

Today is the second week in our series exploring the life of Joseph. And this is another one of those texts of Scripture which is difficult to explore. This is one of those stories that prove once again that the Bible tells all of the parts of people's lives, not just the part that they want us to hear.

Last week we were introduced to Joseph in the Old Testament and how he was the favorite of 12 sons to his father Jacob. This jealousy led his brothers to conspire against him and sell him off into slavery. They took the coat that Joseph was wearing, dipped it in blood, and told their Dad that he had been devoured by a wild animal.

Today we continue the story where he ends up being purchased as a slave in the house of Potiphar, one of the officers of Pharaoh in Egypt. **Read 39:1-6a.**

I had intended originally to skip over chapter 38 in the Joseph saga because it's about Joseph's brother Judah and it interrupts the Joseph storyline. But then as I read chapter 38 and 39 together I realized how they both needed to be understood together. But let me warn you the content is not G-rated.

Just prior to our reading, Joseph's brother Judah has a son named Er who is married to a woman named Tamar. Er is wicked and dies and it was the law according to Deuteronomy that if a woman's husband died and she was childless that his brother would then need to marry her and have children by her.

Well Er's brother Onan did not want to have children by her because that would cut into his family inheritance. God was not pleased by Onan and he also died. Tamar is told by her father-in-law Judah that she needed to return to her father's house because he wanted her out of his life. Tamar, however, would not go away quietly as she did not want to be left a poor widow.

Well one day Tamar is informed that Judah is going on a business trip and she goes to that town and dresses in such a way that Judah thinks that she is a prostitute. He notices her but does not recognize her. Judah then offers Tamar a sheep if she would sleep with him. She bargains for a price including a signet and a cord. He agrees and they carry out the transaction. She becomes pregnant.

Judah is later told that Tamar has been hiring herself out as a prostitute. Judah says that no daughter-in-law of his should do such despicable things and orders that she be burned. But then she presents the items that he paid her with. He then comes to terms with his own hypocrisy and immorality and abuse of power.

So we are told about that story and then we move back into the story of Joseph. In the Scripture we read, we are told that Joseph has God on his side and that he becomes a very successful man. His master Potiphar sees that he is a godly man and is very pleased with his work. Joseph is given more and more responsibility. Joseph is a blessed man and a hard worker and smart.

Everything should go great for Joseph from here on out right? Don't many of us believe that if we live a godly life, work hard, show intelligence, and play by the rules that harm will not come our way and we will live a life of blessing? But real life doesn't always turn out so black and white where the faithful lead charmed lives.

Potiphar's wife takes an interest in Joseph and tries to make a move on him. He rejects her advances. She becomes furious. She rips a garment from him and accuses him of rape. Potiphar believes his wife's accusation and has Joseph thrown in prison.

A former professor of mine, Walter Breuggemann says that this is a story at the intersection of real life and real faith. He says it is tempting to think that we have to choose one or the other. He says the temptation is to become super religious and believe that everything works out perfectly if you love God and work hard and play by the rules.

Or he says it is tempting to take the opposite approach and choose to be a child of the world that says that the world is terrible and that God is nowhere to be found.

Brueggemann says that life is sandwiched in between real life and real faith. We are to rely fully on God while we engage the real human experience which involves manipulation, greed, abuse of power, and sexual manipulation.

Here we have the story of someone chosen by God, he used his skills to do good work, he was faithful to God, faithful to his employer, faithful to his morals, and yet, he was still sold off into slavery and accused and convicted of rape. Joseph's story teaches us that being a follower of God does not mean that life suddenly becomes fair. Joseph's life was never fair.

But there is something interesting about this chapter of Joseph's life. The name of God is used in this chapter on 9 occasions. Throughout this story, the narrator emphasizes that God is involved with and present with Joseph throughout this ordeal. And as we move through the Joseph story over the next few weeks, we will see how Joseph is used by God to bless and sustain many lives.

We do not need to choose between real faith and real life. We can encounter real life problems and struggles. But in the midst of these real life problems and struggles, we still seek to encounter God. AMEN.

-Brueggemann, Walter, Interpretation, Genesis, WJKP, 1982

-Text: Genesis 38-39

-Given: Sept 5, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)