

“Enduring Covenant”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

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Genesis 39:1-23

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.

I'm sure that most graduation speeches are fairly forgettable, but there's one that I will remember for the rest of my life. When I graduated from Great Falls High School in Great Falls, Montana, the student body choice for graduation speaker was Brian Johnson, an outstanding musician, successful debater, and all-around nice guy. Brian was also a friend of mine, and a member of my church youth group. Because of that, I knew more than most about the trials of his high school years—getting out of a bad home situation and couch-surfing for a time, then eventually raising the money it took to hire a lawyer, go before a judge and legally change his name in an act of self-preservation and self-definition. So I remember well Brian's speech on our graduation weekend. I remember the staccato tapping of a wooden stick on the talking drum that he used to frame his message. I remember the audience of hundreds paying rapt attention to each word, and the silence in between them. Most of all, I remember the illumination inside of me when Brian said that character is not so much who you are when *everybody* is watching, but who you are when *nobody* is watching.

That comment about character comes up when I think about the biblical figure Joseph. Last week we heard about God's call to Abram and Sarai, telling them to go from their country and kin to a new land promised by God. When God says "you will be my people, and I will be your God", it wasn't a once-and-done thing, but a timeless commitment to relationship with their descendants also. Because Abram and Sarai followed God's lead, today we glimpse how God's covenant endures generations later through their great-grandson Joseph. Like Abram and Sarai, Joseph is not perfect. Throughout twelve chapters at the end of Genesis—the enchanting little novel that tells his story—we see him as a cocky youngster whose dreams of grandeur get him in trouble, and later as an Egyptian prince using his power to play tricks on his brothers. But even with these flaws, Joseph's character hews toward righteousness. God's covenant with Noah to preserve life, then with Abram and Sarai to be their God and the God of their descendants, becomes God's durable, persistent covenant with Joseph through a lifetime of ups and downs.

Because having God's covenant is no promise of easy living, mind you. Joseph is betrayed by his jealous brothers, then sold into slavery and shipped off to Egypt. He bounces back and rises to become the head household servant for Potiphar, his prominent and wealthy Egyptian master. Joseph then has one of the many #MeToo moments we see in Scripture, and this is one of the few cases where the charges are false. Potiphar's wife frames Joseph for sexual assault, and despite ample examples of the servant's honorable character, Potiphar throws Joseph in prison, where he faces likely execution.

Living under the covenant of God's loving presence does not mean there will never be hardship. It does not mean that there be no life-threatening storms, or that your toast will always fall butter-side-up. But it does mean, in the words of the UCC Statement of Faith, "courage in the struggle for justice and peace, [God's] presence in trial and rejoicing". God's promise is not measured in fortunes, be they money or circumstances. God's covenant is revealed in the human ability to persevere in the face of wrong, and to overcome the obstacles of injustice. We see that several times throughout the Genesis passage. "The Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love", according to verse 21, and that's when Joseph is in prison! This is how we are to understand the beginning, where we read that God "caused all that he did to prosper in his hands"; and at the end when we hear that "whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper."

A quick reading of this might imagine that God's favor equals worldly success and material prosperity. Indeed, there's a whole strain of flawed Christian theology which says this. The so-called "prosperity gospel" suggests that wealth is the measure of how much God loves you or is pleased with you. To that end, there are television preachers who will take your money, buy themselves private jets, and tell you this is what God's love looks like. But check your wallet or their motives, and you'll see that something is missing. Recognize something different in today's Scripture. Joseph indeed is blessed, but God's covenant doesn't come with guaranteed fortunes. The covenant is within a person, as a character of righteousness.

We see this in Joseph's private conversation with Potiphar's wife. He recognizes how God has blessed him and shown him kindness. He understands his duty to put his success in the service of others. Above all, his relationship to God requires that he not take advantage of divine favor by indulging what would be a selfish motive. He names such an abuse for what it is: sin. Joseph states his conviction in the manner of Martin Luther, millennia later: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise. So help me God!" This is what my friend Brian means by character, revealed not just in public, but also in private moments.

Beloved people of God, we are similarly held in the abiding promise of God's favor. This day—and each day—will bring us opportunities to receive and respond to this covenant. Will we lament that God must not love us because we find ourselves facing injustice, or doing our own version of unmerited prison time? To do so would suggest that the prosperity gospelers are right, and God's favor is measured by fortunes alone. Or will we call upon our inward character like Joseph—seeking justice and righteousness even in the face of sin, using what privilege we have in the service of others? Will our speech and actions, in public and private, cooperate with the enduring covenant of God's character within us, extending mercy and justice to all in the name of Jesus Christ? May it be so. Amen.