

***The Story Series***  
***Week 3: Joseph***  
***From Slave To Deputy***  
***Rev. Craig M. Sturm    Trinity Lutheran Church, Sherman Texas***

As we make our way through *The Story* of the Bible, we begin to sense that there are really *two* stories happening at the same time. There is God's Story (sometimes referred to as the Upper Story) and then there is the human story (referred as the Lower Story). The Lower Story contains the details of everyday life — the stuff with which we busy ourselves.

The Bible is full of Lower Story stuff – dealing with illness, obstacles like running out of wine, not having a place to sleep, or encountering a storm on the Sea of Galilee. We, like the characters of the Bible, become consumed with Lower Story living. But as we read through the Bible, we soon realize that there is another story happening, an Upper Story. There is something else going on that we easily miss if we get too concerned with the details.

When we step back and take a second look, we soon realize that God is up to something in the daily story of our lives. There is an Upper Story happening, a story that reveals how God is active in our lives and is revealing to us his master plan.

As we make our way through the Bible (chronologically) in this *Story* series, my hope is that we won't get lost in all of the details of the Lower Story, but that we might catch a glimpse of what God is up to in the world, and what that means for our daily lives. There is no better story in the Old Testament that better illustrates this Lower and Upper story concept than the story of Joseph, our focus story for today.

In the last chapter when we talked about the story of Abraham, we heard God declare that he would build a new nation using this old guy Abraham and his barren wife Sarah. And it is through this new nation that God would begin to reveal himself and his plan to win us back from our sinful rebellion – first revealed in Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Our sin separates us from God, and that problem has to be dealt with if there is any hope of us ever spending eternity with God in heaven. We can't solve the problem on our own, so God has to step in and do something. And what God does is creates this nation through Abraham. And somehow through this nation, God is going to make everything OK. God's rescue plan to save us is going to be revealed through this new nation.

So we come to the story of Joseph. The story of Joseph is one of the most well-known, most beloved stories in the Bible. It reads like a best-selling novel – full of mystery, sex, deception, and it has a happy ending! In the 37<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis,

we meet Joseph at the ripe old age of 17. Joseph has 10 older brothers who don't like him. They don't like him for two reasons.

First, Joseph is the favorite son of his dad, Jacob. And Jacob expresses his favoritism by giving Joseph these extravagant gifts, like a beautiful coat of many colors. Parenting 101: this is not a good way to parent. If you are going to buy one kid some amazing gift, then you need to buy something special for the rest of the kids. Otherwise, as we see in the story of Joseph, it's going to create some dreadful hostility among the kiddos.

The second reason Joseph's brothers didn't like him is because Joseph is having these dreams. They are such powerful dreams that he has to share them with someone, so who better to share them with than your own brothers. The only problem is that in these dreams, Joseph's older brothers – even his own parents – are bowing down to him, as if to say that Joseph is the most special person in their whole family. If I were Joseph's friend, I would tell him the only reason he should ever share that dream with his brothers is if he wanted to get beat up!

As *The Story* unfolds, one day Jacob (the dad) asks Joseph to go into the fields and to fetch his brothers who are out tending the sheep. As they see Joseph approaching in the distance, they see it as a grand opportunity to ditch their brother, Joseph. What they decide to do is to sell their brother to a traveling band of Ishmaelites as a slave. Then they take Joseph's coat of many colors and they dip it deep into animal's blood. They take that coat back to Jacob the father and say, "We didn't see what happened exactly but it looks like Joseph was mauled by a wild animal" – which we know is a flat out lie! And just think: it is from this dysfunctional family upon which God is building his great nation! All of us can find some level of comfort in that, knowing that God is still able to use our lives and our families, despite our dysfunction.

Joseph ends up being sold to an Egyptian officer named Potiphar, a high ranking official in Pharaoh's army, and is forced to travel to Egypt. The story of Joseph unfolds in Egypt (see map on last page).

What we discover is that even though this tragic thing happens to Joseph, a surprising turn of events takes place in Genesis 39. The Bible says, "The Lord was with Joseph, so he succeeded in everything he did as he served in the home of his Egyptian master." Even though God allowed Joseph's brothers to abuse him by selling him as a slave, the Lord is still there, watching over Joseph, prospering his every move. God is by Joseph's side. It's the same exact place we found God at the opening chapters of Genesis: walking in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. It's a biblical truth that I cannot proclaim enough: God is with us. God is watching over us and providing for our needs. And with God's help, anything is possible.

In the story of Joseph, with God's help, Potiphar is so impressed with Joseph that he ends up putting him in charge of his entire household. But then another twist comes. Someone else is taken by Joseph, this time by Potiphar's wife! The Bible

describes Joseph as “well built and handsome.” Potiphar’s wife takes notice of Joseph’s handsome stature, makes repeated advances at him, but Joseph – because of his desire to live according to the ways of God – refuses. But Potiphar’s wife won’t take “No” for an answer. Out of her jealousy, she sets Joseph up and lies by saying that Joseph made advances at her, not the other way around. Potiphar gets very angry and throws Joseph into prison.

Joseph’s life is like a see-saw. He’s up, he’s down. He’s up, and now he’s down once again, sitting in prison for a crime that he did not commit. But he doesn’t stay down for long. In Genesis 39, the Bible says, “The LORD was with Joseph in the prison and showed him his faithful love. God caused everything he did to succeed.” If that verse is not highlighted in your personal Bible, it should be. Because just as it was for Joseph, so it is for all of God’s children. “The LORD is with us and shows us his faithful love.”

