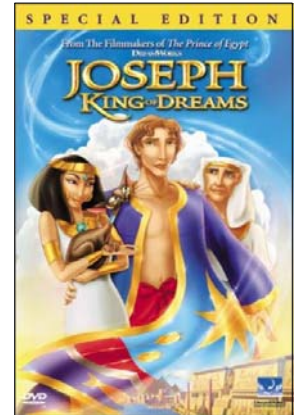


The Call To Fully Engage In Unexpected Places

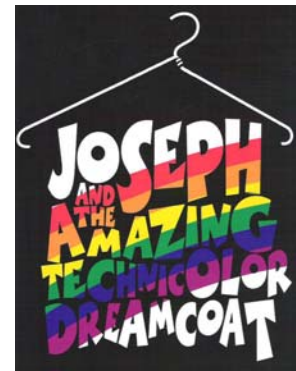
Genesis 45.4-7 and Genesis 50.15 and 19-21

How many of you know something of the story of Joseph? Any chance you saw the Dreamworks movie **Joseph – King of Dreams**? How about Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical **Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat**? Great... now forget them. Forget them because our call today takes us thousands of years back past Dreamworks and Webber to the account of Joseph found on the pages of scripture. For you see, what we need to hear today can’t be captured in a cartoon or show tune any more than the truth of God at work in your life or mine can be summarized by animators or costume designers.



So come with me back to scripture, to Genesis 37, where we first meet Joseph in as the conceited favorite son of the favorite wife of that old blessed crook himself, Jacob, the striver, who God renamed Israel at the Jabbok.

You might remember that young Joseph doesn’t do himself any favors by bragging to his brothers about several dreams where the family bows down to him and Jacob doesn’t do the lad any favors either by giving him a desert tuxedo far more splendid and colorful than anything owned by his older brothers.



Then there is that fateful trip Jacob sent Joseph on to check on his brothers who are out with the herds and their collective hatred at his appearance on the horizon wearing his special tux. As he flounces their general direction, their first impulse is to kill him straight up, but brother Reuben seeks to save his smug little brother— suggesting that they instead toss him in a dry water cistern to sweat a bit. And then Judah decides to make a little coin by selling Joe into slavery.

They covered the sale by staging his death with that bright tuxedo as **CSI Exhibit A** – ripped and smeared in goat’s blood – and they return home with their story while their brother, Josephy, the arrogant twit, is hauled south in chains by Ishmaelite traders. Are the details of the story coming back?

Joseph pops up again on the scriptural grid in chapter 39 in Potiphar’s house in Egypt and something has happened. Betrayal by his brothers and time in chains has changed Joseph.

I imagine the abuse and disorientation and humiliation of slavery would shatter most smug brats, but not so with Joe... and in the chapters to follow we see him leave behind so much more than that fancy coat to become exactly who God intended him to be all along. In no time flat slave Joseph is running Potiphar’s house with administrative efficiency and real integrity.



Things are looking up... at least until a scene straight out of **Desperate Housewives** and Joseph gets thrown into prison— framed by Mrs. P when he refuses to sleep with her.

If you think you will always get rewarded for doing the right thing, think again. And if you think prisons now are ugly ... imagine back a few thousand years. But remember too that the story isn’t done. Joseph not only survives the rats and disease and capricious brutality of the Egyptian penal system, in almost no time he’s running the prison as well. The writer of Genesis

says that even in prison “the Lord was with him... and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden.”

And Genesis 40 brings Joe two new cellmates—Pharaoh’s baker and cup-bearer—and two more dreams for Joe to interpret. And what he says comes true: the baker is executed and the cup-bearer returned to the palace.

Fast forward two years. Now it is Pharaoh’s turn to dream and when no one can interpret, the cup-bearer remembers the young Hebrew in prison. Joseph is brought to the palace: first, to interpret seven coming years of abundance followed by seven years of famine, and second, to run all of Egypt as effectively as he ran Potiphar’s house and the warden’s prison.

Another jump forward, this time into the seven years of famine when Joseph’s brothers show up in Egypt desperate to buy food. They don’t recognize him, and he accuses them of being spies and tosses brother Simeon into prison to insure they will return with young Benjamin—the brother who wasn’t even born when Joseph was sold to the Ishmaelites.

They do bring Benjamin back, and when Joseph frames young Ben for stealing, all the brother are distraught. And their grief shows Joe that they too have changed. We pick up the story in Genesis 45:

⁴Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.” ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.

