

**First Baptist Church of Augusta**

**January 6, 2008**

**Genesis 37:1-11**

*Joseph, A Multi-Colored Life*

**Biography Series**

NRS Genesis 37:1 *Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan.* 2 *This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father.* 3 *Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves.* 4 *But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.* 5 *Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more.* 6 *He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed.* 7 *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."* 8 *His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.* 9 *He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me."* 10 *But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?"* 11 *So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.*

Do you remember the cable series, "Biography?" At one time it was a very successful television show that featured both well-known, as well as obscure persons, and presented a biography of them. As you probably know, this person may be a celebrity, an athlete, a politician, or from a famous family. The few times I have watched this show, I have been surprised that no matter how much I think I know about someone, something new is brought out that helps explain a bit better about who they are (or were). And then, there are times I don't have a clue about the person they are featuring, but I find myself enjoying learning about them anyway.

I am certain that many of you have recently read some form of a biography. The most popular section, after all, in a newspaper is the obituaries count.

We begin this new series entitled, "***Biography***" by looking at some well-known and other less-known persons in the Bible. In future weeks, we will look at the lives of Ruth, Samson, and *Phoebe, Priscilla, Persis and other Unknowns*. **The purpose is not only to get to know them better, but see how God used them for higher purposes and how God can use us, with our ordinary biographies, to live out extraordinary lives.**

Today we begin with the multi-colored life of Joseph. Let's begin by acknowledging that Joseph appears to be the epitome of a know-it-all little brother. The youngest of eleven brothers, with only one sibling younger, Joseph came across as spoiled, a tattle-tale, and given privileges not afforded to the others. The gift of the multi-colored coat, (which is literally translated as "long sleeves") is one example of favoritism. If I was one of Joseph's older brothers, I am not sure if I would have wanted to be in his company either. No one really cares for favoritism, unless of course, we are the ones being favored! Not only did he have privilege, he seemed not to care about the feelings of his family when he shared his dreams of their submission. I suppose the only thing worse than favoritism is when one feels entitled to everything.

Most of us know the story of Joseph, son of Jacob. We know that out of jealousy, his brothers plotted at first to kill him, but settled on throwing him in a well and then sold him into slavery. Whether we like Joseph or not at this point in the story, we cannot help but have some sympathy. He was just a boy of seventeen. All seventeen-year-olds like to think they have the world by the tail, but inside, they are just frightened little boys. It had to have been terrifying in the pit of the well, listening to his brothers bargaining with strangers over his

future. Some of you, here this morning, know what it is like to feel as though your future is in someone else's hands.

He was sold into slavery, and ended up as a servant to an officer named Potiphar, who was the captain of the guard to Pharaoh in Egypt. Even as a slave, Joseph became successful and was highly regarded, and was promoted through the ranks and given great responsibilities.

Joseph had some set-backs of course. There was Potiphar's wife, who sought to seduce Joseph. When he refused, she falsely accused him and had him thrown into prison. Yet even in prison Joseph did well taking on responsibilities and winning the favor of his guard. His predisposition in interpreting dreams became his key out of there. After correctly interpreting the dreams of two fellow prisoners, word got to the Pharaoh himself, who also had a puzzling dream.

Joseph interpreted the dream for Pharaoh, which predicted seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine. This is like getting an insider tip at Wall Street and the stock market. Pharaoh was pleased with Joseph, released him from jail, and promoted him ahead of everyone else in Egypt – second in command to Pharaoh.

Of course, there is more, much more. But let's race ahead in the story to the part when Joseph's brothers come to him needing his food and protection. When Joseph revealed his identity in the end, all were surprised, delighted, and little bit fearful. It seemed Joseph's dreams came true. The sheaves of grain did bow down to him, and so did the moon and the sun and the stars. End of story.

***So what...Why should you and I care about the biography of Joseph? What does that have to do with you and me? Let me offer some additional observations about the life of Joseph.***

### **The Role of Life**

The role that life plays is one of inequity. First, life was not fair to Joseph's brothers. No child deserves to be treated as less important than another sibling. We parents like to think that we work so hard in making sure everything our children receive is evenly distributed: from Christmas presents to chocolate milk. But of course, inequity happens all the time. Most parents would never admit this, but it does. I can tell when one child gets the bragging rights of the parent, while another struggles to be included or to be blessed.

And, of course, life was not fair to Joseph. No matter about his father's favoritism, Joseph certainly did not deserve to be sold into slavery, and sometime later to be falsely accused and sent to prison – not fair.

Guess what? That is life. It is not fair. Some of us are born with a silver spoon in our mouth, others are born into poverty. Some of us have doors open to us at every corner, and others cannot seem to get a break.

Have you ever known someone who treated their bodies harshly: boozing, smoking, eating whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, and still lived long lives? And then, there are those who obey all the rules, get cancer or some disease and never recover. Do not tell me that life is fair. It certainly is not. We are not born on equal footing.

