

I

Last weekend, I had the honor and privilege to officiate a wedding in this beautiful room, and over the years, it has dawned on me that the hours and moments leading up to the start of the wedding service, I am the most powerful person in the room. The sanctuary might be filled to the rafters with friends and family and a whole army of attendants, but there are only three people that are required for the wedding to take place, and I am the one standing in the middle of it all. Just before the bride enters the room, all eyes are on me, and with a simple wave of my arm, everyone in the room to stands up.

But then a strange thing happens over the course of the service. My power and command of attention begins to evaporate rapidly. So much so that the moment the service is over, before the happy couple has even made it all the way back down the center aisle, I am all but powerless. I am no longer the one in the center of the action, and in the middle of all the hugs and smiles and pictures, if anyone notices me at all, it's with a look that seems to say, "Oh, you're still here?"

And of course that's how it should be. The wedding is about the couple and their covenant before God, not me. But still, it's a strange thing that I notice every time, this sense that I have lots of power and people look to me, and then suddenly I have none.

II

Perhaps all of us at some point in our lives have had that kind of experience – where one moment, you're on top of it all, right at the center of the action, and then the next, you're an afterthought, a footnote, if you're even noticed at all.

Sometimes this human life can be quite the roller coaster ride, from great heights to devastating lows. Sometimes, the distance between those two points can feel so steep as to make us dizzy, leaving us to wonder, is God in this with me?

And such is the case with the man named Joseph who is at the center of our story today.

III

If you were with us last week, we talked about God's mission statement, namely, that God intends to bless all the families of the earth in and through this one particular family, through a man named Abram and his wife Sarai and their descendants. We said that the rest of the Book of Genesis, in fact, the rest of the biblical story is about how God's mission of the blessing of all the families of the earth will be worked out. We also noted that there was already a major obstacle to be overcome if God was going to make a great nation out of Abram and Sarai, namely that they were in their mid-70s and as of yet had been unable to conceive and bear a son.

Between where we left off the story last week and where we pick up

today, Abram and Sarai did indeed end up having children, including a son by the name of Isaac. Isaac in turn became a father himself, including twin boys named Esau and Jacob.

Jacob became the father of many children, including 12 sons, the 11th of which was named Joseph, who is the focus of our story for today.

One of the running themes in Genesis is favoritism, wherein a mother or father plays favorites among his or her children. In modern parenting, favoritism is of course to be avoided, but within the framework of Genesis, the favoriting of one child over all the others is a theme. After all, as we said last week, Abram and Sarai weren't the most faithful or the most attractive or the wealthiest or certainly youngest couple on the face of the earth, but for reasons beyond our understanding, God chose them, God blessed them, God favored them, and decreed that their descendants would be the instrument of God's blessing all the families of the earth.

And so that theme resounds in these Genesis accounts – a father or a mother favoring one of their children over the others. And such was the case in the relationship between Jacob and the second youngest of his twelve sons Joseph.

I played the role of Jacob in a church youth group production of the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, and as Andrew Lloyd Weber put it via the voice of

Jacob, Joseph's mother, she was quite my favorite wife, I never really loved another all my life, and Joseph was, my joy because, he reminded me of her.

As you might imagine, the fact that Joseph was Jacob's favorite son caused his eleven brothers to be filled with a jealous rage. Joseph was also obnoxious and a little clueless. Those of you with younger siblings, raise your hand if you've ever experienced them to be a little obnoxious and clueless.

And so the brothers devised a plan to rid themselves of their obnoxious brother. At first they were going to kill him outright, but then Reuben, the eldest, thought better of it, and convinced his brothers instead to throw Joseph into a pit, which they did.

Then they sat down to eat, and just then, they saw a passing caravan of traders on their way down to Egypt, so they decided they would profit from their treachery, and they sold their brother as a slave to the traders. In order to cover their tracks with their father Jacob, they took Joseph's coat and roughed it up and dipped part of it in goat's blood, and sent it back to father Jacob with a story about how their little brother had been beset by wild animals and devoured.

And that's where we pick up our story today. So I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Genesis chapter 39.

Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, *and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the*

captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge; and, with him there, he had no concern for anything but the food that he ate.

Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, 'Lie with me.' But he refused and said to his master's wife, 'Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?' And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her. One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house, she caught hold of his

garment, saying, 'Lie with me!' But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside. When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, she called out to the members of her household and said to them, 'See, my husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice; and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside.' Then she kept his garment by her until his master came home, and she told him the same story, saying, 'The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me; but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside.'

When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, 'This is the way your servant treated me', he became enraged. And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison. But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. 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. 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.

If we were to draw a line graph of Joseph's life, it would look something

like a roller coaster. Joseph keeps oscillating between being at or near the very top, and then at or near the very bottom.

When we're introduced to Joseph, of his father's 12 sons, Joseph is the favorite, and Jacob gifts him with a beautiful coat. He's also gifted with dreams, where he sees himself standing tall and his eleven brothers bowing to him.

But the next thing you know, Joseph's coat is ripped from his body and he's thrown down into a pit and sold into slavery in Egypt.