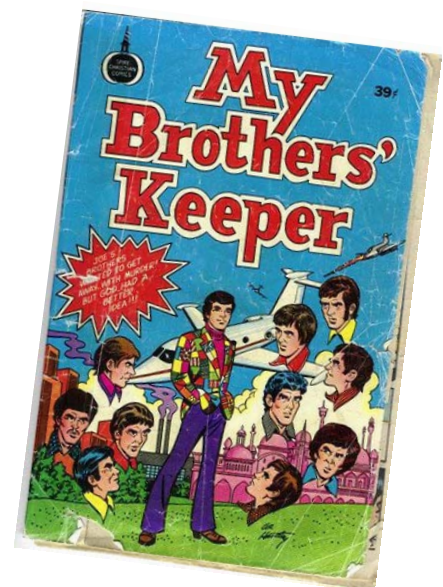
Their terror turns to astonishment and then wonder and the end result is that the whole family is brought to Egypt and is saved. But you know, my favorite dialogue in the whole story comes even later... at the very end of Genesis... and it builds on what we’ve just read. Jacob, the old redeemed crook, has finally kicked the bucket, and this causes a panic:

¹⁵Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph’s brothers said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?” ... ¹⁹But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. ²¹So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.”

“You intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.” The Word of God.

I started by mentioning Dreamworks and Andrew Lloyd Webber and their retelling of the Joseph story. The truth is, my most vivid images of this story come from a comic book version of the story I read as a kid. The comic was called **My Brothers’ Keeper**, and as I read it and reread it, I imagined myself as Joseph... maybe because he had his own jet in the modernized version... and from the comic book I could easily see why Potiphar’s wife was a serious threat. I had something of comic book crush on her.

Yet the last time I checked, none of our lives play out quite like a Dreamworks cartoon or a Webber musical or a Christian comic. No... the family betrayals in our lives are not so easy to forgive, the seasons of slavery incredibly bleak, and the last place we expect to find God in our lives is in the prisons where we end up... whatever they look like and whether we deserve to be there or not.



And then there's that troubling matter of **Potiphar's wife**... how many of us, if we are honest, run from temptation like scripture says Joseph did? Do we really bolt for the door, or are we more likely to hang around awhile to see how things play out?

Joseph's story offers us so many gifts if we take the time to slip past the dance tunes and caricatures to the real story... a story that lays out the remarkable call of God in the life of this man... a call that I believe is call to be to fully engage in unexpected places.

Joseph's story just may be the ultimate 'bloom where you are planted' story.

I say this because once the young Joseph's arrogance is stripped away, his location in life... be that geographic and socio-economic... turns out to be entirely irrelevant to the way Joseph lives out his call and uses the gifts God gives him. That bears repeating:

Joseph's location in life... both geographic and socio-economic... is entirely irrelevant to the way Joseph lives out his call and uses the gifts God has given him.

What happens at Potiphar's house? Slave Joseph ends up in charge. Potiphar sees God's hand at work in Joseph's life and "entrusted to his care everything he owned." The writer of Genesis says that "with Joseph in charge, Potiphar did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate."

How about in prison?

"The LORD was with Joseph and... the chief jailer committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it.²³ The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper.

And as it was at Potiphar's and in prison, so it was in Pharaoh's palace.

Pharaoh said to Joseph... "You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you... See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt."

And when the famine did come and people cried out to Pharaoh for help, here is what he said: "Go to Joseph; what he says to you, do."

Where is God calling you? Or wait... strike that... **what is God's call in your life that is location independent?** What is God's call to you—both in terms of passion and gifts—that God intends for you to live out exactly where you find yourself right now? All of us are ready for the perks and privilege of the palace. Sign me up. But slavery and prison? Not so much.

Yet if we are to believe the story of Joseph and make any links to how God calls us, we might need to give up our 'grass is always greener on the other side of the fence' mentality and discern who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do here and now... not once we make it financially or find the perfect life partner, not once we finish the degree or land the perfect job. Not when the markets recover. Not once our guy or gal gets into the White House. Not someday. Not some place. What is God's call here? Now?



I've told you a little about my call to love on people in the restaurant and hospitality industry. And I think I mentioned that I have been dreaming and praying about this for several years. A number of these dreams have been shared with a counselor I've seen off and on over years we've lived in Spokane. And one day while we were talking I said something like "when I start Big Table, I'll..." and he interrupted me and said "What do you mean when? You've already started. Kevin, do you realize that almost everything you say you want to do, you're already doing?" And he was right. I love food. Always have. I love people. Almost always do. And it turns out God began using me to set the table long before we came up a name.



