

++Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 22, 2019

Series: The Story of Joseph

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

Genesis 39:1-23

Romans 8:35, 37-38

#metoo Joseph



"Joseph, Overseer of Pharaoh's Granaries" Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1874

The gifted American poet Langston Hughes asked:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore— ...

Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode? ⁱ

We are halfway through the story of Joseph. The brothers who hated him have violated and betrayed Joseph, and have now sold him to slave traders who took him to Egypt. He is someone's property, a house slave in the home of Potiphar, captain of the Egyptian guard.

If ever there has been a dream deferred, this is it. The dream of the least rising to become the greatest, of God's great reversal, God's sacred promise to Joseph's great grandparents, to bless their descendants and make them a blessing to the whole world -- that dream lies in pieces now, exploded on the elegant tile floor of Potiphar's home.

But Joseph's story is more than a series of tragic events. The Lord is with Joseph, that's what this text says, over and over. Potiphar discovers that this young man has talent – he's smart with an engineer's mind and a great work ethic. Before long the captain has put him in charge of everything in his household, *and the Lord blessed the household because of Joseph*. And things went well -- until they didn't.

Today's reading is from Genesis chapter 39, verses 1-21.

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 favor in the sight of the chief jailer.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In the Wednesday Bible Study this week, we mused about a title for this part of the story. Is it more like House of Cards or Desperate Housewives? Or is it Downton Abbey?

I don't mean to make light of it. This is another chapter in a tragic story. If you have ever been on the receiving end of sexual harassment – I have – or if you, God-forbid, have ever

experienced sexual assault -- you know the anguish, shame, and enduring pain this abuse of power causes. The Bible doesn't shy away from the topic. Already in Genesis alone we read stories of Tamarⁱⁱ and Dinahⁱⁱⁱ and the daughters of Lot^{iv}. Now, in chapter 39 we come to Joseph.

Some pastors and others – shame on them -- have used this text to prove that women make false accusations, and therefore cannot be trusted. Unscrupulous people have used this text to silence victims. That is not only unethical, it's a serious abuse of scripture. For too long structures of power and influence have been used to prop up the secular and ecclesiastical Harvey Weinstens of this world. There are too many. Turning this text into a political tool misses the point of Joseph's story, which is the redeeming work of God.

Here are the facts: Potiphar's wife, a woman of considerable power, uses her position to try and gain sexual access to Joseph, her subordinate. It's a textbook example of harassment, defined as "behavior characterized by unwelcome and inappropriate remarks or physical advances in a workplace or social situation."^v Don't let the fact that she's a woman throw you. Men are victims of sexual harassment and assault all the time. Harassment is about power, not gender. This "lady" might as well have her picture next to "perpetrator" in the dictionary. She's a tormenter and the worst kind of bully – and as I told the children, God does not help a bully.

Joseph does the right thing by fleeing from her. But that is not always possible. Too many times harassers attack and assault their victims. If this has happened to you, please, please listen...it is not your fault. There are people here for you who will keep your confidence and help you heal.

Through the years I have had the opportunity to come alongside both male and female survivors, and I can tell you from personal experience that healing is possible. It can take months or even years, but there are spiritual and other resources for you. So when you are ready, let one of your pastors know, or speak confidentially to a Stephen Minister, and we will make sure that you get the healing support you deserve.

Joseph was able to escape his harasser, which is a good thing, but this text is not simply about that event. Dr. Brueggemann wants us to remember that Joseph is not only the hero of this story, he is also the representative of his people, "*the people of the dream [vs] the rulers of the empire [in our story]...the dreamer serves and finally saves the empire.*"^{vi}

In today's chapter, Joseph's stubborn adherence to the dream lands him in prison. It's the dream of God's promise to make Abraham a great and numerous people blessed to be a blessing to the whole world, the dream of a world where the last and least become the greatest of all, and the merciful, not the rich and powerful, are the ones who receive mercy.

So what does become of a dream deferred? Right now the dream is sagging beneath a heavy load. As Joseph languishes in *the place where the king's prisoners were confined*, the text simply says,

He remained.

This is one of the most poignant moments in the Joseph play, in my opinion. Behind bars, Joseph sings:

Close every door to me,
Keep those I love from me,
Children of Israel are never alone,

For I know I shall find,
My own peace of mind,
For I have been promised
A land of my own.^{vii}

The dream is alive. God is with Joseph. Three times in this chapter the narrator declares that YHWH is with Joseph; it makes a strong counterpoint to his harasser's continual demands that he be "with her."

She doesn't know it yet, but her slave is subject to a power higher than her own. She may have a deed of sale, but she cannot own him because of this power, defined in verse 21. It is called *hesed* in Hebrew and translated "steadfast love." Joseph knows that power, though he surely must have been tempted just to go along to get along. Therefore, Brueggemann writes:

"Life must be lived at great risk. It must be lived in the face of deceit, temptation, and seduction. It must be lived in the empire where there appear to be ways to gain self-security."^{viii}

But those self-serving ways are always false, and this world is starving for leaders of integrity, "[Joseph] is a man who knows his boundaries. Here is a man who values right relationships, *hesed*, the steadfast love of God."^{ix}

If you've been with us the last few weeks, you've discovered that Joseph, a family friendly show, is actually based on a harsh story. Last week our text forced us to think about human trafficking. This week I read that 21 million men, women, and children are currently trapped in modern-day slavery. The week before that, the topic was hate crimes.

But there is gospel here too; God was with Joseph. Every minute and a half in the United States someone is sexually assaulted, every 9 minutes that victim is a child.^x That says nothing about those whose abuse goes unreported. That's the bad news.

The good news is that Woods Church, and others like us do not shy away from this pain.

We will continue to stand in solidarity with survivors and call perpetrators to account.

We will speak truth to power and advocate for fair laws that protect the vulnerable.

We will hold each other accountable for truth and fidelity in our relationships, and

We will teach our children to deal with bullies, and do our darrest to set an example of sacrificial love and faithfulness for them.

When one of our relationships falls apart – and sometimes they do -- we stand beside one another because God is with us. Amen? Amen.

ⁱ Langston Hughes, "Montage of a Dream Deferred" *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 1995, 387

ⁱⁱ Genesis 38

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 34

^{iv} Genesis 19

^v Oxford English Dictionary, www.lexico.com/definition/sexual_harrassment

^{vi} 313

^{vii} Tim Rice "Close Every Door" *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat*, 1969, The Really Useful Group Limited

^{viii} Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, John Knox Press, 1982, 319

^{ix} W. Sibley Towner, *Genesis*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, 258

^x Rape, Assault, Incest National Network, www.rainn.org