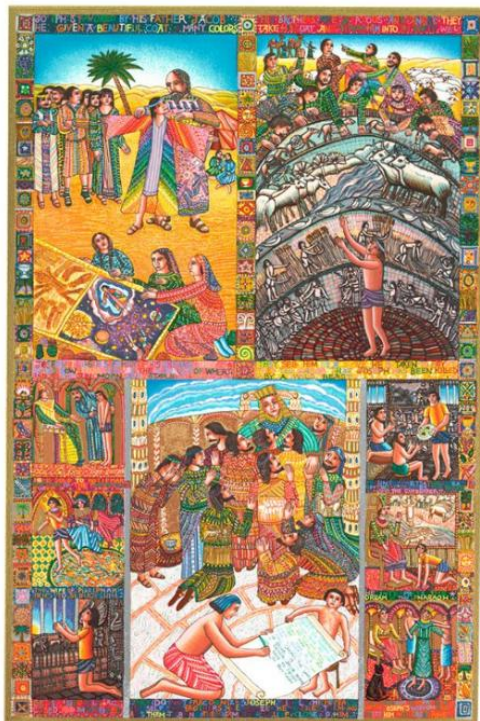




Story of Joseph (2005), by John August Swanson

HERE'S TO YOU,
MRS. POTIPHAR

LAST WEEK WE HEARD THE BEGINNING OF ABRAHAM AND SARAH'S STORY IN GENESIS, and the promise that through their descendants, the world would be blessed.

Today we'll hear of their great grandson Joseph. And the world was blessed because Joseph was a blessing, but Joseph's life would not be hashtag blessed. I don't want to spoil a 3,000 year old story for you, but let's just say he faces some setbacks and trials, all while living out the blessing.

And I think it is easy when we face setbacks and trials for us to want to withdraw. 'Someone else will have to carry forward the blessing because it clearly isn't me'.

But as we hear Joseph's story, notice how he will continue on as the truest version of himself, no matter what happens to him. He doesn't pretend the bad things aren't happening. He just stays true to himself and faithful to his God.

Joseph reminds me of a poem by Maya Angelou, titled Continue. Here's an excerpt:

My wish for you
Is that you continue
Continue
To be who and how you are
To astonish a mean world
With your acts of kindness
Continue
To allow humor to lighten the burden
Of your tender heart
Continue
In a society dark with cruelty
To let the people hear the grandeur
Of God in the peals of your laughter
Continue
To remind the people that
Each is as good as the other
And the no one is beneath
Nor above you
Continue
To remember your own young years
And look with favor upon the lost
And the least and the lonely
Continue
To put the mantel of your protection
Around the bodies of
The young and defenseless
Continue
To take the hand of the despised
And diseased and walk proudly with them
In the high street
Some might see you and
Be encouraged to do likewise
Continue
To plant a public kiss of concern
On the cheek of the sick
And the aged and infirm
And count that as a
Natural action to be expected
Continue
To dare to love deeply
And risk everything
For the good thing
Continue
And by doing so
You and your work
Will be able to continue
Eternally

Genesis 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. The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. 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. 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. 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.

Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, *Lie with me.* 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. 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?*

And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her. One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house, she caught hold of his garment, saying, *Lie with me!* But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside. When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, 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; and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside. Then she kept his garment by her until his master came home, and she told him the same story, saying, The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me; but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside.*

When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, *This is the way your servant treated me*, he became enraged. 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. But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favour in the sight of the chief jailer. 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. 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.

LAST WEEK, WE HEARD ABOUT ABRAHAM, at the beginning of his biblical story. In the intervening chapters, he and his wife Sarah had a son named Isaac, who had sons named Jacob and Esau. Today, our story in Genesis jumps ahead a few chapters to an often un-preached story of Joseph, who is Jacob's second youngest son, and the first-born son of Jacob's favorite wife, making him Jacob's favorite son.

