

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Luke 12:22-31

Genesis 41:14-41

STORIES OF JOSEPH: GOD'S PROVISION

We have come quite a way in our journey with Joseph. We started in Canaan with a self-enamored teenager bragging to his older brothers about his favored status with their father. Joseph gets dropped into a pit, becomes an example of human trafficking as he is carried to Egypt where he is enslaved, and then he gets falsely accused of a crime and is put into prison. Each step of the way, dreams play a critical role in the story. Joseph tells his brothers of his dreams that indicate that he would reign over them. He then becomes an interpreter of others' dreams. While in prison, he meets the cupbearer and chief baker for Pharaoh, who had lost favor with the ruler. They each have a dream which Joseph interprets. What he indicates that each dream foretells, indeed comes true. When the cupbearer is restored to his previous position, Joseph hopes he will tell Pharaoh about him, which might lead to an end to his unjust imprisonment. But the cupbearer forgets to mention Joseph until a couple of years later, when Pharaoh has some upsetting dreams and he is searching for someone who can offer an interpretation. The cupbearer remembers Joseph's ability and recommends him to Pharaoh. Joseph is brought and we hear Pharaoh's dreams about seven fat cows being eaten by seven thin cows, and seven healthy ears of corn being consumed by seven withered ears. Joseph's interpretation warns that after seven years of good food production that there would be seven years of famine.

How unlikely were the series of events that led to a Hebrew man, just recently a slave and then a prisoner, ending up being the person who would interpret Pharaoh's dreams, who would then be named the Secretary of Agriculture of the Egyptian empire! As we become aware of how the disastrous effects of a pending famine will be averted, we realize that a story that seemed to impact primarily one person or one family broadens into a narrative that shapes the well-being of people throughout that region of the world. Joseph goes beyond interpreting Pharaoh's dream when he suggests a policy initiative of stockpiling one-fifth of the grain production during each of the good years in order to be prepared for the time of famine that he had predicted was coming. God's provision for the needs of a broad range of people was taking place through an odd set of circumstances. Had it originally been God's will that Joseph be sold by his brothers into slavery, an action that would take him to Egypt? We can't really say that hateful enslavement of one's brother could be in accord with God's will. Had it been God's will that Joseph be framed for a crime that didn't occur so he could demonstrate his gift for dream interpretation for someone who could open his way to doing the same for Pharaoh? Neither can we say that an unjust, downright false accusation against Joseph had been in keeping with the divine will. And yet, the story clearly indicates that God was working through all these human circumstances for a greater purpose.

Let us also note that a significant part of God's work, God's provision, in the story shows partnership with human actions. There would not have been the positive historical action that provided food for a vast range of people during a time of famine if Pharaoh's dream had not occurred. However, if there had only been the dream and even the interpretation of it, without an effective leader being appointed to carry out policy changes, no saving action would have occurred. What we also need to note is that God's saving activity in this case involves a change in political policy regarding food.

Some seem to think that God is only interested in people's theological beliefs, but in this story we hear of a God who is working things out to make sure that people will have the physical food they need. Some seem to think that God's people should be involved with charitable giving but not with the formation of wise and just public

policy that addresses basic needs. Of course, we should give charitably and generously through our food barrel and two cents a meal and through our deacons' fund for grocery gift cards for needy families. But God also can work through forward-looking public policy that has a focus on meeting basic needs. How did God's provision come about in this story? God gave Joseph an ability to interpret dreams, but we also see Joseph's gift of being able to analyze what would need to happen to avoid the disastrous effects of a famine. Joseph was also blessed with an ability to articulate a possible policy initiative to someone with the power to act. He then evidently also is enabled by God to organize and plan and follow through with an aggressive food plan. Later in the story, we will get to see the results of God's gracious provision.

Some might wonder whether God is doing a good job providing for human need today in a world where according to the United Nations, one in every nine people or 870 million are estimated to be chronically undernourished. But the World Food Programme of the United Nations has studies showing that there is enough food in the world for everyone to be well-fed. About one-fourth of all food calories produced worldwide for consumption get lost or wasted. Problems with distribution are a significant concern as the majority of those suffering from hunger reside in sub-Saharan Africa or Asia where transportation can be a challenge.<sup>1</sup> But the main thing that needs to change to address world hunger is simply a change of priorities. God has provided more than enough food for all to be fed. But like the Joseph story, those food resources need to be carefully and thoughtfully managed.

Also similar to this story, there are predictions of the possibility of famine as we look to years ahead. Based not on dreams, but on data, scientific data, some modern-day Josephs are predicting the increased likelihood of serious droughts brought about by human-induced climate change. The increased temperatures might actually help certain crops in particular places, they say, but overall it will have a negative effect on world food production.<sup>2</sup> A major area of concern has to do with the health of our oceans, which face challenges from acidification that comes with increased temperatures, as well as overfishing in many regions of the world causing various fish populations to approach a state of collapse.<sup>3</sup> Our current human practices and priorities are not showing good partnership with God's provision.

Will there be a repeat of the Joseph story where once again, God raises up a voice from the faith community that pays attention to and articulates possibilities to mitigate the threats to human physical needs going forward? Part of God's provision is that we have this story, this indication that God has partnered with human actions in the past to bring about policy changes that address human need.

Like Joseph, we can dream, and by God's grace, like Joseph, we can do a bit more than dream.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wfp.org/hunger/faqs>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/mar/31/climate-change-food-supply-un>

<sup>3</sup> <http://science.time.com/2013/05/16/why-warming-oceans-could-mean-dwindling-fish/>

