

I remember being the guest preacher at a church outside of Nashville fifteen or so years ago. I saw a woman come into the church office in a huff and threw down her Bible Study book on Genesis on the counter. Curious I stopped her and said, "You don't like this study?" She said, "This has nothing to do with my life!" To which I responded, "Well, you must not come from a dysfunctional family like I do." Without saying a word, she went over to the counter, picked the study book back up and walked out the door. Pastor Amanda and I are preaching mostly from what is called the Narrative Lectionary- basically it is a four-year cycle of assigned scripture readings for preachers that show the breadth and variety of voices and stories within the Bible. Two weeks ago Amanda kicked off this new cycle in the Book of Genesis, preaching on the story of Noah and the flood. Even though she didn't start with the story of Adam and Eve, she did talk about the brokenness of humanity who were created good by God. Back in the garden of Eden God created Eve and Adam to be "image bearers" of God's self. And as Amanda shared, humanity had and continues to have trouble bearing the image of God. Humanity jeopardizes or even forfeits God's blessing through sin and rebellion. So God chooses Abram's family as the vessel through which God would restore God's blessing, God's covenant, to all the world. Last week Amanda preached on God's call for the childless Abram at 75 years old as well as the covenant that he would be blessed and be a blessing to others, and his family would grow and grow it did. And this morning we reflect on Joseph, the great grandson of Abraham, and his successes and suffering as a slave in Egypt. Knowing today's assigned text, I looked on the Narrative Lectionary FB page and kept seeing my colleagues backing

out from preaching this text because it is a difficult, uncomfortable and messy one. Several of us agreed that while we understand the fear, if we cannot talk about hard things in the church, including our woundedness and brokenness, what are we modeling for dealing with hard things in our faith? If we live long enough, we're all going to have suffering and bad, unfair things that happen in our lives. I was in a store yesterday when I overheard a boy yelling at his dad about something with his brother, "It's not fair! It's just not fair! It's not fair!" That's the way I feel after reading today's story. Life sometimes is not fair and in today's story- trigger warning- it may stir up things from your story as well.

Joseph was a favored child with a tragic story. Some of you may know the story. Joseph's story takes up more pages and air time than most other characters in Genesis but the short version goes like this. From his birth as the favored son of Jacob and Rachel to his teenage years where his brothers plotted to kill him because he thought he was all that- including sharing a dream where they all bowed down to him. Oh and let's not forget Joseph's obnoxious multi-colored coat his father gave only him- but instead of killing him, his jealous brothers threw him in a pit and then sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites- for twenty pieces of silver- as a slave in Egypt. Then they slaughtered a goat and dipped Joseph's coat in the blood and took it to their father- telling him that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. Jacob was inconsolable. Joseph's life, filled with many ups and downs, is a tale that foreshadows the story of the people of Israel eventually living as slaves in Egypt. Joseph and his eleven brothers are the twelve from whom the twelve tribes of Israel

derived. Today we're transported right in the middle of Joseph's story- right after he'd been sold into slavery at the age of 17. **PRAY. READ.**

Genesis 39:1-6a.

Notice how God's blessing to Abraham has been passed on to his great grandson, Joseph, even though Joseph has experienced great hardships. God is with Joseph and God's blessing overflows to people who come into contact with Israel's ancestors. **READ Genesis 39:6b-20a.**

Who listened to Joseph?- to his side of the story? And who actually believed him when he told it? We aren't told. It's interesting that in the Qur'an, the Muslim's Holy Book, Joseph's story is the longest single narrative (though shorter than in the Bible). It also parallels today's story in Genesis with the exception that while Potiphar's wife has Joseph's clothes in her hand, Potiphar meets them both at the door. Joseph is then allowed the opportunity to deny her accusation and is judged innocent (Elna K. Solvang, workingpreacher.org). In the Christian text, Joseph isn't afforded the space to grieve, speak or seek justice. The traumas of such treatment aren't limited to the biblical text or ancient history. Just as Joseph's brothers used his coat to deceive their father so Potiphar's wife uses Joseph's clothes to falsely accuse him of sexually assaulting her. Can't you just hear some of the other servant's comments. "Joseph shouldn't have been so good looking and well built. He was tempting Potiphar's wife just by being there. He should've known better!" What makes us say dumb things like that? Maybe we're trying to justify something that is just plain awful and

unjust?! I have to say, especially as a woman, I struggle with Potiphar's wife lying about being raped or sexually harassed. When women or men do this, it jeopardizes the word of all women and men who have been victims. Just look at the Me Too movement and yes, this happens in the church as well. I also struggle with her shaming and blaming that he was a Hebrew- a foreigner- an enemy- a slave. Yes, more than seduction, this story is about power (and greed and lust and ethnicity and class). It usually is. People with power aren't always held accountable for their misuse of power, and that is wrong. I find it interesting that in today's story an outraged Potiphar chose to send his favorite and lucky charm servant to prison, although by law, he could have executed the young Joseph.