This leads to a second observation about Joseph who faced life's inequities:

### **The Role of Joseph**

Joseph could have decided that life was simply absurd, and lived his remaining days in quiet desperation, bitter, and resigned. Instead, Joseph took the inequity that life brought him and worked towards meaning. From a favored life to the bottom of a well, Joseph knew about the unfairness of it all.

Joseph resisted a theology of determinism. Determinism is the suggestion that one's destiny is final, regardless of the actions taken. To believe that one's role is fixed and predetermined, is the epitome of hopelessness, a categorical rejection of redemptive alternatives.

Joseph took the problems of slavery and turned it into an opportunity for purposeful living. He could have sulked about his situation, held himself a "po-me" party, and resigned himself to living out a life of failure.

Joseph was a dreamer, that the role of life was filled with generative possibilities. Slavery or imprisonment was not going to stand in the way. From the bottom of the well, he goes on to be in charge of Potiphar's house. In the confines of prison, he was in charge of all the other inmates. From a convict, he goes on to be second in command in Egypt. When God grants a dream, no one else can stand in the way, not brothers, not slavemasters, not Pharaohs, and not Egypt.

Some of you here this morning, may not fully grasp the dream God has for you. You may even wonder if God has anything for you, and that's okay for now. But you do need to know this: there is nothing you are facing in your life that renders God's purpose for you null and void.

Beyond every problem waits a dream God wants you to live into. The problems do not necessarily go away, but they will never overcome God's purpose. What kind of person is waiting to emerge out of God's grace and God's redemption? Throughout scriptures – let me hasten to emphasize all throughout scripture – God is to be found working on redeeming people for the good. In God's economy, no one is useless, hopeless, or beyond change.

The life of Joseph reminds us that we can, in the words of John Claypool, "become something very different from what we were in the past" (*Glad Reunion*, p. 40).

## The Role of God

NRS Genesis 39:21 *But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love.*  
The role of God balances the drama of Joseph. To exclusively depend on one's self is a form of pragmatic agnosticism. It is believing in God, but not believing God.

This is not a story about the work ethic or success of a man named Joseph, or how he faced problems and challenges and turned them into opportunities and success. This is a biography of how, even in the midst of dire circumstances, God's participation was accepted, even when not understood.

The intriguing thing about this story is that the presence of God is not overt or ostentatious. More often than not, God is hidden, working behind the scenes.

To paraphrase one Old Testament scholar, God was working between the hint of Joseph's dreams and the doxology of God's disclosure in the end (Walter Brueggemann).

We listen to this biography with the hope that somewhere in the hint of our dreams, when we feel as though we are operating all alone, when we feel most neglected and the odds are against us, God is present. Even when the well is deep and dark, and the forces of evil negotiate about our fate...God is there.

There are two passages in the Joseph narrative that are the major theological statements for the entire saga:

NRS Genesis 45: 5 *...now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life...<sup>8</sup> So it was not you who sent me here, but God...*

NRS Genesis 50:19 *But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 20 Even 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.*

Paul, the apostle, may have thought of Joseph when he, writing from prison, penned the following words: NRS Romans 8:28 *We know that **all things work together for good** for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son... 30 And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

He does not say: *all things are good... But all things work together...* Walter Brueggemann writes, "...the purposes of God are at work in hidden and unnoticed ways. But the ways of God are nonetheless reliable and will come to fruition" (*Genesis*, p. 289).

***God can be trusted with our biography, however it turns out...*** We would wish to see mighty acts of intrusion on God's part when life has us hanging by a thread. It is when the chemo starts, or the children disappoint us, or when we fail and fall flat on our faces. It is then, when we want God to swoop down and make it all better. Life is not fair to many of us, and yes, there are a great many things we will all experience that we probably do not deserve. We want God to come in those times, riding the mighty celestial horses and vanquish our enemies whoever or whatever they might be. But that rarely happens. It did not with Joseph.

But, like all the other biographies in the Bible, this is not a story about the man Joseph, but about the God behind and before the man. ***God is in the story.***

When I watch A&E's *Biography*, and see someone like Tiger Woods, I know I can never be like Tiger Woods. You know I do not even like golf. His biography is impossible for me. The same is true for Sean Connery, Dave Matthews, Ronald Reagan, and nearly every one else featured on *Biography*. But you and I can share in Joseph's biography. This God, who moves throughout the highs and lows and disappointments of Joseph, is in our story too. What a wonderful thing to remember as we begin the New Year. We all have a role to play in this life.

And that is what we mean when we say God is sovereign, God is almighty. God will work out God's purposes in spite of Egypt, in spite of Joseph, in spite of who wins the next election, in spite of our wealth, our poverty, our health. This God scripts the story, including ours, from beginning to end. Amen and Amen.