He ends up as a slave in the home of the captain of the guard, and he becomes a successful man, rising to the position of overseer of everything in Potiphar's possession.

Then he is falsely accused of a crime he did not commit. He is denied due process and falsely imprisoned. He is back down at the bottom again.

But in the prison, he begins to rise again, and the chief jailer commits to Joseph's care all the prisoners and paid no heed to anything in Joseph's care.

And spoiler alert, this pattern will continue. Joseph will keep rising and falling, and eventually he will become the Pharaoh's most trusted advisor, and when a worldwide famine strikes, it's Joseph's faithful stewardship and careful planning that will ensure that both Egyptians and Hebrews survive.

But as interesting as the Joseph saga is, as much as this story makes good material for a Broadway production, the bible isn't ultimately about Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. It's not ultimately about Egyptian politics or legal structures. Ultimately, the bible is about God, and about us, about you and me.

And here's the refrain that kept catching my eyes and my ears this week in this story.

The Lord was with Joseph.

The Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Jacob's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field.

But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer.

The Lord was with him, and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper.

The Lord was *with* him.

IV

And the Lord is *with* you, my friend.

Maybe you're at a high point of your life this morning. Maybe things are going really well. Business is good, your relationships are strong, your body is healthy and whole.

Or maybe you're at a low point in your life this morning. Maybe things are not good. Maybe you are suffering in

body, in mind, in spirit, or all the above. Maybe somebody has betrayed you, and you find yourself in a pit. Maybe you've been slandered and falsely accused and denied due process. Maybe people have used their power to ostracize you or point out all the ways in which you don't belong, and you're just at the bottom.

My friend, whether you're at the top this morning or at the bottom or somewhere in between, remember this. When you were baptized, you were made a member of this family, with all its ups and downs and triumphs and tragedies. When you were baptized, you were adopted into the covenant that God made with Abram and Sarai all those years ago. These aren't just old stories – they're the stories of your ancestors in faith.

And the promise that God made to Abram and Sarai, the promise that God kept with Joseph, God extends and keeps with you. God is with you, my friend. You are God's favorite. Not because of anything you've said or not said, not because of anything you've done or not done, not because of where you come from or who you know, but simply because God has chosen you, God has favored you, God has looked at you and said, that one is mine.

The good news, the gospel news, my friend, is that in all the good times, in all the hard times, in all the in-between times, God is with you.

V

Three months from today, Christians around the world will mark an important holiday formally called The Feast of the Nativity, or as it's more commonly known, Christmas. For us, for we who claim to be followers of Jesus of Nazareth, Christmas is about far more than lights and tinsel and ho-ho-hos. At Christmas, we proclaim the birth of Jesus, who is also called Emmanuel, which means God *with* us.

As people of faith in Jesus Christ, we do not worship a God who sits far off in the heavens somewhere, a God who set creation in motion and then walked off to do other things and left us to our own devices.

As people of faith in Jesus Christ, we do not proclaim a God who sits like a lifeguard on a watchtower, just waiting for us to make a mistake so God can whistle us out of the pool.

As people of faith in Jesus Christ, worship a God who is with us, a God who knows first-hand what it is to be human, a God who knows first-hand what it is to be on the very top, and also to be on the very bottom, a God who knows firsthand what it is to be falsely accused and denied due process, a God who knows what it is to be treated as an outsider, a God who knows first hand what it is to suffer.

As people of faith in Jesus Christ, we proclaim that God is with us, even, somehow, someway, should we find ourselves in the very deepest pit there is.

For all his obnoxiousness, for all his cluelessness, Joseph had one thing going for him. He understood the concept of stewardship.

Whenever the word stewardship is uttered from a pulpit, people in the pews have an instinct to clutch their pockets and purses, because over the years, we pastors and church leaders have accidentally taught the people of God that stewardship is a fancy way of saying we're about to build something, and it's going to be expensive, or we've already built something, and we need to pay back the loan.

Stewardship, biblically speaking, means to manage something carefully and faithfully on behalf of another. So yes, stewardship is about managing the dollars entrusted to our care, because as people of faith in Jesus Christ, as people who take the Word of God seriously, we understand that ultimately, everything belongs to God. The Psalmist teaches us the earth is the Lord's, and all that is therein, the world and those who live in it.

Stewardship has to do with how we manage all the things of God that God has placed in our care – our money, yes, but also our time, our power, even our very bodies.

Joseph was an excellent steward of everything that was entrusted to his care. And like Joseph, our whether we find ourselves at the top or at the bottom, whether we find ourselves in seasons of flood or drought, whether we find ourselves in the palace or the pit, is

to be faithful and trustworthy with all the things God has given us to manage.

And my goodness, my friends, has God entrusted us here at First Presbyterian Church of Athens with resources to manage for God's glory. My goodness, my friends, has God equipped us well for our mission of creating a community where people seek the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, rejoice in worship, and go forth sharing the love of Christ with Athens and the world.

So may we be faithful stewards. May we manage the things of God faithfully and well.

And may we never forget, the Lord is *with* us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.