

Indestructible Promise

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Text: Genesis 39:1-23

Some life stories are sprinkled with fairy dust. Joseph has one of those stories. We've heard other stories like this one. In Robert Zemeckis's 1994 film *Forrest Gump*, the title character is sitting with his platoon leader from Vietnam in a hotel room on New Year's Eve. Lieutenant Dan's claim to fame is that one of his ancestors had died in each war throughout all of American history. But Forrest saved Lieutenant Dan's life (and, it seems, robbed him of his destiny) by rescuing him on the battlefield from a Viet Cong attack. Now the lieutenant is an amputee and an embittered alcoholic, and he asks Forrest, "Have you found Jesus yet?" And Forrest replies, "I didn't know I was supposed to be looking for him, sir."¹

The story of Forrest's life as it unfolds in the film is one of grace. Simpleminded but goodhearted, brave, loyal, and curious, Forrest stumbles in and out of history, running into Elvis as a boy, turning the security guard onto the Watergate burglary, crashing into an anti-war protest, starting cultural trends, and meeting a whole succession of American presidents. Toward the end of the film, Forrest stands at his wife's grave and reflects, "I don't know if we each have a destiny, or if we're all just floating around accidental-like on a breeze, but I, I think maybe it's both." The destiny, purpose, design that emerges out of a mish-mash of random events is grace.

Joseph is a bit like Forrest Gump. While he's not quite as simple-minded as Forrest, Joseph floats through life with the same innocence and naïveté. When he was young he had a dream about bundles of wheat representing all the members of his family, and in the dream, their bundles bowed down to his. But then he thought it was a good idea to tell his father and his older brothers about this dream, not realizing how it would kindle their resentment and hostility against him. His brothers kidnapped him, faked his death, and sold him to some Arabian slave traders who are on their way to Egypt, where they sell him to a court official named Potiphar. "There," say the brothers. "So much for the dreamer."

So that's where we find Joseph at the beginning of this story. He's not dead, but he might as well be—cut off from his family, no wealth, no power, no control even over his own person, living among a foreign people in a foreign land.

And that's too bad for Joseph, but it also poses a bigger problem, because Joseph is part of the family we heard about last week. He's the great-grandson of Abraham and Sarah, the elderly childless couple God chose to become a great nation. God promised this family that they would inherit a land and become a special people, so that the all the people of the world would be blessed through them. This special promise that God made is called a covenant, and it's the means God is using to restore creation, to build it back to what it was meant to be. And so now the question is whether that promise can survive its encounter with jealousy, exploitation, violence—with all the ways human

¹ *Forrest Gump*. Dir: Robert Zemeckis. Perf. Tom Hanks, Robin Wright, Gary Sinise. Paramount Pictures, 1994.

families and human beings can go wrong. Will this special, chosen family make it? Or are they going to tear themselves apart, and God's promise as well?

As I said, Joseph reminds me of Forrest Gump, and there's a certain fairy-tale quality about his story. Everything he touches turns to gold. He does such a great job working for Potiphar that Potiphar puts Joseph in charge of his entire household, so that—and the Bible literally says this—the only concern left in Potiphar's mind is, "I wonder what's for dinner tonight?" Potiphar is a bit of an oafish character. He's not terribly engaged with the running of the house, nor does he want to be. And I think part of what makes this story sound like such a fairy tale is that these characters around Joseph are all pretty two-dimensional. They're signposts along Joseph's pathway, and that pathway is leading him to greater and greater things.

Time and time again, we're told that the reason for Joseph's success is that "the Lord was with Joseph... the Lord caused all that he did to prosper... the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake..." In spite of the circumstances—Joseph separated from his family and enslaved—God's promise is coming true! God promised that all the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham's family, and that's exactly what's happening as Joseph brings the blessing of God into his master's house.

But slavery by its nature is about exploitation. It's a distortion of God's creation, where all people are made in God's image. Instead of relating to their fellow human beings as neighbors, masters lord it over those they enslave. They don't treat these peoples' bodies as the sacred images they are, but as tools that exist only for the benefit of the masters. Within this system of domination and exploitation, the masters don't just extract labor, but also commit acts of sexual violence as well.

