

***The Roots of Our Family Tree***  
***Joseph: God Was with Him***  
Genesis 50:15-21  
New Testament: Acts 7:8-16

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Through the course of these summer services, we have been taking a look at some of the people who form the roots of our family tree of faith. The Genesis of the Bible also forms the genesis of our faith. If you trace our faith to its roots, you will find a wandering Aramean named Abraham who, along with his wife Sarah, was called to leave his family and go to the land that God would show him. God promised to bless Abraham with descendants too numerous to count, and that through Abraham's lineage the whole world would be blessed. Abraham and Sarah eventually gave birth to Isaac, who would inherit the blessing and pass it on to succeeding generations. Isaac married Rebekah, who gave birth to Jacob and Esau. And though Jacob was a conniving thief and deceiver, nevertheless Jacob was the one through whom the promise of blessing would be kept. Jacob got a taste of his own medicine when, through the deception of Laban, Jacob ended up with both Leah and Rachel as his two wives. It is from Jacob's marriages to Leah and Rachel that the twelve tribes of Israel would be descended.

And now we come to Joseph. The story of Joseph contains enough material that we could have spent a month of Sunday sermons. But as it is, we're only going to spend one Sunday on Joseph. Most of you are probably familiar with the Joseph story. Still, it's worth a few moments to review the highlights.

Joseph, you will remember, was the favorite son of Jacob. Joseph's brothers were deeply jealous of the special treatment that Joseph received and they resented the fact that Joseph lorded his favorite status over them. One day Joseph's brothers had had enough, and they tossed Joseph into a well and sold him to slave traders. They created a deception whereby they convinced Jacob that Joseph had been killed by wild animals.

Joseph was taken to Egypt, where he was sold as a slave into the household of Potiphar, an official of Pharaoh's court. Joseph found favor in Potiphar's eyes, and he was appointed the head servant of the household. Joseph also caught the attention of Potiphar's wife, who tried to seduce him one day while Potiphar was out of the house. Joseph, though, was honorable toward his master, and he refused to succumb to the temptation offered by Potiphar's wife. The angry spurned wife then falsely accused Joseph of attempted rape, and Joseph was summarily thrown into prison.

Even in prison, though, Joseph rose to some prominence. The prison warden appointed Joseph as the chief caretaker of the other prisoners, making him responsible for their affairs. While in prison, Joseph discovered that he had the gift of interpretation of dreams. He successfully interpreted the dreams of the royal baker and the chief cupbearer of the Pharaoh, both of whom had been imprisoned for incurring the

disfavor of Pharaoh. Joseph accurately predicted that the baker would be executed in public, and that the cupbearer would be freed from prison.

Many years later, the Pharaoh had a series of disturbing dreams that none of his own wise men were able to interpret for him. The Pharaoh's cupbearer remembered a man named Joseph who had accurately interpreted dreams in prison. So Joseph was given the opportunity to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, which he did by stating that the dreams were foretelling of seven years of abundant harvest followed by seven years of severe famine in the region. The Pharaoh was so impressed that he not only granted Joseph his freedom from jail, but he also appointed Joseph as the equivalent of the secretary of agriculture for Egypt, and he granted Joseph the authority of the second-in-command; nobody but Pharaoh had greater power in Egypt than Joseph.

As the predictions of plenty came to pass, the Egyptians carefully stored excess grain in preparation for the years of famine. When the famine struck, people from other nations came to Egypt to purchase grain from the Egyptians. Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to find relief from the famine that had stricken their land. Joseph's brothers appeared before him, failing to recognize him as their brother. In the end, there was a joyful reunion, and Jacob joined the rest of the family in Egypt, where they enjoyed comfort and privilege.

There are two recurring themes in the Joseph story that inform the way I have come to understand the origins of our faith. The first is a phrase that appears several times in the Genesis narrative, woven throughout the story of Joseph; it is a phrase that Stephen also uses when retelling the Joseph story in his sermon before the Jewish authorities: "The Lord was with Joseph..."

"The Lord was with Joseph..." Five simple words that pop up from time to time throughout the Joseph narrative. Five words, so matter-of-fact, yet so profound: The Lord was with Joseph.

Joseph's brothers threw him into a pit and sold him to slave traders. But *the Lord was with Joseph...* and placed him in Potiphar's house.

Potiphar's wife falsely accused Joseph of attempted rape and Joseph was thrown into prison. But *the Lord was with Joseph...* and he was put in charge of the rest of the prisoners.

When Pharaoh could not interpret his dreams, *the Lord was with Joseph...* and the cupbearer remembered about Joseph's special ability.