When life doesn't turn out the way you had hoped and it's not fair a lot of times, we find ourselves asking, "Where is God?" That's not the only question I have. I wonder how Joseph felt about this odd juxtaposition of enslavement and blessing? Was it comforting for him that God was with him? Did he wonder how, if God was with him, these bad things kept happening to him? I know I would ask these questions. Wouldn't you? This question of how this can happen to people who belong to God to reconcile God's goodness & mercy with the evil in the world is so big that it has a name: "theodicy"- so big that it remains unresolved. But in the stories of individuals—both in the Bible and in life, people eventually find their own answers almost always undergirded by God's presence and care even (or especially through) tough times. And even sometimes, when it's beyond us, being held up by others who represent

God's care. Sometimes through a final reversal of fortunes or restoration of relationships. Sometimes through an understanding of solidarity with Jesus' suffering and his victory over suffering. Sometimes through solidarity with other sufferers. Not to shock some of you, but I don't buy the platitude that "everything happens for a reason" nor that "God doesn't give you more than you can handle." While these clichés may bring some of you comfort, they do not to me. I don't believe God made me fall so that I'd learn to be more patient any more than I believe God put Joseph through these awful betrayals and lies to test his faithfulness. And I know many of you living with more than you can handle.

Sometimes life just stinks, and I also believe that we're not alone- God IS with us- working towards justice. I do believe that despite all of the *expletives* that happen in our lives, despite the sin of racism and inequality and the judgment on those who are innocent, despite it all, God is actively weaving a story of hope, shining a light into the shadowy places of our lives- though sometimes that is hard to believe or see.

The hard truth is that we live in a world of injustice. Things do not always turn out the way that they are supposed to. We experience injustice when something terrible happens to us, or to a loved one, or even to someone we have never met. This makes bearing God's image all the more important because our identity is as children of God. "It requires integrity to become honest about how our power systems and our position in the world affect our capacity to do justice. Power, no matter how well intentioned, always cast its weight in the wrong places"(Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh*). The number of biblical

figures who are falsely imprisoned is remarkable just as it is today. In the US we have an incarceration crisis with the highest percentage of our citizens in prison of any country in the world. "In 1972, there were 300,000 in our prison system now there are over 2.3 million" (Bryan Stevenson, Ted Talk, 2012). "The US represents 5% of the world's population, but houses 25% of the world's prisoners, a shocking number who are there due to false evidence, coerced confession, or other legal incompetence" (Jaqueline E. Lapsey, workingpreacher.org). In poor communities and communities of color there is a sense of despair and hopelessness that is being shaped by these outcomes. According to author and lawyer Bryan Stevenson, 1 out of 3 black men between the ages of 18-30 are in jail, prison, probation or parole. 1 out of 9 men on death row have been found innocent of their charges before their execution (Stevenson). Think about that for a minute. These stories are distorted by race and poverty. Wealth= power. You're treated much better if you're rich and guilty than poor and innocent. If you have a record, some can't vote or get a job or get housing. Joseph's story IS relevant to our lives.

Back to the text for the end of today's story. **READ Genesis 39:20b-23.** Notice how just as it had happened in Potiphar's house, Joseph once again rises to power- or as much power as one could have in prison- all because of the Lord's presence with him. We hear this four times in today's story- twice at the beginning and twice at the end- though this isn't the end of Joseph's story- just as the cross isn't the end of Jesus' story nor ours. There are some who do not experience or see God's

presence or blessings during hard times and that's ok. Bruce Springsteen felt moved to write songs to help people grieve after 9/11. A product of his own grieving journey was an album called "The Rising." In it, he wrote a song entitled, "Into the Fire." He wrote about those brave first responders who, while everyone else was running away from the fire, they ran into it- many losing their lives helping others. The song describes a fatal climb, but for Springsteen, ascending is also an image of redemption. In the chorus, Bruce sings about their faith and hope but what I hear is him singing also about God. From where do we get our faith and our hope? "Life must be lived with great risk- lived in the face of deceit, temptation, and seduction. It must also be lived trusting that God is not only with us but also fulfilling God's covenant with us. This is a story that struggles with the contact of real life with real faith" (Brueggemann). Today's story reminds us all that God meets us in our suffering and does not leave us there. God "makes his own judgment and does not accept the verdict of those in power. How very different God is from Egyptian or American expectations. God is loyal. His loyalty has the capacity to transform situations" (Brueggemann). And God's promise to Abraham remains with Joseph, just as it remains with you and me...into the fires of life. Thanks be to God! Amen.