

January 25, 2015 “A Singular Insight” Genesis 39:1-10

There has been a shift in the story of Joseph. Did you catch it? In all of the part of the story in Genesis 37, in which we learned that Jacob, is telling this story, about Joseph's tendency to carry tales...a constant irritation to his older brothers, the gift of the many coloured coat, and finally the decision of the older brothers to kill Joseph, how they sold him to the Ishmaelite traders resulting in Joseph's being carried into Egypt and sold as a servant, a slave to Potiphar the captain of the Guard in the service of the Pharaoh, in all of those details there is not one mention of God, or the faith life of the family. Not one.

Now in the telling of the episode of how Joseph entered into the service of Potiphar, closer than even he would have dared to think, to the Pharaoh, we catch up on that detail. Verse 2 “And the Lord was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master.” There are no details of this spiritual journey. To some degree we are left to figure that out for ourselves. And while it is strictly speaking speculation on my part, here for what it is worth is my opinion. I was teaching a Bible Class, to adults and I asked the question: “If God is a gracious God, loving, forgiving, sustaining, how come he permits us to experience pain and illness and even loss?” And I remember the answer of the widow in the group. She said, “Those are the things that drive us to our knees.”

It is a key insight. When things seem to be going good we are all too often forgetful of the Lord our God. I do not mean to suggest that we function as unbelievers. We don't forget to try and live according to the 10 commandments. We don't forget to say our prayers at the usual times and in the usual places. We may read Scripture daily, or use a daily devotional guide. But in times of

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trouble and pain, illness or sorrow there's a desparation about all those things that just is not there when things are going smoothly, and all appears to be well. In fact we may suffer in the good times from the pride of life. We walk with a certain swagger. We speak with confidence. Our attitude tends to be, I can handle this...in fact I do things rather well.

I suspect Joseph's transformation started in the depth of that

dry cistern into which his brothers threw him. By definition he had a hard landing. The Scripture does not say they lowered him gently. It was in you go, plop, smash...scraped knees and hands...and the memory of rough handling. He probably heard them cursing him. Maybe a couple of them managed to sucker punch him as they subdued him. What are bruises when the original plan was to kill him by whatever means...a knife, a rope, just plain starvation. Joseph's descent was a horrible experience. One moment he was the favourite of his father, Jacob, and the next he was on the verge of perishing. Being sold for cold hard cash must have been the blunt instrument that whatever his troubles, for Joseph, there would be no way back. And how did those dreams he had had fit into all this new and life threatening experience?

In the darkness of that hole in the ground, the empty cistern I suspect Joseph really learned the fundamentals of prayer. His father Jacob was born of a line of spiritual giants. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Those are the fathers of ancient of Israel. Those names invoke a sense of what God is like, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The God who guides and sustains you when you do not know where you are going or why these things are happening. The God who will wrestle with a man, and become his Master, Redeemer and Friend.

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Maybe it was just the cold hard collision with the facts. One moment he was the favourite, coddled, youngest son of Jacob. The next moment he was trade goods. Baggage bound to the merchants who owned this caravan. He went from having a measure of power and stature in the family, to having nothing, no control whatsoever over what was happening. His journey was from worthy to worthless. Security to survival. And somehow in the midst of it all Joseph the man who believed and was committed to the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob emerged. Maybe it was that simple...the spoiled brat became a man. He had to in order to survive. And Jacob in telling us Joseph's story connects the dots even if he does not tell us what all of them are. Potiphar of Egypt, Captain of the Guard, bought Joseph and took him to his home. The Lord was with Joseph and he prospered.

You have to admit, we do not think of prosperity, in terms of being sold into someone's service. Joseph was not free. He could not go home. He cannot choose to build a new life as though he were free. This

new life has to be built within the confines of Egypt and within the confines of his assigned work and responsibility in the service of Potiphar. But there is Jacob's cold, clear analysis of what was happening. The Lord was with Joseph and he prospered in Egypt, in the service of Potiphar.

