

When Power Is in Play
Genesis 39:1-23
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Preface:

When the Narrative Lectionary debuted nine years ago, more than a few people were surprised that in Year One of this new endeavor, the Joseph story the drafters would choose was the one you are about to hear. First, they were surprised because it came from the middle of the narrative — no multicolored coat, no dreams interpreted, and no deliverance of his family. It was just this very odd story — the first story of workplace sexual harassment in the Bible. To contextualize, Joseph has been stripped of his coat and sold by his jealous brothers to slave traders from Canaan who are on their way to Egypt. It's from the 39th chapter of Genesis. Listen (and I warn you, you have to listen hard, for a word from God), the translation is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) with a number of changes made where I and others believe the NRSV translation is confusing or incorrect.

(The text was read.)

A couple of months ago, when I was first looking at the arc of this fall, this was going to be a fairly simple sermon. We were going to hop on the Joseph roller coaster as he is taken DOWN into slavery in Egypt and as he rises in the house of Potiphar due to God being “with him” — until he falls again into prison and uncertainty due to household intrigue, and then rises again in the eyes of the jailer “because the Lord was with him.”

That's the narrative device of the Joseph story. We'll talk some about it in the “Living the Word Bible Study” at 11:05 later this morning. The rise and fall and rise and fall and rise and fall and ultimate rise of Joseph, ultimately the star of Genesis, is the most developed biography of the Torah — even more detailed than Moses.

Joseph is a stand-in for the Hebrew people, whose story from throughout the Torah will follow the same pattern — rise when they are loyal to God and fall when they are not. But in the Joseph story, it's not that he is faithful or not — it's that God is with him and people threaten him. God's faithfulness is always the reason why Joseph prospers, and the guile and fear and, yes, the power-mad-lust of others is the reason he falls.

We were going to consider what it is like to surrender to the idea that not only are we not alone, but that, when we live as though it is true that God is with us, then we do not live as though we are our own. I wanted to explore how surrender to the loving, guiding hand of God, how entrusting our worth and our value to God and not to human standards is a hard thing to do and a thing that requires the surrender of ego — something none of us can do perfectly ever or imperfectly always. And even though our imperfection at it is inevitable, it can still be a source of great freedom and great inspiration.

But then the world, or rather, the news cycle changed. Oh sure, we've been in the #MeToo Moment for over a year now, but two major recent events compelled me to revisit this text in a different way. In August, Bill Hybels, the founding pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, resigned after it came to light that there had been numerous allegations of sexual harassment by colleagues and staff. All senior lay leadership of the church and several other pastors stepped down after it was revealed that they had not taken the allegations seriously, choosing to believe their senior pastor instead of his colleagues and co-workers.

Last Sunday, after months of behind the scenes confidential engagement on the matter, after her name was publicly released against her stated wishes, Professor Christine Blasey Ford publicly accused Supreme Court Nominee Judge Brett Kavanaugh of sexual assault in connection with an incident when they were both students at Georgetown Prep High School, some three decades ago. For the last seven days we have seen the often-sordid manner in which the media and many in power make light of a woman's claims of a brutal violation of her personhood, her right to physical autonomy and, indeed, a violation of her bearing the image of God.

We've seen lip service to due process on all sides, while Professor Ford has insisted that is the only way she will engage the matter further. We've seen spurious claims that, because the matter wasn't reported 30 years ago, we shouldn't consider it for any purposes today. We've seen people defend physical restraint and a smothering hand applied to stifle outcries described as youthful indiscretion. And, like has so often greeted this flipped narrative story in Genesis, we've seen a serious matter trivialized to the point of humor.

For 30 years we've been laughing at awkward Joseph's ducking the amorous advances of stunt-cast Potiphar's wives in productions of "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," as on the cover of today's bulletin. It's funny because it's reversed. The man is harassed by the woman and that makes it hilarious. Others have found humor in the current situation with one Senate candidate joking publicly this week that Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg now claims to have been groped by Abraham Lincoln. It's hilarious.

The reality is that this story and millions like it throughout history, mostly with the genders reversed from the Genesis narrative, have been stories of ultimate abuses of power — the use of power to subjugate one who has less power, the one who, because of physical, legal, emotional, cultural or situational circumstance, is vulnerable to exploitation by another.