One of the ways God blesses Joseph while he is in prison is to give him the ability to interpret dreams. Joseph is in prison for two years, when out of the blue he gets a summons from Pharaoh, the head honcho of Egypt. Pharaoh summons Joseph to come visit him because he is having this troubling dream over and over again and no one can tell him what it means. It’s a bizarre dream that involves fat cows and skinny cows, and then stalks that are full of grain and others that are shriveled up and dying. “I’ve heard you are gifted at interpreting dreams,” Pharaoh says to Joseph. “Can you tell me what my dream means?”

And here is what Joseph says. These are very important words. Joseph says, “It is beyond my power to interpret dreams,” Joseph says, “but God can tell you what it means and set you at ease.” Joseph, a man of faith, recognizes that his gift comes from God, and instead of taking credit for the gift, Joseph gives credit where credit is due. In so many words, Joseph says, “Only God has the power to interpret dreams, but God has chosen to use me to reveal his wisdom to you.” That’s an important truth for our lives as well. Any gift that we possess has been given to us by God. We are merely the means by which the gift is shared with the world. The purpose of our gifts is to bring glory to God.

Joseph tells Pharaoh that his dream foretells seven years of bumper crops, but then there will be seven years of famine. So he instructs Pharaoh that he needs to store up enough grain from the bumper crops in order to survive the seven years of famine. Pharaoh recognizes the wisdom that God has given to Joseph so Pharaoh makes Joseph second in command in all of Egypt. Do you sense the hand of God at work here? Joseph, who hours ago sat in a prison cell, is now second in command.

As the story continues, we discover what Joseph predicts comes true. There are seven years of bumper crops, and Joseph as the leader stores up enough food to get the people through the seven years of famine that follow. The drought is so great that it creates this global-like famine. The famine is affecting everyone, including Joseph’s family back in Canaan. So Jacob sends his oldest sons to Egypt to barter

some of their belongings for food so that they won't starve. They have no idea who they are about to run into.

The question becomes, knowing how horrible Joseph's brothers have treated him, and also knowing how much power Joseph now has in Egypt, what will Joseph do when his brothers come begging for food?

The first thing we notice is that when Joseph's brothers arrive in Egypt, even though they don't recognize Joseph, they bow down to him. Did you catch that? They bow down to him, a fulfillment of that dream that Joseph had during his younger years of his family bowing to him.

The brothers don't recognize Joseph, but Joseph immediately recognizes them. Is it payback time? We would expect Joseph to take revenge. He's got every right after his brothers treated him so cruelly. Rather, *The Story* says Joseph breaks down and sops uncontrollably, choosing to forgive his brothers! How is that possible, you ask? How could a young man who was torn from the love of his father find it in his heart to forgive? How could Joseph not be bitter about what could have been?

The only way I can explain it is that Joseph must have caught a glimpse of what I referred to earlier as the "Upper Story". Joseph must have caught a glimpse of what God was up to by sending his brothers to Egypt. God must have had a bigger plan in mind for their family. Now, because Joseph was in charge, he would be able to feed his family and secure their survival. God went ahead of them, and put Joseph in the right place at the right time.

God was making a way to continue on this new nation that he was creating in order that God's rescue plan might be fulfilled.

In Genesis 45, Joseph says to his brothers, "It is I, Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into slavery in Egypt. But don't beat yourselves up for selling me to this place. It was God who sent me here ahead of you to preserve your lives and the lives of many others." Joseph was able to see his own personal story within the story of God. God had this planned all along. Later in *The Story* Joseph says to his brothers, "What you did to me was intended for harm, but God intended it all along for good."

The humanness of this story comes out in the brothers' reactions. They just can't bring themselves to believe that Joseph has truly forgiven them. In fact, when Jacob, Joseph's father dies, the brothers think to themselves, "Oh no, here it comes! Now that Dad is gone, there's no one to stop Joseph from paying us back!" The brothers never forgive themselves for what they did to Joseph. They carry around all that guilt and shame with them for their entire lives.

I know some of us are carrying around a huge amount of guilt and shame. We just can't forgive ourselves for that mistake we made. We can't accept that God would have it in him to actually forgive us and set us free from the burden of our sin.

Joseph came to realize that God's very heart was that of love and forgiveness. God's greatest desire is to set us free from our brokenness so that we might experience the abundant life of God's grace and mercy. When we struggle with guilt and shame, we must find a way to get our head out of the Lower Story of our lives, in order that we might see what grander thing God is doing in the Upper Story of our lives.

In the final stages of God's rescue plan to win us back, we will find ourselves standing on a hill called "Golgotha" in the shadow of the Cross. We will behold a man named Jesus Christ hanging on that cross, crying out "It is finished." God's rescue plan will be complete. Through the sacrificial death of his sinless Son, Jesus Christ, God will utter to us the same words Joseph said to his brothers. "What you did reveals the selfish, sinful desires of your heart. What you did jeopardized our relationship. But I have redeemed your sinful deeds and have transformed them into something good."

"You once were lost, but now you are found. You once were blind to what God was up to, but now you see clearly the Upper Story of God's love and mercy at work in your life."

Now that God has redeemed us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our life can now take on a new purpose, to be – just like Joseph was – a vessel by which God's will and ways are carried out to accomplish something far bigger than we could ever imagine.

*The World of Ancient Israel*

