

Joseph – “Things Fall Apart”

Text(s): Genesis 39:1-23

- Pastor Mike Pancoast

If you were to read the whole Joseph story—which begins actually two chapters before (in Genesis 37) where we meet him today and continues through the end of the book (Genesis 50)—I believe it would strike you as the makings of one of the best country music songs ever. And I’m not talking about the New Country, that sings about family and faith and “just another day in Paradise,” as Phil Vassar sang about a few years ago. I’m talking about the stuff that Willie and Waylon and Johnny and Merle and Hank and George Jones sang about...the stuff that looks like what we’d LIKE to think is out there on the fringes of life but has a way of finding its way front and center. Edgy. Raw. The lyrics and tunes of that long, dark night of the soul.

By the time we meet Joseph today, you would unflinchingly be able to say that he and his family put the “fun” in “disFUNction!,” between his dad Jacob playing favorites and Joseph being a tattler on his other 10 older brothers. While they do all the dirty, hard work with the flocks out in the field, Daddy showers Little Joe with the all the easy jobs back home and fine clothes. On top of it all, when they are together, Joseph doesn’t help his standing with them as he shares with his brothers the dreams he’s been having: about binding sheaves in the field, when all of sudden his brothers’ sheaves bowed down in homage to his sheaf, seeming to imply their intended servitude to him. As if they need any other reminders about his place in the family! In fact, the very first chapter about Joseph, Chapter 37, has hardly introduced the “Jacob-son” family when elements of the 10 older brothers are ready to kill Joseph. Literally. It’s the two oldest brothers, of course, Reuben and Judah, who talk some sense into the other 8 fire eaters, convincing them instead to sell him into slavery instead. And that’s where we pick it up today: “*Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt...*” (v. 1), though as we heard from today’s reading, the Country Song Saga continues. And there’s 11 more chapters of the song to go! (By the way, it’s no George Jones or Patsy Cline, but Andrew Lloyd Webber’s “*Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*,” starring Donny Osmond, is as fine a rendering of the story as there is.)

And, yes, it is clear through the story that at least early on, Joseph is a brat. It is clear that his father’s indulgences have spoiled him and wrecked the family. One can’t help but be sympathetic with the older brothers’ jealousies if not their intentions. Yet how much is enough for Joseph? Sure, he’s a schmuck, but how much does any one schmuck deserve? Betrayed by his brothers. Sold into slavery. Framed and falsely accused by his employer. At almost every turn, Joseph is let down, betrayed and completely has his life turned upside down. Nothing upon which one might otherwise build a foundation of trust and hope is found to be reliable or certain. Not his family. Not a sense of fairness or justice. Not even a good-old-fashioned helping of stick-to-it-tiveness. How much is enough?

Yet again... and again... and AGAIN Genesis reminds us that God is with Joseph. No fewer than three times do we hear that refrain in just this chapter alone: “*The Lord was with Joseph*” (vs. 3, 21, & 23), not to mention the words that tell us that God caused everything Joseph touched to prosper and work out.

BUT WHAT’S NOT AT ALL CLEAR from the text is whether Joseph himself knows this. The cycle of Joseph stories are different from everything else in Genesis that precedes them and from the Exodus account that follows them. In those texts, the place, presence, and action of God is as evident as the nose on one’s face: “And God said to Adam & Eve...”; “So the Lord spoke to Abraham...”; “And God caused an easterly wind to blow...”. But there’s none of that in the Joseph stories. Sure, there are the dreams that eventually Joseph is given that seem to indicate there’s more going on here than meets the eye. But even there, as to where those dreams came from, it’s up to Joseph—and to YOU, dear Christian—to decide. Betrayed by his brothers. Sold into slavery. Framed and falsely accused by his employer. Unjustly thrown in the slammer like a common criminal. But God was with Joseph, says the text.

It’s not unlike Jesus in the garden, hoping for PRAYING FOR deliverance, “Let this cup pass.” Or even hanging on the cross, “My God, my God, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?!” And in both cases, the answer was apparent silence, at least until such point as the story divulges what we confess by faith, “*On the*

third day he rose again from the dead.” But that outcome is no sure thing as the story unfolds, any more so than the resurrection of our beloved dead for whom we still wait. Or the promise of our own liberation from death. Or the resurrection of our homes, our schools, and our community, to place it in a more immediate context. But God was with Joseph. God raised Jesus from the dead. And God has promised to be with us.

When considering these texts for the students he taught, Luther wondered how Joseph knew, how Joseph was sustained, how Joseph didn't give up hope in his trials, since the text doesn't tell us. And here is the conclusion Luther drew, something that Luther himself knew a little about in his own vocation as parent, and it's nothing particularly super-spiritual:

Why is Joseph's heart not broken, and why does he not cry out in despair?...From his FATHER Jacob, Joseph received the Word which he keeps firmly in his heart—the Word by which he was taught to believe, and trust in, the mercy of God. Through this faith, Joseph conquered all. Not indeed that his flesh did not feel the horrible assaults of the trials, since the flesh is very soft and unable to bear trials or to keep from raging against God. But the Holy Spirit strengthened him. ...[T]he faith he learned from his father (Martin Luther, Lectures on Genesis, Vol. 7, pp. 55-57).

How did Joseph know the Lord was with him? Someone else told him, and that someone was his closest relation.

Dear friends, God's preservation of Joseph was not just dumb luck or meritorious earning on Joseph's part. It was God's grace for the purpose of preserving, serving, up-lifting, and keeping those around him. Everything Joseph touched not only benefited HIM; it benefited those whom he served. Eventually, God's preservation of Joseph saved his entire family from starvation. Joseph had a mission, and that mission was directed through God's love for others.

That is our mission too, and it's a mission that is as simple and as fundamental and begins in our homes and in our neighborhoods. God is with you, just like God was with Joseph and with Jesus in the midst of their trials, and how do I know? You're here to hear this good news, aren't you?! That's no accident. But neither is it just for you. Joseph had his father. And your loved ones, your family, your neighbors, your coworkers have you. God is with them too. Can you let them know that, please?