

HOUSE OF CARDS
by The Rev. Damaris D. Whittaker

Scripture:

Genesis 39:1-23

Matthew 5:11-12

September 21, 2014

“The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man.”

Let us pray...

This morning, we read the story of Joseph in Potiphar’s House. The story of Joseph is one that is told comprehensively in Chapters 37 to 50 in the book of Genesis. His story is full of drama, ascends and descends, of power.

One might like to think that the characters in the stories in the bible are mostly good people who are ethical and essentially better than any of us--the truth is that they are not.

Joseph was a difficult young man. His brothers hated him for many reasons¹

- a) He was his father’s favorite;
- b) He has a tattletale;
- c) He, alone, received a coat of many colors from his father;
- d) And then, he had grandiose dreams--dreams that his brothers and father will bow in his presence.

So, his brothers sold him as a slave to Egypt. There he, as a slave, raises to a position of great responsibility in the house of Potiphar.

The story says the “God was with Joseph and he became a successful man,” (vs. 2) furthermore, “his master saw that God was with Joseph and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands...so Joseph **found favor** in his master’s sight (vs. 3-4)”

Here is a young man who had arrived as a slave. He was socially dislocated, geographically dislocated. But...he found favor.

While he is enjoying the benefits of this “favor,” he encounters the master’s wife, who attempts to seduce, but he refuses her.

There is something interesting about Joseph’s refusal. First, he claims that if he was to lie with her, he would be betraying his master and moreover, it would be “a sin against God.”

¹ Genesis 37; Also referenced in *What’s in it for me?* Rabbi Stephen Lewis Fuchs, pg.35

“Joseph and the Torah break new moral ground, though, by claiming that to lie with her would also be a sin against God. That notion was unheard of in the pagan world because ancient pagan gods were not concerned with moral behavior.”²

Nonetheless, Joseph refusal does not deter Potiphar’s wife. One day, he finds himself alone with her in the house and she gets a hold of his garment, as that house becomes the center of lust, corruption, and lies. It becomes the place where the powerful acquire more power and the innocent are incarcerated.

It is in that house where Joseph is sent to prison because his clothes are used as evidence against him.

“History repeats itself, at least in poor Joseph’s life: earlier his brothers threw him into a pit/prison, taking his fabulous garment in order to convince Jacob (his father) that his beloved Joseph was dead. Now Potiphar’s wife takes Joseph’s garment in order to perpetuate a deception that will land Joseph in prison...again.”³

This sounds extremely similar to American politics, some commentaries note. Even the affliction of human trafficking—as Potiphar purchased Joseph is something that is still present in twenty-first century life.

Joseph is put in jail— but it is believed that Potiphar doubted his wife and sent Joseph to the dungeon, instead of sentencing him to death.

There, too, in jail, the scripture tells us “the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer.” (vs. 21) and “the chief jailer paid not heed to anything that was in Joseph’s care, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper.” (vs. 23).

And, for a guy, who we are told over and over again, that “the Lord was with Joseph.” For a guy where his story continues to note that “he had found favor,” he sure experiences a lot of hardship.

One thing is important to note in this story is that God never speaks to Joseph, like he spoke to Abraham and others.

But, there are moments that an overt message from God is not necessary, because God’s favor is powerful enough.

What does it mean to have found favor before God? Certainly, it does not mean that we will not encounter adversities.

² Stephen Lewis Fuchs, *What’s in it for me? Finding ourselves in biblical narratives*, 2014, pg.35-36

³ Jacqueline E. Lapsey, Commentary on Genesis 39:1-23; Narrative Lectionary. (9/17/2014)

Certainly, it does not mean that if one was to write one's story, it would not sound like a scene from "*House of Cards*" or "*Scandal*."

It means that God is with us, through the pain and brokenness. God is with us.

Ernest Hemingway wrote, "The world breaks everyone, and afterward, some are strong at the broken places."

Life broke Joseph, and then he was strong, God was with him, and he saved his family.

There was purpose in his brokenness.

The world teaches us that we should not be vulnerable. Expressions like "don't let anyone see you sweat" are expressions we not only say, but we put in practice.

But church is not the world. Church is an alternative society, and here, I invite us to be vulnerable.

I invite us to take a look at our own brokenness. Yes, own your story, as dramatic as you might think it is. Let's look at our brokenness.

I dare to say that once you have examined it, you will identify moments when you would also say: "God was with me, and I found favor. God did not save me from the pain, but God was with me through the pain. There was purpose."

And then you, too, like Joseph, were able to be a blessing.

May the God's favor permeate our lives as we continue to live in a world full brokenness.