

Looking Ahead for Hints, or Looking Back for Helps?

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Genesis 37-50
- Jude 23-25

How do you know if you have faith? If it's the right kind of faith? If you have enough faith? If your faith is doing for you what it's supposed to?

In an essay in the current issue of *Christian Century* magazine, United Church of Christ pastor Liz Goodman¹ noted that lots of people wonder about such things. "Many people seem to believe that 'God has a plan' for them and that their central task in life is to figure out that plan ahead of time."²

And so we tell ourselves, "I know I'd hear God advise me about even the littlest things... if only I had the faith to listen; I know God would direct me through life's big decisions... if only I had the faith to obey." But most of us, most of the time, don't hear a holy whisper, don't feel a divine nudge... and we blame ourselves. We despair. We mutter, "I don't have strong enough faith to follow God's lead."

But rather than imagining God interacting with us constantly like a puppeteer pulling the strings of a marionette, perhaps we should take a longer view, take time to look back. Maybe that will help us reflect on how God has been at work in our lives, "to wonder where God has opened a way that turned out to be the true way, where God might have used a narrowing of options in life"³ to guide us to where we were reluctant to go.

The ability to look back to see how God has accompanied us thus far is illustrated so powerfully in the Biblical story of Joseph. You may remember that Joseph was one of the twelve sons of Jacob, a "favorite son" who Jacob gifted with what the Bible calls a "coat of many colors." Maybe you're most familiar with Joseph's story because of the Broadway musical "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor® Dreamcoat." The story of Joseph fills one quarter of the whole book of Genesis, and it shows us how looking back on life can assure us that God is with us in our ease and in our struggle, in our successes and in our defeats.

So today let's hear the story of Joseph. We'll see how he was able to look back on the twisting, tumultuous events of his life and see God's presence guiding him through the successes but also through the very real challenges he endured. But rather than read

¹ Liz Goodman is pastor of Church on the Hill in Lenox, Massachusetts, and Monterey United Church of Christ in Monterey, Massachusetts.

² Liz Goodman, "Sunday's Coming: Joseph's Whole Story." *Christian Century Newsletter*, February 20, 2022

³ Liz Goodman, "Sunday's Coming: Joseph's Whole Story." *Christian Century Newsletter*, February 20, 2022

all thirteen chapters, I'm going to paraphrase much of the story and quote directly from Genesis for parts of it.⁴

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Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the family flock with his brothers; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father [Jacob]. Now Jacob loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because Joseph was the son of his old age. Indeed, Jacob had gifted Joseph with a coat of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all of them, they hated Joseph, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, "There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "You think you're ever going to rule over us??" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

Joseph's brothers took the flocks to a pasture. When they saw Joseph approaching from a distance, they plotted, saying, "Let us kill him and throw him into a pit; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him." But brother Reuben convinced them not to hurt Joseph but just leave him in a pit, so Reuben could secretly rescue him later.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his fancy coat, and they took him and threw him into a pit.

Then Judah said to his brothers, "Come, let us sell him, and not hurt him with our own hands; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they lifted Joseph up out of the pit, and sold him to them for twenty pieces of silver. And the traders took Joseph to Egypt.

The brothers took Joseph's coat, dipped it in the blood of a slaughtered goat, tore it up and told their father that a wild animal had devoured Joseph. The father Jacob was grief-stricken.

Meanwhile the traders had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man working for Potiphar. Potiphar saw that the LORD was with Joseph, and that the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. So he made Joseph overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. From that time the LORD blessed Potiphar's house and fields for Joseph's sake.

Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. Potiphar's wife repeatedly tried to seduce Joseph, but he resisted, not wanting to violate Potiphar's trust or sin against God. Finally she accused Joseph of assaulting her, and her enraged husband had Joseph thrown into prison. But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer.

Some time after this, Pharaoh was angry with his chief butler and the chief baker, and he put them in the prison where Joseph was. One night those two had disturbing dreams. In the morning they said to Joseph, "We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." So Joseph interpreted their dreams, and the fate that Joseph envisioned for each was exactly what happened.

