

The Lord Was With Joseph

SLIDE 1

Grace and peace from God our Father and from the one who is always with Joseph and with you and me, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

SLIDE 2 THE HERO WHO RAN

Four years ago, when this story last appeared in the Narrative Lectionary, I called Joseph “the hero who ran away.” I still think that is true. When Potiphar’s wife grabbed his garment, Joseph did not stick around to negotiate with temptation. He ran. Sometimes running away from something destructive is the best act of courage anyone can demonstrate. This time, another part of the story caught my attention. Joseph ran from wrongdoing and still landed in prison. He told the truth, but the lie was believed. He honored Potiphar’s trust, but Potiphar punished him as though he had betrayed it. Joseph did the right thing, but doing right did not make everything turn out right. His story speaks to anyone who has tried to be faithful and still suffered, or who has been mislabeled, falsely accused, or trapped by someone more powerful. I discovered a long time ago in the Air Force and in

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life in general, you do what you do and you get what you get... The two don't always match up... When we do our best and things still turn out poorly, despair can leave us jaded and cynical about the world and even about God. Yet when everything appears to have gone wrong, Scripture tells us what matters most: "The Lord was with Joseph." And the Lord is with you too.

SLIDE 3 TRUSTED, BUT NOT FREE

Joseph didn't go to Egypt looking for an opportunity. He didn't submit a resume to Potiphar. His brothers sold him, traders carried him to Egypt, and Potiphar purchased him. Other people controlled nearly every part of his life. He had no freedom to leave, no family nearby to protect him, and no standing in the community. Yet Joseph served faithfully, and Potiphar eventually entrusted the whole household to him. For the first time since his brothers sold him, Joseph may have felt his life was becoming stable. Then Potiphar's wife began making demands. The imbalance of power matters. She belonged to the household that owned Joseph. He couldn't resign, report her conduct, or expect anyone to believe a foreign slave over his master's wife. Joseph refused her anyway. To violate Potiphar's trust would be an offense against his master and a sin against God.

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SLIDE 4 GARMENTS USED TO TELL LIES

She pressured him day after day. Finally, she grabbed his garment and made her demand once again. Joseph pulled away and ran, leaving the garment in her hand. It became evidence against him. This had happened before. Joseph's brothers had taken his special robe, covered it with blood, and used it to support the lie that Joseph was dead. Now another garment supported the lie that Joseph was guilty. Once again, the person holding Joseph's clothing appeared to control his story. Potiphar's wife also knew how to use his identity against him. She called him "that Hebrew servant," appealing to the household's prejudice against a foreign slave. She even shifted some blame toward her husband by saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us." She possessed the garment, the accusation, and the social power. Joseph had only the truth.

We want to believe the truth will always win, that faithful people will be recognized, and that doing right will protect us from terrible consequences. We want life, the world, or God to reward our effort. Genesis 39 makes no such promise. Potiphar hears the accusation and sends Joseph to prison. There is no

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investigation, no opportunity for Joseph to defend himself, and no witness to confirm his story. He does the right thing and still loses the little freedom he had.

SLIDE 5 THE LORD WAS WITH JOSEPH — IN PRISON

This story raises some difficult questions: Where is God when an honest person suffers and the person with the least power pays the highest price? Where is God when the lie is believed and justice never seems to arrive? Genesis answers with a sentence so quiet we could almost miss it: “But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love.” God’s presence did not prevent Joseph from entering prison. God went into prison with him.

We often say God was with us when the surgery succeeded or the danger passed. We should certainly thank God in those moments, but favorable circumstances are not the only evidence of God’s presence. The Lord was with Joseph in Potiphar’s house, and the Lord was with Joseph in prison. The address changed. The promise did not. God’s presence didn’t mean Joseph would be rescued immediately or the injustice no longer mattered. It meant Potiphar’s household did not have the final word about him. The prison did not have the final word. Even Pharaoh’s empire didn’t have the final word. Powerful people could

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restrict Joseph's movement and call him a slave or prisoner, but they could not decide who he ultimately was. Joseph belonged to God.

SLIDE 6 CLOTHED WITH MERCY — BAPTISM

Belonging and relationship with God connects with our Thanksgiving for Baptism. Joined to Christ, we are clothed with God's mercy and forgiveness. Other people kept taking Joseph's garments. His brothers took the robe that identified him as his father's beloved son. Potiphar's wife took the garment associated with his place in the household. They could take those outward signs, but they could not take away God's claim upon Joseph's life. In the same way, Baptism doesn't make us immune from illness, grief, or injustice. The sign of the cross on our foreheads doesn't promise an easy life. It tells us who we are when hard things happen. We are children of God, clothed with mercy and joined to Christ. No accusation, diagnosis, prison, or human judgment can take that identity away.

God continued to work through Joseph inside the prison. This didn't make the imprisonment good or excuse the lie that sent him there. Wrong remained wrong. Yet Joseph was never beyond the reach of the God who loved him. The

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jailer gave Joseph responsibility for the other prisoners, and Joseph's faithful service again became a blessing. His world had become smaller, but God's work through him continued.

SLIDE 7 TROUBLE TODAY — TRINITY

That is good news for anyone confined by circumstances they did not choose. I have felt something of that during these past months as I recovered from two bouts of pneumonia. Others know the confinement of a hospital room or a body that no longer permits them to do what they once enjoyed. Some feel trapped in grief while life continues around them. Others face caregiving responsibilities or a future that looks nothing like the one they planned. Genesis offers no easy formula for changing those circumstances, but it offers the same promise to us Joseph knew firsthand... The Lord was with Joseph. The Lord is present before we know how the story will end, while the jail door remains locked, and while justice has not yet arrived.

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SLIDE 8 JESUS — DEATH DOES NOT HAVE THE FINAL WORD

We see that promise most clearly in Jesus. Powerful people falsely accused him and twisted his words. Pilate pronounced Rome's sentence. Soldiers took Jesus' garments, mocked him, and led him to the cross. Every visible sign suggested the authorities had taken control of the story. Rome had spoken, the stone had been placed across the tomb, and the case appeared closed. Then God raised Jesus from the dead... The resurrection did not erase the cross. Jesus still bore its wounds. Yet, in the resurrection God revealed violence, accusation, and death do not possess the final word. God always does! Our hope, wherever we feel confined is that God, in Jesus Christ is always with us, even to the end of the age... Joseph could not see Pharaoh's dreams, the coming famine, or the day he would be reunited with his family. Genesis 39 ends while Joseph is still in prison. That matters. The chapter ends before the rescue because sometimes we must live for a while in the unfinished part of our story, between the prayer and the answer, between the injustice and the restoration we hope to see. In that unfinished place, God gives us the promise that sustained Joseph: "The Lord was with Joseph."

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Friends, the same Lord is with you. The struggle may continue and the answer may not come as quickly as we want, but neither the prison nor the grave have the final word. The accusation does not have the final word. Even death does not have the final word. Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, has the final word, and his word is mercy, life, and steadfast love.

May the God who was with Joseph in the household and in the prison be with you wherever life may lead. When the way is shadowed by injustice, illness, grief, or fear, may Christ hold you fast in the promise of your baptism: you are God's beloved child, clothed with mercy, and never beyond the reach of God's steadfast love. May the Holy Spirit give you courage to do what is faithful, strength to serve where you are, and faith to trust that no prison, no accusation, no suffering—not even death—will define who and whose you are. Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, has that final word, and his word for you is mercy, life, and peace. Amen.