Your deepest call and mine will never be location dependent. It will never be job dependent. It is simply God dependent.

Over and over again in the story of Joseph we read that "the Lord was with him" wherever he was. God blessed him as a slave, God blessed him in prison, God blessed him as he ran the land of Egypt.

The Lord was with him and blessed him as a leader and an administrator, as a designer of grain storage facilities and the coordinator of relief for one of the worst famines in history.

Have you ever noticed how an artist makes art with whatever is at hand and wherever he or she happens to be? If you doubt it, come to our house and peek in the Megan's bedroom. It is like stepping into another world. Paint. Papier-mâché. Pottery. Music. Colorful sheets draped on the walls and tacked to the ceiling that have turned a sheetrock box into a living maze that looks like a Starbucks on steroids.

Or think about someone you know who loves numbers. They can find math anywhere and delight to make columns add up or balance out, and if the rest of us who find math more daunting didn't make so much fun of them, I bet we'd get to see a lot more of the delight in their eyes. Did you know there is actually a group on the social networking site Facebook called "Lovers and Faithful Followers of Microsoft Excel"? I know because one of my Facebook friends from here in the church, Craig Numata, is a member.

What might be God's deepest call for you? That call that draws on your passions and gifts so fully that no matter where you find yourself... like Joseph... it begins to bubble up.

Do you know intuitively the answer to this question or is this a question you find yourself avoiding for some reason? Maybe this is too painful a question to ask straight up because you feel trapped right now in a dead-end job or you are reeling from a recent betrayal. Maybe right now you are eating Ishmaelite dust at the back of the slave train, and the clarity and joy God's call to you is the last thing on your mind. Why you are not even sure you want to survive to make it to Egypt.

Sure God used Joseph as a slave and in prison, but that has to be a fluke. Divine lightning doesn't strike twice. God isn't going to do the same thing for you, right?

Bullocks! Our God is the same yesterday, today, and forever and we are called to fully engage wherever we find ourselves for this is exactly where God will meet us.

It's just that a call like this is tricky business... holy business... not just 'jerk up your bootstraps and git 'er done' business. Call isn't something that we can DO on our own. Call takes God 'with us' because we too will face betrayals in the family and attempts on our life—figuratively if not literally. Slavery remains a reality, and all of us end up in some kind of prison sometime.

Call it EVIL if you will because it is, and the damage done to us is just as real and life-threatening... especially if we try to go it alone. Yet hear the good news of the gospel told here in the end of Genesis. Even evil... shrapnel evil or active intentional evil... will not be able to destroy the good that God intends and will accomplish in us and through us if we let him.

"Do not be afraid!" Joseph tell his brothers in Genesis 50. "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.

Now there are plenty of stories of people who, after their lives are shattered by evil, never recover. But there are others stories too of lives where evil doesn't have the last word. And I believe the difference is God: our God who is able... and might even be said to specialize... in transforming evil and redeeming the damage in our lives.

Alastair Campbell served as Tony Blair's press secretary for years and describes Blair as truly a man of deep faith and the most openly devout political leader in Britain in literally 100 years. And he remembers standing with Blair in 1996 at a school in Scotland where a gunman had killed 16 children and a teacher. In the bloodstained classroom Campbell... not a Christian... remembers turning to Blair and asking: "What does your God make of this?" And Campbell says Blair stopped and looked at him and said, "**Just because man is bad, it does not mean that God is not good.**"



And we dare to go further: **God is not just good, God is mighty to save.**

The story of Joseph shows us just this salvation and it isn't salvation that is isolated and individualistic. Through this one man thousands upon thousands are saved.

God's deepest call in your life and in mine will never be location dependent... be that geographic or socio-economic... and it won't be luck dependent either... as we manage somehow to dodge evil as it seeks to devour. In fact, what enters our lives as evil often... in God's stunning grace... is redeemed to become part of our call... along with our passions and gifts... our call to , like Joseph, fully engage wherever we find ourselves.

Do you know... or might you take a guess... at what God' call might be for you?

Charge: God's deepest call in your life and in mine will never be location dependent and it won't be luck dependent. It is simply God dependent as we, like Joseph, fully engage wherever we find ourselves using our passion, our gifts, and even our pain. Do you know... or might you take a guess... at what God' deepest call might be for you?

Spokane First Presbyterian Church
 October 19th, 2008
 Kevin Finch