Abraham's great grandson Joseph is also a dreamer. And his dreams get him in trouble, because he dreams that his older brothers will bow down and honor him, which is not a dream he ever should have reported to the older brothers. Joseph is naive throughout his story. He doesn't seem to see the consequences of his honesty. Or maybe he does see the consequences but can do nothing other than be honest.

In a world of lies and liars, Joseph is different. I suspect he always drove the speed limit and gave his actual weight for his driver's license.

Earlier in his story, Jacob sends him to "see about the shalom your brothers?" (37:14)

And his brothers' first response is to want to kill him. But then one of the brothers considers that a bit of an over reaction and they decide to leave him in a pit to die on his own. And remember—people look to scripture to support "family values".

Eventually, his brothers sell Joseph to traders, dip his coat in goat's blood and take it home to dad and say, "gee, dad, we don't know what happened to your favorite child?"

Filial love at its finest.

That was the first time Joseph's coat gets him in trouble.

In the first coat incident, or wardrobe malfunction, Joseph ends up a victim of [human trafficking](#), just as many men, women, and children are human trafficking victims today.

Joseph was sold to an Egyptian named Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh's guard.

Today's story will be the second time Joseph's coat causes him trouble, as his coat is left behind when he flees Mrs. Potiphar, becoming evidence against him. In both cases, his coat is used as false evidence against him.

The narrator reports that Joseph does well. Everything prospered in his hands because "the Lord was with him" (v. 3). No matter how optimistically the narrator wants to tell the story, in truth Joseph remains a slave. He's property of Potiphar. There's a big power imbalance in this narrative. Joseph is not in control of his destiny. Within the narrow confines of his slavery, he can do the best he can do, but at the end of the day, he is still Potiphar's slave. There are also cultural power imbalances. Joseph is referred to as not just a slave but as "the Hebrew slave" (v 17), suggesting an additional level of cultural/racial discrimination and imbalance Joseph is facing.

I don't know what Mrs. Potiphar was up to. As Simon and Garfunkel said, *We'd like to know a little bit about you for our files. We'd like to help you learn to help yourself.*

Was she just abusing the power and privilege she had over a Hebrew slave because she could?

Was she drawn to Joseph's success, the way Potiphar himself seemed to be?

Did she think if she slept with Joseph that her life would prosper, as everything else near him seemed to succeed?

Was she trying to deflect her own shame for her behavior onto someone else, distracting people away from her own behavior, and pinning it on Joseph and his garment—the seemingly perfect piece of evidence?

Was the narrator just using her as an archetype of a bad woman so that Joseph's goodness could be better seen? Who knows.

Joseph and Mrs. Potiphar isn't the only story in scripture where sexual violence or misconduct drives the narrative. Dina, Bathsheba, David's daughter Tamar—the list is long. And this is a story that is real for many people in this room, and in our families, and in our community. When we read scripture, and when we read the national news, may we remember the ways these stories intersect in each other's lives.

I want to keep worship as safe as possible for people. I know we often come here for an escape from the news. But we need to see the parallels of scripture in our lives today, with convicted sexual assault perpetrators in elected positions, with reports of frat boys using a group chat to invite friends to join their violence against a classmate, with zero attempts at justice for the victims of Jeffrey Epstein and his friends. And we have to be honest about, and reckon with, our failures as a society to end this violence.

Joseph is a character in the Book of Genesis lifted up for his faithfulness despite the chaos of everyone else in his story. He is a character who has God's favor and blessing with him throughout his life. When anyone says our faith in God will bring us an *easy, uniformly happy, untouched by trauma, kind of life*, **remember Joseph**. Human trafficked by his own brothers. Enslaved in Egypt. Imprisoned on false accusations.

As we seek to live faithfully the life that is before us, we recognize it is not a guarantee of prosperity and comfort. Trauma may still happen to us. People may lie about us. God's faithfulness will not, however, change. Whatever we go through, God never leaves us. No matter how alone we might feel, God is there.

