

June 17 – Interpreter of Dreams

Genesis 41:1-16, 25-36

We left Joseph having been thrown in jail by Potiphar when his wife accused Joseph of sexual advances. Joseph is one who tries to bloom where he is planted and so, instead of being morose about another unfair downturn in his life, he does his best. The jailer is impressed with his attitude and sees how God seems to be blessing what Joseph does, and so he gives him more and more responsibilities. Soon Joseph is running the jail. These are the circumstances when two high officials in the household of the Pharaoh, the cupbearer and chief baker, are imprisoned. They are accused, not convicted, so they retain their status. It is Joseph's job to attend to their needs. In this capacity, one morning he notices they are both downcast. When Joseph inquires as to why they are so sad they share how they had both had dreams and, here in jail, there is no one to interpret them. Joseph immediately asks them to tell him their dreams. By implication, he is saying he is an interpreter of dreams. The cupbearer shares his, and Joseph's interpretation is that in three days he will be restored to his position. All Joseph asks, for interpreting the dream, is to show him some kindness and mention his plight to Pharaoh. The baker has a similar dream but Joseph's interpretation is that in three days he will be hanged. In both cases Joseph's predictions comes true. We can only imagine Joseph's excitement as the cupbearer leaves the prison. Soon, he believes, he will be free. Nothing happens for two years.

How would you feel if you were Joseph? We can guess that he experienced all the negative emotions surrounding feeling let down. Yet, he continues doing his work in jail, as far as we can tell, to the best of his ability. The scripture we read today picks up the story at this point.

Pharaoh has two dreams one night. They are similar in detail so he is sure that they are sharing the same message. When he calls together his advisors none of them can give an interpretation that is satisfactory to Pharaoh. It is at this moment the cupbearer remembers Joseph and how he had successfully interpreted his dream. He mentions this to Pharaoh and Joseph is sent for. After cleaning himself up, he is presented to Pharaoh. Joseph never takes credit for being a dream interpreter. He

continually talks about God. It is God who gave Pharaoh the dreams. It is God who gives Joseph the power to interpret dreams. Gone is the brash 17-year-old who was full of himself. Now we have a much more mature person who realizes life is not all about “me” but how we walk with God.

The retelling of the dream by Pharaoh adds some additional elements that show just how worried Pharaoh is. The cows are the ugliest he has ever seen. When they eat the fat cows they don't put on any weight. Pharaoh knows the gods are trying to tell him something. He is the high priest of Egypt as well as ruler. These dreams seem to point to something horrible, he just doesn't know what!

The interpretation of the dream, by Joseph, would have struck fear in the heart of Pharaoh. Here is a little I have learned about belief structures in ancient Egypt at this time. The River Nile flooded each year and this flooding was what made the land so fertile. The floods brought nutrient rich sediments to the land as well as watering it deeply so there was moisture for crops during the long hot summers. Each year one of the chief duties of Pharaoh, as priest, was to offer gifts to the God of the Nile. All believed that it was his offerings, if done correctly, that caused the Nile to flood and bring prosperity. If there was no flood it was seen as the god's displeasure with Pharaoh and could cause the people to turn against him. Seven years of drought, which in this case would also mean no floods, would be unprecedented. So the dream has political and theological implications for Pharaoh.

Joseph offers more than just an interpretation. He proposes a plan of action for Pharaoh. What Joseph is doing, to use modern parlance, is to put a positive spin on negative news. Instead of hearing about the drought as being the god's displeasure with Pharaoh, Joseph says that his God has told Pharaoh what was going to occur so he could rescue Egypt. Joseph is hinting that the God of the Hebrews is more powerful than Egypt's gods. The Egyptian gods might reject Pharaoh's offerings and not bring a flood but his God had given Pharaoh a way forward. If Pharaoh acts decisively, he can show that the gods were with him even in the midst of a prolonged drought! Pharaoh, realizing that the interpretation had come from God through Joseph, believes he must be the one in whom the Spirit of God rests and it should be he who oversees this

program. He is asking Joseph to not just save Egypt from hunger but to save his throne. We will talk in more detail about this rise to power next week.

What I want us to take from this story is how it reflects the various ways in which God can work in and through people, from Joseph who gives God the glory, to Pharaoh who recognizes the spirit of God. God's work of blessing includes the entire human race. With that in mind, three questions arise for me.

The first is "How do we wait patiently when it seems everything is going wrong?" Joseph's life after age 17, until this point, is a series of disappointments. He is sold into slavery by his brothers. He makes the best of it, but then is thrown in jail for being good and rejecting the advances of his owner's wife who then accuses Joseph of the same thing because she has been spurned. He again makes the best of things and then is forgotten after helping one who promised to help him. Anywhere along the way we could have excused Joseph for getting angry at God, at life. I am sure there were moments of depression, but mostly he continued to live each day as well as he could, trusting that God was with him. It is hard to stay positive when life seems to turn against you. It is hard to stay positive when you are in a waiting time and you don't like where you have paused. Joseph's story is a reminder that we are not to give up hope, stay focused on God, and sometimes, not always, but sometimes good things come our way. And always, we see when we look back how we were never alone.

The second question this story raises is, "Do we always try to remind people it is God at work and not about us?" This part of the story shows the maturation of Joseph. Before all of the difficulties, life was all about what he could get out of it. Now, he continually tells the officials who are in prison, and later Pharaoh, that if he can interpret dreams it is because of God. He is no longer putting himself forward. Think about how great a temptation it would have been to claim the glory when he met Pharaoh. To say, "I am Joseph and I will interpret your dreams." This would have guaranteed him freedom from prison and likely a bit of money. He might have even been able to go home and enact revenge on his brothers. Instead, he gives God the glory. Ultimately, because of this stance, it will cause Pharaoh to look kindly on him and lead to his rise in power. But Joseph does not know this at the time. What this shows me is that Joseph

has learned through all those trials that his one hope, his one strength is God. He will not give up that foundation now even if it means losing a quick moment's gain. He has matured mightily.

Do we give God the credit in our lives? When people tell us how impressed they are that we: forgave someone, gave of our time to work on a project, or let go of some anger, do we smile and say thank you taking all the credit, or do we say, "I couldn't do it but through God's help and strength I did?"

Finally, this part of Joseph's story makes me ask, "Where do we discount God's presence just because of the messenger?" Too often we look at a person and their situation and make decisions about how reliable they are. Joseph was a slave and Potiphar saw God at work in him. Joseph was a prisoner and the jailer saw God at work in him. Joseph was a slave and a prisoner and a foreigner and yet Pharaoh sees God at work in and through Joseph. It reminds us to not be blind to how God is working in and through people. Just because they are different from us, having struggles, or have different beliefs does not mean that God is not with them, using them and may, through them, bless us.

Faithfulness in times of struggles, centering our lives on God and seeing God in everyone we meet, who would have thought that Joseph could teach us so much? There is more to learn from Joseph who is becoming a man of faith and will become a man of grace and compassion before his story is finished.