

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

16th Sunday after Pentecost
Year A

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September 24, 2017

Text: Genesis 39:1-23

Title: “A Way Out of No Way: Protecting”

We began this series remembering God dealing with messy human beings as we explored the story of Noah. We remembered God’s bow in the sky which recalled God’s attempt to deal with human sin by wiping out all of human kind except the righteous few of Noah’s family. We remembered God’s promise never to use that tactic again when it came to dealing with the evil behaviors of human beings but rather to come in the Christ and die himself in order to reveal what God’s love really looks like.

Last Sunday, we heard God’s call to Abram: “Abram, leave your country and your neighbors and your family and go to a land I will show to you, and I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great and you will be a blessing; all who bless you will be blessed and all who curse you will be cursed and through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.” We pondered that call as it may relate to our district churches engaging in the “Amazing gRace” as we have been challenged to send 12 people out into the neighborhoods carrying a gift and knocking on doors and asking a few non-threatening questions like what do you think our community most needs right now? Those who have volunteered will be meeting today after the 11:15 a.m. service to get this done before next Sunday.

This morning we move from promises God made to Noah and Abraham to the presence of God with Joseph whose brothers sold him into slavery as a result of their angry jealousy. Talk about a dysfunctional family. Jacob’s family was dysfunctional with a capital D. What a mess! The 11th son of a woman who has since died giving birth to his baby brother. The favorite son of his father, loathed by his 10 older brothers. His father doesn’t make him work but instead turns him into the family snitch as he is called upon to supervise their work. And one day when he went out to the fields to do so, they conspire against him, throw him in a pit and sell him to a caravan heading to Egypt which is where we pick up the story.

39 Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. 2 The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. 3 His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. 4 So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house

and put him in charge of all that he had. 5 From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. 6 So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge; and, with him there, he had no concern for anything but the food that he ate.

“The Lord was with Joseph”. Seems a bit strange to hear this given his brothers sold him into slavery. He is not free to be his own man. He can't take off and book a vacation on the beaches of the Mediterranean for a couple of weeks just enjoying time away with his family. He is not free to pursue his own dreams but instead is compelled by his station to fulfill the dreams of the one who owned him, his “master”.

Are there places in your own life in which you feel constrained by the limits placed upon you? Maybe it's a decision upper management makes that imposes a way of working that you find untenable but have to decide to comply, protest or leave. Maybe it's wanting to follow your passion to be a professional musician or some form of full-time ministry but your parents want you to pursue medicine because there's more prestige, more money, and they've made it clear they aren't paying for anything but a path to medicine. It's happened to a few youth I've known over the years. Are there situations in life—now or in the past--you'd rather not be in—or have been in--but for unforeseen reasons, you're there whether by your own fault or others?

In spite of what Joseph had already endured, “The Lord was with him.” He grew into a person of integrity, so much so that his master entrusted his affairs to him and things went well. He had the “Midas' touch” as it were. The returns on the master's investments were in the double digits. The farm operation doubled in size. His master prospered, and Joseph was a success!

There are some who would see this as a story of God actively providing financial prosperity as a result of faithfulness. It's the prosperity gospel: if you are faithful, work hard and endure, God will grant you financial reward. There are mega church pastors who preach this gospel all the time. I suppose it's evident in the thousands they preach to every week in the multimillion dollar churches and their multi-million dollar homes. It appears to be true for them.

I appreciated the honesty of one commentator I read who reflected on this passage:

I am still wrestling with the idea of a God who causes us to prosper. I wonder if my generally liberal protestant background, which is so nervous about prosperity Gospel, undercuts a healthy understanding of God's blessings in our lives.

..the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field.

So does this mean we're doing something wrong if we aren't all rich by now? Are God's blessings all about prospering?

Consider what happens next in Joseph's story:

Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. 7 And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." 8 But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. 9 He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" 10 And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her. 11 One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house, 12 she caught hold of his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside. 13 When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, 14 she called out to the members of her household and said to them, "See, my husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice; 15 and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside." 16 Then she kept his garment by her until his master came home, 17 and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me; 18 but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside."

19 When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, "This is the way your servant treated me," he became enraged. 20 And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison.

I have to ask: if God rewards hard work and faithfulness with prosperity and financial gain why is Joseph sold into slavery by his own brothers? Why is his integrity in refusing to engage sexually with another's spouse met with imprisonment as a result of her need for revenge for being spurned? How is this prosperity for his faithfulness? Where is the blessing in this for a person who understands that God is with him?

We all know that bad things happen to good people; even those most devoted to God find themselves in situations they don't deserve. Ask the people still digging out of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Ask the people of Mexico City. Bad things happen to good people, so if you've found yourself in some kind of enslavement whether it be ill health or job loss due to standing up for your principles or being marginalized by people you thought were your friends until you informed them your child is gay, know that you are in good company. God's blessings are not about prosperity or being free from being hurt.

Listen further to Joseph's story:

21 But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. 22 The chief jailer committed to

Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. 23 The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper.
(Genesis 39 (NRSV))

Joseph suffered. He suffered at the hands of his own brothers. He suffered from the lies of a spurned woman. He suffered from the angry imprisonment by his master. But here he is in that prison and somehow even there the Lord was with him and showed him steadfast love. There must have been something about Joseph that endeared him to others. Maybe it was the sense of understanding Joseph had that God was protecting him in spite of what others did to him or said about him. Maybe it was the ability Joseph had to refuse to equate the suffering he endured with God punishing him for something said or done. Maybe Joseph had a way of looking for God in all situations. Maybe he trusted that God desired good for him and he was confident that in spite of his circumstances God would not forsake him, that God was protecting him and making a way out of no way.

That's the word I hear from Joseph today: that we trust that God desires good for us even—and maybe especially—when we suffer, that we remain confident that God will not forsake us but desires blessings for everyone, that God invites us to look for God in every situation because God does not abandon anyone even those good people who experience bad things, and know that in the words of the psalmist “God's steadfast love endures forever!”