When the Mrs. Potiphar's of the world show up with their injustice and lies, it can seem that we don't have any options, that there isn't anything we can do. When we watch people lie and utter all manner of falsehoods, we can speak the truth as best we can. And it may not be enough in the moment. But the story of Joseph shows the truth matters in the end.

The one thing Joseph had control over throughout this story was his integrity. His word. We can't manage all of life's events. We can't manage other people's opinions of us. We can maintain our integrity.

When we read these stories in scripture, they are completed, *finished*. We know the innocent party and the guilty party because the jury has already reported back and the narrator is giving us the final edit. In our lives, it often isn't so simple. And so it comes down to our word.

And it comes down to the way our culture values and devalues the words of different people. For Joseph, he was a slave, whose words weren't valued. Mrs. Potiphar, in that situation, held the power, and her words carried the day. Joseph's word, however, held the truth.

While it may not have been enough to keep him from going to prison in the moment, it will eventually be what gets him out of jail. And, more than that, by maintaining his integrity the whole way through the encounter with Mrs. Potiphar, Joseph remains someone whose word is never compromised, and whose faithfulness remains constant.

We live in a world where it is becoming increasingly more difficult to know what is truth. With AI, people can make realistic looking photos and videos that are totally false. We now elect people who lie to us all the time, people who believe that whatever comes out of their mouth is the truth.

Joseph's integrity and honesty were perhaps his defining feature. *How can we be people who model for the world that integrity still matters, that we value honesty, and that we don't want to mistake lies for truth, and we don't want to lift up and admire people who revel in the lies they tell?*

We can stop putting microphones in front of people who lie all the time and choose to amplify voices speaking honestly. We can take the time to build community that can both be a support and can hold us accountable for our words and actions.

It takes time to listen for someone's story, to get to know them. It takes time to know and experience a person's integrity. It is quicker and easier to remain disconnected from each other and to let our assumptions about people's stories be our excuse for not moving closer to each other.



A TV station in Denmark made a series of ads called “*All that we share*”, where they brought strangers together and helped them find what they had in common.

“These people have a lot to talk about”, the video begins.
“They just don’t know it. Yet.”

Two men get called out of the crowd of strangers, and stand facing each other. They clearly have no idea who the other person is. The host tells them that one of them is living with his family in the home where the other man grew up. They immediately start smiling and talking about the things they love about that house.

Then a young woman is called up to stand across from an older woman, only to discover that the older woman was the midwife who delivered her in the hospital when she was born. They hugged.

A couple who recently came to Denmark from Syria met a couple who came during World War 2, and they talked about what it meant to be refugees. Then they brought up a young woman whose great grandfather had taken risks and smuggled the older couple into Sweden in 1943.

The commercial says, “Just below the surface, a total stranger can be someone you’re actually connected to, someone who rouses forgotten memories, someone who reminds you that you aren’t alone. If we approach each other, we might find out that we share the same destiny.”

Are we taking the time in our lives to see our connectedness with each other? We think about this a lot here at Calvary. How can we build connections with each other in a world that makes disconnection easier?

How can we have time to hear each other’s stories so those connections can be known? We do ask you to share with each other during the passing of the peace in hopes it will spark other conversations after worship, but we recognize it takes more than that.

Some of my favorite moments here have happened because of the gift of time spent with each other. Around bridge tables. At the all church retreat in Tahoe. Dinners and happy hours in your homes. Basketball games, picnics, and potluck dinners.

I deeply believe that the more connected we are to each other, the less power lies have to destroy us.

I invite you to read the rest of the Joseph narrative in the later chapters of Genesis this week, because we’ll jump to the Book of Exodus next week. The end of Genesis is important for us though, to see how Joseph, will *rise* from being falsely imprisoned, how he will *rise* from having his character maligned. And wherever we find ourselves in this story, may we too, hold fast to truth and feel the presence of God as we navigate the snares of this world. The truth will set us free, but it may make us miserable before it’s done with us. That’s why I’m so grateful to not have to do any of this work alone. Thank you for the community you make here, so people can be honest about their story.