When Joseph appeared before Pharaoh and predicted the seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, *the Lord was with Joseph...* and Joseph was put in charge of all the land.

The Lord was with Joseph. And as we look back upon those who form the roots of the family tree of our faith, isn't that what we see time and again? Can't you insert that same phrase for Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob--can't you proclaim with equal certainty that the Lord was with them, too?

How about you? Can you look back on the story of your life and see where the Lord was with you? Don't you see--the God who calls us to be his people, the God who calls us to follow him, the God who sends us into the world to serve faithfully in his name--this God is the same God who is with us every step of the way. There is nowhere we can go where God will not be there with us. Wherever you are, whatever you face in your life, our faith proclaims that in all circumstances the Lord is with us.

The story of our faith is about a God who is not far-away, but who comes alongside us through the journey of life. He is a God who was not content to allow us to wallow in our sin, but who took on human

flesh and walked among us to redeem us. He is the God who is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God-with-us. Ours is a faith that reminds us that we are not alone, that in all of life, the Lord is with us.

The Lord was with Joseph. And the Lord is with you. And the Lord is with me.

The second theme in the Joseph story that helps me understand the roots of our faith comes in this morning's lesson. At the end of the book of Genesis, Joseph's brothers came to him. Their father Jacob had died, and the brothers were afraid that Joseph will finally exact revenge upon them for what they had done to him as a young teenager. And so they concocted a story to try to convince Joseph that he really should be nice to them. They appealed to the memory of Jacob: "Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs in treating you so badly...'"

When Joseph heard his brothers, he wept, and in his reply he said, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."<sup>1</sup>

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good. And in that answer to his brothers, Joseph summarized what is most important for us to understand about the founders of our faith. For you see, in the end the story of our faith is less about Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob and Esau and Joseph. In the end, the story of our faith is about the God who is still able to accomplish his purposes despite the weaknesses and flaws of the people he calls. One of the things that has struck me time and again as we have read the stories of those who occupy the hall of fame of our faith, is how utterly human they were. Abraham was at times a spineless bozo. Isaac was a weak man who was easily manipulated. Jacob was a liar and a cheat. And Joseph was not given the best of circumstances in which to flourish.

Yet through it all, God's purposes were being accomplished. Despite the intentions of those who served him, still God was able to work out his purposes in everything.

And I find that to be personally comforting. Because it reminds me that despite my own personal weaknesses, God will still be able to use me to accomplish his purposes. The body of Christ is far from perfect. Yet our God is so awesome that he can still take every one of us and use us to fulfill his plan for the world. There is not one of us who is beyond God's ability to use in a redemptive way. Every one of us, then, has an opportunity to live our lives offering ourselves to God, confident that God will take the unrefined raw material we offer and use it for the good.

Tony Snow was the former Press Secretary for President Bush. After his second bout with colon cancer, he resigned from that post last year. Then about a month ago, he died.

There are two things about Tony Snow that attracted me to him, and neither one has anything to do with his political views. The first is that Tony was a graduate of Davidson College, and so his prominence was a source of great pride for me, as well as for many other alums. The second thing was his faith. Tony Snow was a man of great, joyful faith in God. He was a man who understood that his life was not his own, but that every day was a gift from God. He once noted that the most important holiday in the United States is not Independence Day, but Thanksgiving, because we owe such a debt of gratitude to God.

Last year, Christianity Today magazine asked Snow to reflect upon his faith. What he wrote became his testimony that has now been actively circulating around the internet. In the article, Snow reflects that in cancer--as well as anything that any of us might face in life--God offers us the possibility of

salvation and grace. Instead of trying to complain about our circumstances, Snow suggests that it is better for us to open our eyes and see where God is working.

At the conclusion of his article, Snow writes, "*What is man that Thou art mindful of him? We don't know much, but we know this: No matter where we are, no matter what we do, no matter how bleak or frightening our prospects, each and every one of us, each and every day, lies in the same safe and impregnable place—in the hollow of God's hand.*"<sup>2</sup>

The Lord was with Joseph. And the Lord is with you and me.

And above all, in all things, God is working out his purposes. And God's purpose for you, and for me, and for all his people, is for the good.

If you want to understand the roots of our family tree of faith, even more important than the people who form those roots, consider first the God who called them, the God in whom we place our faith. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 50:16-17, 20

<sup>2</sup> Tony Snow, "Cancer's Unexpected Blessings: When you enter the Valley of the Shadow of Death, things change.", Christianity Today, [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com), posted 7/20/2007 02:30PM