

## Season after Pentecost

Joseph in Prison – “Down But Not Out”

Narrative Lectionary Year 1, Week 3

September 21, 2014

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Matthew 5: 11-12; Genesis 39: 1-23

*Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit –Amen*

“The Lord was with Joseph” — four times we are reminded of that — while he is a slave in a foreign land, serving the powerful Potiphar. When Joseph is thrown in jail, unjustly accused of a crime he did not commit, we again read “The LORD was with Joseph.” Well for a guy who has God with him, Joseph seems to be having a pretty tough time of it!

For those who think that the Bible has nothing to say to us today, they need to read Joseph’s story. No, not just because it has betrayal, intrigue, sexual allure and power plays like you’d find in Big Brother, House of Cards or other television offerings.

But because this story of Joseph can be laid over our lives — the lives of good people trying to live lives pleasing to God, who find themselves struggling with unexpected and often, unearned circumstances. Joseph finds himself a slave in a foreign land. Joseph finds himself chased by temptation. Joseph finds himself in prison for doing what was right. Joseph will suffer because the lies of the powerful spoke louder than the truth. At each turn, Joseph’s faith in God and the faithful life he’s called to live are challenged by real life that seems utterly unfair and wrong. It’s right there in the Bible! It’s true in our lives, too. If you can’t identify with Joseph’s circumstances of slavery, injustice and imprisonment, substitute cancer, marital problems, peer pressure, chronic pain, and other real and painful situations of life. We can find ourselves in Joseph’s story and Holy Scriptures..

When we read this story, when we find ourselves in our times of suffering, we inevitably wonder — Where is God? We want to believe that when God is with you, than nothing bad will happen to you. But that is not the truth we find in Scripture. There is no answer to the question of why God allows these terrible things to happen to Joseph. What IS asserted again and again is that God is WITH Joseph and it makes a difference. St. Paul wrote, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” That does not say all good things happen to those who love the Lord and are called into God’s saving mission. It does say God is with us and God is at work in the muck and messiness of human sinfulness, of families and bodies in distress, of conditions that seem like dead ends. What we find in the lives of Joseph, Moses, Ruth, and Jesus is that God will bring life out of loss, enslavement, injustice, imprisonment, isolation, even evil, though God is not the source of any of them.

Where is God in the particular Joseph story we read today? God is with Joseph in the gifts he has been given. They bring him to Potiphar's attention and he's given work that is suited to his skills. In faithfully using those God-given gifts Joseph blesses others. It's the enactment of one of God's promises to Joseph's ancestors — You will bring blessing to the world. God is with Joseph in his faith and integrity when he faces temptation and he must choose to whom he will be loyal — the Lord or the use of power to satisfy his own desires? "How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" God is with Joseph when he lands in jail. Again, Joseph's talents are recognized by the chief jailer and he comes to oversee the care of the prisoners. "What he did, the LORD made it prosper" God is with Joseph in his calling to serve others as God's servant. Through Joseph the other prisoners are blessed by God through his authority, skills and the compassion of a fellow prisoner. God is present with Joseph in his suffering — through his gifts, integrity, faith and calling ---- and in the process God blesses others through him. The circumstances may not be what Joseph OR God would want, but that does not stop God from reaching out and reaching in to work on bringing light and life into darkness, fear and pain.

I think Chiune Sugihara understood Joseph's story. Born January 1, 1900, he grew up cherishing the dream of becoming the Japanese ambassador to Russia. By the 1930s, he was the vice consul of the Japanese consulate in Lithuania, just a step away from Russia.

One morning, a huge throng of people gathered outside his home. They were Jews who had made their way across treacherous terrain from Poland, desperately seeking his help. They wanted Japanese visas, which would enable them to flee Eastern Europe and the Nazis.

Three times Sugihara wired Tokyo for permission to provide the visas. Three times he was rejected. He had to choose between the fulfillment of his dream as an ambassador and people's lives. He made his choice. In direct violation of orders, Sugihara wrote visas by hand for twenty-eight days, rarely sleeping or eating. Recalled to Berlin, he was still writing visas and shoving them through the windows into the hands of refugees who ran alongside the train. Ultimately, he saved 6,000 lives.... and lost his position, standing and dream.

Sugihara was not only a courageous Japanese, he was also a committed Christian. He spent his remaining days in Japan, in menial jobs, at one point selling light bulbs door to door. When his story was finally told, his son was asked, "How did your father feel about his choice?" The young man replied, "My father's life was fulfilled. When God needed him

to do the right thing, he was available to do it.”<sup>1</sup> God was with Sugihara in Germany when he had to make a difficult decision that required great personal sacrifice. I think God was with Sugihara in the peace he found in a life so distant from his dream. Through Sugihara, many others were blessed.

When you are suffering, you may want to slug those who tell you things like, “Don’t worry, it will all work out” .... “It could be worse”... “God won’t give you more than you can bear.” When you’re suffering, it can be so difficult to see any good or God. When you or someone you love is suffering, you want God to work miracles NOW. Even Jesus asked God if he could skip the pain and wondered if he was abandoned on the cross. When you’re suffering is exactly when the stories of the Bible, like Joseph’s, become VERY relevant and important. For when we are suffering and hanging on by a thread, feeling our faith is faltering and wondering where God is, we can know beyond our feelings, beyond the appearances of circumstances that God IS with us. We can know it because our Hebrew ancestors recorded their experiences of peace and suffering, and reported again and again that God was faithful and God labored to bring pathways, futures and life where it had seemed hopeless. Years later, God showed us in the resurrection that not even death would have the final word.

We may wish we had a God who snapped a finger at our bidding to stop pain, injustice and wars. But who we have is a God who is greater than we creatures...with a steadfast commitment to redeem all creation... who has chosen to work through us rather than beat us to submission... Who has love and wisdom beyond our understanding and never, ever faltering or absent. Wishing God would be different is an Eden response and gets us nowhere but into despair. Trusting in the God who is, who loves, who is life is the work of faith and leads to hope and strength. “The Lord is with you” is not just a phrase to start worship or get a group of Lutherans to quiet down. “The Lord is with you” is a truth we profess, a truth we can hold on to, like Joseph .... and a truth holds on to us because God IS with you always. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 9/20/14

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1. King Duncan, adapting a story from The Power Book by Stephen Arterburn (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publisher 1996) as posted on [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com)