⁴ From the New Revised Standard Version, highly edited and adapted

Two years later, Pharaoh had two troubling dreams, but none of Egypt's wise men and magicians could interpret them for him. One of Pharaoh's servants remembered a prisoner who had interpreted dreams, and Pharaoh sent for Joseph who told the king, "It's not I but God who will give the meaning of your dream."

Joseph then told Pharaoh that God had revealed in the dream what God was about to do: provide seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of drought and famine. Joseph explained that God provided this insight so Pharaoh could select a person to organize the storage of crops to provide for the years of hardship.

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall obey your command. I have set you over all the land of Egypt." Removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; he arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain around his neck. Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt.

Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. He gathered up the surplus crops for those seven years when there was plenty in the land of Egypt, and stored up food in the cities. Joseph stored up grain in such abundance that it was beyond measure.

The seven years of plenty came to an end; and the seven years of famine began to come, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in every country, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread. All the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain.

When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die." So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. But Jacob did not send Joseph's little brother Benjamin with his brothers, for Jacob feared that harm might come to him. Thus the sons of Jacob were among the many people who came to Egypt to buy grain.

Now Joseph was governor over the land; it was he who sold to all the people. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but they didn't recognize him; he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. Joseph also remembered his dreams about their sheaves of wheat bowing before his own sheaf of wheat.

Joseph said to them, "You are spies!" They said to him, "We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of a certain man in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is still with our father, and one is no more."

Joseph tested them by sending them back to bring Benjamin, Joseph's little brother, but he kept one brother in prison to guarantee their return. He had their sacks filled with grain but secretly returned their payment to their sacks as well, and sent them off.

They returned with the grain to their father Jacob, and said that they couldn't return to Egypt to rescue their brother unless they also brought their little brother Benjamin. They were horrified to find their grain money was still in their sacks; surely the Egyptians would accuse them of theft. Once the grain was depleted they returned with little Benjamin, and with twice the money so they could pay for the first load of grain and another load.

When Joseph saw Benjamin had come with his brothers, he released the imprisoned brother, and sold them the grain they sought. But Joseph instructed his steward to hide a precious silver cup in the grain sack of the youngest brother Benjamin. After he sent them on

their way, Joseph had them tracked down and brought back to the palace, claiming theft of his silver cup. A search through the grain sacks resulted, of course, in the cup's discovery in the grain sack of young Benjamin. Joseph ordered the young man handed over as a slave because of his supposed crime.

The oldest brother Judah begged for mercy, claiming that to return to their father without Benjamin would kill the old man. Brother Judah asked to be kept as a slave in place of his brother Benjamin.

Then Joseph could no longer control himself in front of all of his attendants. He cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers were speechless, so shocked were they at seeing him again.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, master of his house and ruler over all Egypt. Hurry and tell my father, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you.'" And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that the brothers talked and talked.

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Go back to your Bible and read for yourself the story of Joseph, starting in Chapter 37. It's an engaging, richly told narrative. I've shared the highlights of the story of Joseph today to illustrate this point: that sometimes it's easier to see the hand of God at work guiding us or protecting us or comforting us when we look back on our lives. Each of us can recall events in our lives that we didn't plan on; episodes that were uncomfortable or painful to go through; times of uncertainty that were unsettling; disappointments or tragedies that even today are painful to recall. We may wonder why God would make us go through certain moments in life.

But in addition to looking ahead with hope for hints to where God is guiding us, we can also look back. When we look back over our lives we may realize that it was God who helped us through the unpredictable challenges of everyday life. As we look back across our lives, we will see how the mountains and valleys of our life's journey confirm that we've not traveled alone. God has been at work in our lives. Just as Joseph was able to realize in the twists and turns and turmoil and triumphs of his life, so we may recognize how God has opened ways for us that turned out to be the necessary way, and God has narrowed our options to guide us to where God wanted us to go.

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