

## Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Romans 8:28-30, Genesis 50:15-21

### STORIES OF JOSEPH: GOD'S INTENTIONS

He was born in a small village to parents who were both illiterate. He was given the forename Rolihlahla, which in his native language meant 'troublemaker.' His life took many difficult turns along the way. He was the first in his family to attend school, but his schooling had several interruptions along the way and he admitted that he was not the best student. His father died when he was nine. As an adult, he was unjustly convicted of a crime and was sentenced to life imprisonment. His human rights were pretty much ignored by the powers in place. <sup>1</sup> From what I have told you, you would be likely to predict that his life wouldn't amount to much.

We might think the same about someone whose life story took the turns that Joseph's life did. During this sermon series, we've been reminded that although Joseph had a loving father, his mother had died when his younger brother had been born. His older half-brothers hated him so much that they talked about killing him, but instead they sold him into slavery and he was carried off to Egypt. They convinced his father that he was dead. You would think that being a slave was bad enough, but then Joseph was unjustly imprisoned for a crime that did not even occur. He had little prospect of ever being freed. What could become of such an unfortunate soul?

And yet, these two individual stories ended up going in very unlikely directions. The first man, through an odd set of circumstances, got out of prison after twenty-seven years. Soon thereafter, he was elected as President of his nation in its first fully-representative democratic election. By the way, on his first day of school, his teacher had given him the name of Nelson. He didn't know why she chose that particular name, but for the rest of his life, he went by the name, Nelson Mandela. <sup>1</sup> And of course, he not only was the first post-apartheid President of South Africa, but he steered the nation toward much-needed healing from its heritage of its racist laws. Upon reflecting on the time when he was released from prison, he wrote, "As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison." <sup>2</sup> A race war could have broken out leading to dreadful results, but President Mandela's exemplary leadership showed there was a much more positive way forward. He truly forgave those who had unjustly imprisoned him, those who had treated people of color so horribly. He showed how to embrace all people as his sisters and brothers.

Joseph also got released from prison through an odd set of circumstances. He was in prison with two of the Egyptian pharaoh's former staff who had somehow offended the king. They each had worrisome dreams and Joseph had interpreted a meaning for each of them. His interpretations came true. One of the staff people got restored to his position. Two years later, when Pharaoh had a couple of troubling dreams, the staff person recommended Joseph as a dream interpreter. This is when Joseph foretold that there would be a seven-year long famine coming and that it would be prudent to prepare for what was coming. As a result, he not only got out of prison, but he was selected by Pharaoh to be one of the most powerful people in Egypt, overseeing food storage and distribution for this strongest nation in northern Africa.

Last week, we heard the account of when Joseph's estranged brothers showed up, begging for food from this Egyptian official, not recognizing that it was their own brother. Finally, he revealed his identity to them, forgave them for the wrong they had done to him, and encouraged them to move the whole family to Egypt so he could make sure they had what they needed during the remaining years of the famine. In our Genesis reading today, as we near the end of this first book of the bible, we hear that Joseph's brothers, after moving to Egypt, are nervous as to how Joseph would treat them since their father had died. Perhaps he would now carry out the vengeance toward them that he had been holding in his heart, but had not acted upon in deference to their father. They lied

to Joseph about their father's deathbed wishes, and they offered themselves to be his slaves, so afraid were they that he in vengeance would kill them all.

But Joseph tells them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today." Many years later, the Apostle Paul would write, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to (God's) purpose." Both Joseph and Paul were convinced that God could work even through the times where they seemed to be facing a dead end. God had a larger goal toward which they were being moved and God could make a way out of no way. We saw in Joseph's story, and he came to understand in his own life's story that God had worked even through some dreadful human acts to bring about a greater purpose. As people who worship someone who died on a Roman execution device, we should not be surprised that God can use bad events, even evil actions in a way where good comes out of it. Joseph, in looking back, was able to recognize that God had worked even through events that were not in accord with God's good will to bring about that which would be good. Paradoxically, God allows us great freedom in our human actions even while not giving up sovereignty over the direction that God is forging for creation.

For five weeks now, we have been journeying with Joseph, with a story that began with his dreams as a seventeen year old, a story that then moved on to dreams that Pharaoh's chief baker and cupbearer had, followed by dreams that Pharaoh himself had. But after all of this, Joseph realizes that the most important dream all along was God's dream.

Desmond Tutu, who was the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, who President Mandela named to chair the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South African, has written, "God says to you, 'I have a dream. Please help me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts. When there will be more laughter, joy, and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing. I have a dream that my children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God's family, my family.'" <sup>3</sup>

It may be only occasionally that we see how the tapestry of our lives connects with a larger tapestry being woven. Have you seen God use the circumstances of your life to work toward something greater? Joseph's story invites us to ask what we think God's dream might be for our world today, and it invites us, even with all of our human foibles, to help that dream be realized. Human dreams can be powerful things, but divine dreams – wow!

<sup>1</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson\\_Mandela](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson_Mandela)

<sup>2</sup>Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Little Brown and Company, 1995.

<sup>3</sup>Desmond Tutu, *God Had a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, Image Publishers, 2005.

