath the surface of secularism, the voice of God still speaks. Jesus is alive. And it is God’s story.

There are lots of days where we feel the gap. Where we feel the chaos. But just like Joseph coming out of prison, just like Jesus emerging from the grave on Easter morning, someday the true story of the world will burst through one last time. We will find ourselves standing in a glorious place, surrounded by light and goodness, surrounded by people we love, the curtain will be pulled back and the story that sometimes just seemed like a dream to us, will become our eternal reality. And we will be so happy to know that we are part of God’s story.

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