“Is Being Blessed Really a Blessing?

Genesis 39:1-23

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This week we hear a third and final story from the book of Genesis. With the narrative lectionary, we hear some of the key stories in the Bible, which help explain the story of God’s love. We started out with Noah and the flood, then heard Abraham’s call story. This week we encounter Joseph. We skipped some pivotal stories, like Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau. And we don’t get to hear much of Joseph’s back story. I recommend watching *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, for a surprisingly accurate portrayal of his story. For now, we read a bit about Joseph’s time in Egypt.

It’s a long reading, so I’ll be breaking it up into sections. Feel free to read along in your pew Bible, or just listen as we discover what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

1-2

At several points in this text, we are told that the Lord was with Joseph. We are told that Joseph is blessed, yet he was sold into slavery. He was cast off by his 11 brothers and sent away to a foreign land. Genesis states that Joseph was a successful man, and yet he was a slave. Sure, a slave might become successful if he rises in the ranks, gaining the favor of his master. But he still reports to his master. He is still owned by another human being. It seems odd to call a slave blessed.

Today our world is tainted by the human trafficking industry. Every day people are bought and sold, forced into slave labor. Would we call these slaves blessed? Not usually.

Likewise, it seems odd to call Joseph, a slave, a blessed man.

Let us continue reading.

3-6a

 Here find an odd twist in the story. Not only was Joseph blessed, a slave mind you, but the house to whom he belongs became blessed as well. God was with Joseph. Joseph was going good work and so Potipher and all of his household were blessed as a result. This is a nice sentiment, but it doesn’t seem to justify the fact that Joseph is still a slave. He is still the property of another man. This still seems like a strange way to live as a blessed person.

 We continue on with the story.

6b-18

Adding insult to injury, Joseph gets falsely accused by the wife of his master. What a way to kick him while he’s already down. So not only is the blessed man, favored by God, betrayed by his family and sold into slavery, but now he is on trial for a crime he didn’t commit. He is blessed, right?

Now for the final chapter of this saga:

19-23

So then Joseph becomes imprisoned for something he didn’t do. This reminds me of the Andy Dufraine character in *The Shawshank Redemption*. In that book and movie a man is found guilty of a crime he didn’t commit. He is imprisoned for many years, eventually earning the favor of the warden. He becomes the personal accountant of the warden, covering up the corrupt money handling going on in the prison. He is a respected prisoner with quite a bit of power – but, blessed? I don’t know anyone who would watch that movie and remark at how blessed Dufraine is for serving a sentence while innocent. This isn’t the story of a blessed person, as we usually define it.

Same goes for Joseph in our Scripture passage today. Through all of this, the text claims that Joe was blessed. That God was with him. And yet he suffered so much.

This contradicts how we’ve come to define “being blessed.” Especially, here in the U.S. we look at prosperity. Achievement. Something good happens to us, and we respond by saying we are blessed.

Our culture tends to think being blessed is equated with prosperity. Our typical language looks like this: Got a new car, I’m so blessed. Another grandbaby added to the family, I’m so blessed. Got that promotion at work that I wanted, I’m so blessed.

But what about those who can’t afford a new car, who never have grandchildren, who remain stuck in a minimum wage job? Are they not blessed? Are they the opposite, are they cursed? Does God play favorites like that? Using positive reinforcement to reward those who have earned God’s favor?

That’s not how it worked for Joseph. He was a blessed man, and God was with him. But for most of his early life that blessing did not look very prosperous. His brothers sold him into slavery. He was falsely accused of rape. He was thrown into prison. And yet he was blessed? Yikes.

Based on his story, I’m not so sure that being blessed is really a blessing. It sounds more like being blessed by God can lead to some painful experiences.

This is certainly reinforced by the beatitudes which Beth read just a bit ago.

Matthew tells us that blessed people are the ones who are poor. They mourn and are meek. They are hungry, they are persecuted.

A blogger who uses the title “The Accidental Missionary” adds a humorous commentary to the beatitudes. He says:

“I have a sneaking suspicion verses 12a 12b and 12c were omitted from the text.  That’s where the disciples responded by saying,

     12a Waitest thou for one second , Lord.  What about “blessed art thou comfortable”, or  12b “blessed art thou which havest good jobs, a modest house in the suburbs, and a yearly vacation to the Florida Gulf Coast?”

     12c And Jesus said unto them, ‘Apologies, my brothers, but those did not maketh the cut.’”*[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Comfort, employment, a vacation home. These tend to be more in line with how we view blessing. We think blessing means prosperity and good fortune.

But according to our text about Joseph, blessed are those who are sold into slavery by their brothers. Blessed are those who are accused of crimes they didn’t commit. Blessed are those who are thrown in jail, stripped of any bit of freedom.

According to Scripture, this is what being blessed looks like.

So, is being blessed something we should want? Sounds a bit like torture, based on Joseph’s experience. I don’t think I would want to go through everything that he did. I’m not sure blessing is worth it.

What if we zoom out and look at the bigger picture? Read beyond this story about slavery and prison.

Imagine what would have happened if Joe’s brothers hadn’t sold him into slavery and sent him to Egypt? What if he had stayed with his family, continuing to the favored son of Jacob? They would have done alright for a few years, but that famine hit the land and it hit hard. There’s no way this family would have survived if they didn’t seek refuge in Egypt where there was plenty of food stored up. And there wouldn’t have been plenty of food stored up if Joseph hadn’t interpreted the Pharoah’s dream. He predicted that there would be 7 years of plenty followed by 7 years of famine. And Joseph wouldn’t have been able to interpret Pharoah’s dream, if he hadn’t been thrown in jail. He wouldn’t have been thrown in jail if he hadn’t been falsely accused by Potipher’s Wife. And he wouldn’t have been accused by her if he hadn’t been bought by Potipher. And he wouldn’t have been bought by Potipher if he hadn’t been sold into slavery by his brothers. I’m beginning to sound like a Dr. Seuss story.

The point is, all of these really bad and painful experiences for Joseph led to this phenomenal opportunity for him to prevent disaster in the land and rescue his family from starvation.

All of that bad led to something very, very good. And through it all God was with Joseph, blessing him.

As God’s children, we are blessed with God’s steadfast love and presence. But that doesn’t mean we won’t face challenging and painful times. It doesn’t offer us refuge from the suffering of the world.

To be blessed by God means we are participating in a bigger narrative. There’s something far bigger than going on than we might be able to realize when we are in the trenches.

To be blessed means we are loved by God. It means we are in the presence of God, always. It means that all things, even the hard and painful things, work toward good, whether in this lifetime or not.

As we read the larger narrative of the Bible, we see this to be true. There are times of suffering and pain. But eventually it all turns into good. Imagine how time must have slowed to halt the night after Christ was crucified. As the disciples found themselves in shock, those three days after he died. Not knowing that the resurrection was to come. Not knowing that their suffering would soon be forgotten. That Christ would return and triumph. That they were blessed by God and constantly in the presence of God. But that resurrection happened. We are a resurrection people, living into the hope that God has a plan bigger than we’re aware of.

May we remember this in our darkest moments, in those deepest valleys. God is there with us, blessing us with steadfast love. Enveloping us in that bigger plan God has for the world.

Let us pray.

1. http://theaccidentalmissionary.wordpress.com/2014/02/20/the-one-things-christians-should-stop-saying/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)