It certainly did not happen all at once. Potiphar had not become the Captain of the Guard in Pharaoh's service by being a fool. He knew men, did Potiphar. He commanded men. He watched men. He was undoubtedly careful about the choices that put responsibility and even power into the hands of others. Here is an interesting thing. Potiphar did not try to make a soldier out of Joseph. He did not put weapons in Joseph's hands. So what did he

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see in Joseph? Well first of all he caught on rather quickly to the fact that the young man had character. He carried out orders. Did not have to be told twice. In fact he did not have to be watched to make sure he performed. He could think on his feet. He got the job done, and he looked for direction as to what was next. He earned Potiphar's trust. So much so that Potiphar promoted him. Joseph became the personal attendant of Potiphar. I presume Potiphar learned fairly quickly, the roots from which Joseph's dependability sprouted. Joseph was apparently faithful to his God. Potiphar liked what he saw.

Like so many things in life it was a process. Potiphar began to trust Joseph with more responsibility. Joseph handled it well. The fact is, Joseph is Jacob's son. Becoming a man, he became a good man. Over a period of time Potiphar placed Joseph in charge of more and more of his domestic affairs. Joseph did not take that trust for granted. And again, Potiphar was no fool. He realized that in Joseph he had found a servant, yes a slave, in whose hands he could place everything. And Joseph would handle it as though it were his own. Potiphar prospered as Joseph served him and his household.

And Jacob who is the story editor of this episode gives one more little insight. The more responsibility Potiphar gave to Joseph, the more the Lord God blessed this Egyptian Captain of the Guard, his home life, his business interests. God blesses Joseph. Joseph labours to serve Potiphar. God blesses Potiphar. It was not just that the home functioned well. God's blessing was on the household affairs indeed, but also on the

affairs of the field. What does that mean? It means that the fields that Potiphar owned were well tilled, well planted, well watered and produced bumper crops.

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His livestock grew fat. His herds became larger. His flocks did well. Everything Potiphar owned seemed to be producing as if by magic under Joseph's oversight. Potiphar had no doubt the young servant's God was blessing him and every aspect of his life. It got to the point that the only question Potiphar had to ask of Joseph was...what are we having for dinner tonight. What's for breakfast in the morning? What are you packing for my lunch.

If Joseph had a shortcoming perhaps it was this. Things were going so well, he could not see any dark clouds on the horizon. To some degree he was blindsided by the sudden attention of Potiphar's wife. And it is not as simple as she is the villain of the piece. Joseph was always around. Potiphar works for Pharaoh. He is helping to build an Empire. She notes Joseph is well built and handsome. She makes Joseph the offer of her bed. And she is not used to not getting her own way. She fails because Potiphar is right....Joseph is a committed servant of God and therefore committed to serving his benefactor....his earthly master, the Captain of the Guard. In fact Joseph does everything he can to simply not be alone with Potiphar's wife.

Now comes lesson number 2. Joseph is not the one who is in control. You heard the details. The Hebrew servant winds up blamed for trying to take advantage of Potiphar's wife and the pot boils over. Once again, Joseph is reduced to nothing with a twist. Potiphar has real power. Joseph goes to jail. Do not pass go. Do not collect two hundred dollars! But Jacob's comment is the real insight that has blossomed in this story. The Lord is with Joseph. He is reduced to being a convict. This is lower than becoming Ishmaelite trade goods. But God is not done with Joseph, with Egypt, with the Pharaoh...or even the crops and herds of Potiphar. That is what this

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story is all about. God is not done yet...with Joseph, with you, or with me.

Let us pray;

Heavenly Father we all have a story. And most of us can

remember a moment, an experience in the midst of which we were convinced, life could not get worse if we tried to make it so. We have all experienced times when we felt utterly alone and powerless. When we were certain we had become victims through none of our own doing. You lift us up. You dust us off. You open new doors and windows of opportunity. You continue to be our Lord and our God. We praise your name, that like Joseph you are with us still and there are promises of eternity. In Jesus name we pray. Amen