And that's where Mrs. Potiphar comes in. Just like her husband, Mrs. Potiphar is a flat, stock character in this story. There's nothing redeemable about her in this story. She traps Joseph in a no-win situation. If he gives in to her, how long before they're discovered, and Joseph gets punished. If he refuses, then she lies and says he tried to assault her, and he gets punished. She uses the exploitative system to try to get what she wants at Joseph's expense. And so she, like her husband, is a signpost on Joseph's journey. What she does provides an opportunity for Joseph to make the right choice, to show his virtue, and to land him into an even more hopeless situation from which, thanks to God's blessing, he will rise up to the greatness he's destined for.

And that's where we leave Joseph at the end of the story. He's not dead—which is a bit surprising, and leads me to think Potiphar didn't believe his wife's accusation. But he needed to get Joseph out of there for the sake of his honor, and so Joseph lands in jail, where once again he succeeds in all the responsibilities entrusted to him and wins the favor of the jailer. Joseph's upward rise is unstoppable, and he will eventually become second in command to Pharaoh, in charge of the whole kingdom.

There are a couple of lessons for us in this story...

One is that God's blessing is often found in those with the least power. Joseph was enslaved to Potiphar, and yet it was by Potiphar's trusting him, putting power into Joseph's hands, that God made Potiphar's household successful. This is part of the wonder of grace. It's the beauty of God's plan for restoring and blessing the world. God chose Abraham and Sarah, an old, childless couple, to build a great nation. God chose tongue-tied Moses to speak for God before the Israelite people and before Pharaoh himself. God chose David son of Jesse, a gangly teenager, to defeat the giant Goliath and lead God's people. God chose dirty, disreputable shepherds to share the news of Jesus' birth. God's blessing is in the last place we would think to look, and that's precisely how we know it has to come from God, that it can't be explained away. Writing over a thousand years after Joseph, the apostle Paul says, "God chose what is

foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are..." (1 Corinthians 1:27-29a). And why does God do this? So that no one else will be able to take the credit! So that when God's blessing saves, when it gives life, no one can say it's all down to their own intelligence, their own hard work, their own superior strength. "God chose what is low and despised...", Paul says, "so that no one might boast in the presence of God."

Last week some of our siblings in Christ at the St. Andrew's Episcopal Church on Martha's Vineyard rallied to welcome and shelter a group of migrant asylum seekers who had been sent there with false promises of jobs and housing assistance. A stunt that was intended to humiliate the migrants and the residents backfired, and instead there were national news stories about high school Spanish students volunteering to serve as interpreters, donations of food, and assistance with immigration processes and finding long-term shelter. There is blessing to be found among in sharing with those who are vulnerable. Others may seek to exploit neighbors for their own ends, but we know that God's plan to restore and bless the world looks more like the welcome and hospitality that the folks from St. Andrew's Church extended to their unexpected guests.

The other lesson this story leaves us is this: God's promises are indestructible. That doesn't mean that we never suffer loss or injustice or hardship. Joseph suffered all of these things. What it means is that God's promise accompanies us wherever we go. It traveled with Joseph when he was kidnapped and enslaved. It went with him when he was unjustly imprisoned. And it continued to open a pathway for him, even in the darkest places. We are fragile and vulnerable. We bleed and we hurt. We are far from indestructible. But the promise of God that gives us life, the promise that lifted Joseph out of slavery and prison, the promise that raised Jesus from the dead—there is nothing that can set it aside, nothing that can undo it. So as people of faith, we hold onto that promise.

Some years ago, I was talking with an older person who was suffering from a number of health challenges that had landed her in the hospital. And don't get me wrong—she didn't want to be there. She wanted to be healthy and home. But here's what she said: "I don't believe God wants this for me. But I believe God can work with this." So she took the time to ask the hospital staff if she could pray for them. She offered them encouragement. She shared her faith with them, if they seemed receptive. Her hospital bed became a witness stand, where she testified to the abiding presence of God in her life, and did what she could to lift up the people around her. God doesn't want this, but God can work with this, God can use this.

We are not indestructible, but God's promise is. And when we hold fast to that promise, when we seek to live inside it, blessings flow into surprising places. The power of injustice and exploitation breaks down. And the presence of God flows into migrant shelters and prisons and hospital rooms. God promises a future that is good, that is life-giving, that is lasting. No matter what storms this life may send your way, hold on to that promise like a life-preserver. Hold on with Joseph. Hold on with Jesus. The promise will see you through. Thanks be to God. Amen.