

NOT BY CHANCE
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First Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 45:1-15

Today's scripture begins with these words: "Then Joseph could no longer control himself . . . and he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it . . ." It appears that we have come in the middle of something. What's going on here? If we're going to understand this moment, we've got to go back and tell the background.

Joseph was his daddy's favorite, as evidenced by the famous coat that the daddy gave him. The other brothers were understandably upset by this obvious act of favoritism. So, on the day that Joseph came out to where the others were tending sheep, they stripped him of his coat and threw him into a pit. When a group of traders came by, on their way to Egypt, they sold Joseph to them. Then the brothers took his coat, smeared it with the blood of a goat, and presented it to their father. He cried out, "A wild animal has devoured my son." And the father was consumed with grief, for he assumed that Joseph was dead.

Joseph, however, very much alive, was in Egypt, where he was sold as a slave to Potiphar, a captain of the guard in Pharaoh's army. Joseph was such a diligent worker that he quickly found approval in his master's eyes, and was put in charge of running the entire household.

Potiphar's wife, however, took a shine to this good looking young man who was always there at the house, while her husband was off doing things for the king. So one day she tried to seduce him. But he replied: "How could I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" As he tried to escape her grasp, Mrs. Potiphar grabbed his garment from him. When her husband got home, she said that Joseph had come on to her, and she had fought him off so that he had left his garment beside her. Potiphar was understandably upset, so that even though Joseph protested his innocence, he was thrown in jail.

After he had been in jail awhile, Joseph looked up one day when the jail door was opened, and two other men were tossed inside the cell with Joseph. It turned out that they were servants of the king—one was the wine steward and the other the king's baker. One morning as they awoke, the wine steward said: "I had the strangest dream last night. I dreamed that I had a grapevine in my hand with three branches on it, and I squeezed the juice of the grapes into the king's cup, and he drank it."

Joseph said: "God has given me the ability to interpret dreams. The three branches are three days. In that length of time you will be released from jail and will again serve the king."

Then the baker spoke up. "I also had a dream. In my dream I had three baskets of bread on my head. And the birds came and ate the bread out of the top basket." Joseph replied: "The three baskets are also three days. In that time, Pharaoh will have you taken from jail and executed, and the birds will come and eat your flesh."

Three days later, which happened to be Pharaoh's birthday, it happened as Joseph had said. The baker was taken out and executed, and his body hung up so that the birds ate his flesh. But the wine steward was taken back to the palace to serve the king. And as he left, Joseph cried out: "Remember me to the king, so that I do not languish in this jail forever." "I'll remember," replied the steward. But then he promptly forgot, so that Joseph stayed in jail another two years.

But one night the Pharaoh had a dream. He was so troubled by it that the next day he called all his professional dream interpreters, but no one could give an answer. Then the wine steward remembered: "There was that man in prison who could interpret dreams." They cleaned Joseph up and presented him to the king. Pharaoh said: "I dreamed that there were seven fat cows swimming in the river. From the bottom of the river came seven skinny cows. They swallowed the fat cows, but were just as skinny as before."

Joseph said: "The dream means that the land is about to have seven good years when crops will grow, which will be followed by seven years of famine." Then Joseph dared to go beyond simply interpreting the dream. "What ought to be done, O king, is to save some of the food in storage during the good years, so that there will be plenty to eat in the bad years."

"That's a good idea," replied Pharaoh. "And the one I'm going to put in charge of this project—is you." And with that the king gave Joseph his signet ring and a chauffer-

driven chariot and probably one of those Egyptian hat things. Far from his homeland, Joseph had suddenly become a powerful person, second only to the king.

Just as Joseph predicts, seven good years are followed by seven years of famine. The famine extends not only through Egypt, but across that entire region of the world including up in Canaan where Joseph's father and brothers—remember them?—still lived. They hear that there is food in Egypt, so the brothers come to Egypt and appear in the presence of Joseph himself. Joseph recognizes them instantly, but they do not recognize this one in these princely robes. If they think about the memory of Joseph at all, they probably assume he is long dead. Joseph gives them grain to carry home, but he says that the next time they come they must bring their younger brother Benjamin.

After awhile, the grain is used up while the famine continues. The father tells them to go back for more grain. "That man told us that we have got to bring Benjamin if we return." But the father says it would break his heart to lose Benjamin after having had Joseph taken away from him. Nevertheless, he reluctantly agrees, since their situation is severe. So the brothers with Benjamin in tow return to Egypt, and with fear and trembling enter the presence of this prince.

Joseph still does not disclose his identity to them, and in fact is stern and threatening to his brothers. But finally he gives them more grain. Then, secretly, he orders his guards to put his own silver cup in Benjamin's sack. No sooner have the brothers gratefully departed than Joseph sends his guards after them. The guards open the sacks, even though the brothers protest that they have done nothing wrong, and there, in the top of Benjamin's sack, is the silver cup, right where Joseph had put it.

The brothers are hauled back into Joseph's presence, quaking in their sandals. "The one who took my cup is to be put in jail for life," says Joseph sternly. It is then that one of the brothers, Judah, steps forward. "My lord," he says, "if my father loses his son, it will kill him. Please, sir, put me in jail in Benjamin's place." And that brings us finally to our scripture: [Genesis 45:1-15].

If you want the sermon for today, here it is: "It was not you who sent me here, but God." We have said very little about God in this story. In fact, except for a few pious references about how God gives Joseph the ability to interpret dreams, God hasn't been mentioned in this story at all. But now Joseph says: "It was not you, but God."

I would like to have been a fly on the wall to see the reaction of the brothers when Joseph said that. It as enough of a surprise to know that this was actually Joseph. And now, to be told that their evil act so many years ago was God's doing—they had no idea.

It may be that Joseph had no idea either, not until this moment. He opens his mouth to reveal himself to his brothers, and all of a sudden it comes to him in a flash: This has been God's doing all along. The dreams of them bowing down to me, the slavery, the jail, the good and bad, the failures and successes, all have been directed by the hand of God.

The Presbyterian word for all of this is, of course, predestination. We're not sure what we think about predestination, since it makes it sound like God has already planned out everything in advance, and we're like a bunch of robots doing what God has already predestined. If we're just predestined, what happens to our human freedom?

This story doesn't try to answer that question, but simply tells a story. It is a story about people who in their freedom make decisions: the brothers decide to sell Joseph as a slave, Potiphar's wife decides to seduce Joseph, Pharaoh decides to make Joseph a prince, the father decides to let Benjamin go with the brothers. These are real people making real decisions about their lives, exactly like the real decisions big and small that you make about your life every day.

And over it all is the guiding, directing hand of God. It is not a choice between predestination and human freedom, not one or the other. We are free; our choices matter. We are responsible for what we decide. But over us all, is the guidance of God.

Our new elders and deacons were looking last week at the Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church. And one of the statements, in a document called the Heidelberg Catechism, says it well. It says that Providence is “the almighty and ever-present power of God whereby God . . . rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else, come to us, not by chance, but by God's fatherly hand.”¹

Live your life, dear friends. Your decisions are important. They matter. But know this: It is not by chance that we live. We live by the will and purpose of God.☩

¹ The Heidelberg Catechism, Question 27. *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2004), p. 33.