Physical autonomy is our most intimate right, a legal right, a moral right. That's part of what we get from the Joseph narrative. Once Joseph is stripped of a coat of privilege by his brothers and he loses his freedom, then he is stripped of clothing that represents his personal autonomy, dignity and household status (even as a servant). The writer clearly equates these losses.

So, what are we to do with all of this? Where is the good news in this text for us, for victims of sexual harassment and assault, and even for perpetrators? Where is the good news for Potiphar, who doesn't know what to believe and has much at risk when forced to choose between his wife and his overseer?

First, let's acknowledge that not every text is designed to be good news for every character, and this is only one small part of a much larger narrative. But I do think we can get glimpses of light in a text that never fully leaves the shadows behind.

First, Potiphar makes a choice that is not an ultimate one. It is beyond clear both historically and within this narrative that Potiphar could have struck Joseph down where he stood when the allegations were made — a slave accused of raping his master's wife? Our own national history shows us how often and how brutally that accusation can motivate extrajudicial lynching. But Potiphar doesn't choose death for Joseph, but imprisonment. Potiphar leaves room; he chooses the side that culture demands he choose, and he insures that there are consequences. But he still leaves room for the story to unfold. Whether it was grace or the fact that he doubted his wife's story isn't clear. What is clear is that he doesn't go off half-cocked.

We've come a long way since Potiphar — with due process and, now, the invitation to recognize that we are invited to question our historic skepticism at claims of those like Professor Ford's, which, unlike the office staff and women leaders at Willow Creek or Bill Cosby or Harvey Weinstein's accusers have safety and credibility through the sheer volume of the claims. But that, to be frank, wasn't enough good news, so let's get back into it.

I don't know why I didn't see it from the start. We look at this text and talk about how Joseph prospers because God is with him, but we concentrate on the actions of first Potiphar and then the jailer as they put Joseph in charge of everything. But let's think about this for a moment. The favorite son of the local equivalent of a millionaire is beaten and made a victim of human trafficking. But he does not retreat broken and bowed; he lays claim to the presence of God with him and refuses to surrender his dignity; he claims his autonomy, refusing to play by the rules of the household; and he continues to live as the beloved of Yahweh.

And the same happens when his integrity leads to an even further collapse of his situation. He does not give up, surrendering to now the second round of his loss of his status and dreams; he continues to hold fast to his dignity — his belovedness by Yahweh. And it's palpable, inspiring the confidence of others. Ultimately, Joseph refuses to be defined as a victim and he, more than any other, had a right to claim that status.

Joseph's confidence that he was never abandoned by God is surely inspirational — dreams cast down from heir apparent to slave to prisoner. How do we respond when plans go awry, when dreams don't turn out as we had hoped, when a status we had hoped for or actually achieved is taken from us? I'm not suggesting Joseph wasn't disappointed, or sad, or angry. But he never surrendered who he was even as others sought to strip power and status and even hope from him.

Imagine how that story resonated for the exiles wandering in the desert a few generations later, having fallen from Egyptian slaves to starving nomads; or how it might have inspired those hauled from Judah to exile in Babylon a thousand years later; or perhaps how it provided a word of hope to a carpenter from Nazareth, who was hailed as Messiah just

days before being sentenced to die as a religious fanatic and a traitor to the Roman Empire. And how might it speak to anyone whose full humanity is seemingly denied in the violent, arrogant or fearful acts of anyone who abuses power or position?

How can we be those who speak not a message that dismisses pain, violence or anguish, but one that empowers the person who has been victimized — defining them not as a victim but as fully beloved, fully human and weeping with them at the indignities imposed upon them, and insisting that we never define them solely by what others have done to them, but by who God has made them to be, seeing them always as one whom God is with.

Surely the presence of God then is intended both as solace and empowering. God weeps with those who weep, suffers with those who suffer, but never defines them or us solely by those moments — but is always, moment by moment, willing us into never surrendering, always reclaiming our inherent value, our inherent dignity, and the promise that God is with us now and always. Thanks be to God.