

Red Handed

On our path through the Hebrew Scriptures so far this fall, we have met Noah, whose story includes a rainbow and reminds us of God's promise to be faithful to God's beloved creations, come what may. Last week we met Abraham and Sarah, the couple voted least likely to be blessed, whom God sets apart to give birth to a family more numerous than the stars and to be a blessing to the nations. This morning we meet Joseph, Abraham and Sarah's great-grandson. Joseph may be one of the better-known characters from the Old Testament. He's the dreamer with the coat of many colors, or the long coat with sleeves—a more accurate translation of the Hebrew, although disappointingly much less poetic. Some of us know him from the musical, others may simply remember him from Sunday school as the obnoxious little brother who tattles on his siblings, parades around in his fancy coat, and then tells his brothers about his dreams. In this first dream and others that follow, Joseph sees sheaves of wheat bowing to his sheaf of wheat and the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him. The dreams are the last straw. The brothers have had enough and decide that they would be better off if Joseph were no longer able to dream. In the end, Reuben, the oldest brother steps in and persuades them to leave Joseph in a pit and “lay no hand on him,” because Reuben plans to save him.¹ The brothers strip him of his robe and leave him in the pit with no food or water or hope of being rescued. Without Reuben's knowledge, Judah and the others sell Joseph as a slave for twenty pieces of silver. Reuben and the others return to their father Jacob with Joseph's empty and bloodied robe. Jacob is overcome with grief, and he “refuse[s] to be comforted.”² Our reading for this morning picks up the Joseph story at this point. [Read Genesis 39: 1-23.]

If you meet anyone who thinks scripture is boring or without scandal, you could share this text with them. Joseph's saga here in chapter 39 sounds like something from *Dynasty* or *Days of Our Lives* or *Pretty Little Liars*. This is not the Joseph story I was taught in Sunday school. You? I learned about his jealous brothers' throwing him into a pit and selling him off. I learned about Joseph's rise to power in pharaoh's court after his time in prison, about his gift for decoding dreams, and about the joyful reunion with his family when they come seeking food during a

¹ Genesis 37: 22, New Revised Standard Version

² Genesis 37: 35, NRSV

famine. But this episode is left out of most tellings, and we can understand why. This is not the stuff we want in our biographies. This story is uncomfortable and a bit seamy. This is not the stuff of great men and great faith. Or is it?

One reason I find this text particularly challenging is due to the timing. Over the past year or so the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements have shined a light on widespread misconduct and harassment in every industry, at every level, and in every community, including the church. And in the past few days, #WhyIDidntReport has revealed the daunting number of people who have survived assaults but not reported them for countless reasons. (You or someone you know may be part of that daunting number. If so, I am here to listen.) As this past week has reminded us, when a woman or a man or a child comes forward with a revelation, some are quick to push back, questioning whether the claim is true. There is rightfully a concern to protect the accused, to strike a just balance for all involved. Read too quickly or too superficially, this story could be misused as justification for defending the accused. Potiphar's wife is easily painted as a stereotype of the deceitful temptress telling tales to bring a good man down. But to read it only as a soap opera is to miss the full depth of the story in its time and in our own.

Throughout his life, Joseph experiences more than the average ups and downs most of us encounter. He is the favorite child of his father and mother. He is a dreamer with a coat made only for him. And then he is pitched into a pit to await his execution at his brothers' hands. He escapes death by being trafficked into slavery in Egypt. He rises to prominence in his master's house, and yet, he remains a slave. He has no home or property of his own. His welfare is tied to staying in Potiphar's good graces. His power, such as it is, is utterly contingent. In other words, any power he has is on loan from Potiphar.

Potiphar's wife does not have a tremendous amount of power either. She has servants and a life of relative luxury, but she is not even given a name here. The power she does have she chooses to wield in regard to Joseph. Perhaps she envies his position and his esteem. Perhaps she is genuinely smitten with the young dreamer. But ultimately this story is not as salacious as some would have us believe. This story is less about intimacy and more about the abuse of power, unheard voices, and the deep brokenness of human relationships. The accuser lashes out in anger when things do not go her way; she denigrates and dismisses him with a slur; and she wrongfully accuses him, sending him to prison, if not a death sentence. Joseph says nothing in response to the accusation. He is presumed to be guilty, perhaps because of his position in the household or perhaps because he is a foreigner, an outsider. This story is not about he said, she said, as if such accounts really ever are. This story is about what makes—or doesn't

make for right relationship in the eyes of the God who does stop wanting to be in right relationship with us. As scholar, Sib Towner says:

In the end this is a story about right relationships. The steadfast love that the Lord shows Joseph in the jailhouse is not unrelated to the loyalty that Joseph shows to Potiphar, and truth be told to Potiphar's wife.

Right relationships between God and God's human friends are manifested in right relationships at the human level.³

Right relationships. One could argue that the whole of scripture is about God seeking to be in right relationship with us and calling us to be in right relationship with one another. God tries and tries again and again and again, ultimately sending God's own son to show us this commitment, this love face to face in order to make things right. The God we meet in Jesus Christ never stops trying to make things right. This is the God we worship. This is the God we serve.

Our rainbow—the symbol of God's love and faithfulness has expanded again this week. There is green for the olive leaf, yellow for the stars above Abraham and Sarah's tent, and now we add red. So often red is the color of shame, embarrassment, scandal. It is often said that a guilty person is caught "red-handed." But red is also the color of love, passion, the color of a beating heart. So red can be a symbol of all that is wrong with human relationships or all that is right and good. In the Joseph story, we see how God remains with Joseph in the depths of the pit, in slavery, and in prison faithfully transforming injustice, pain, shame, and loss into something new and good and hopeful. It is easy—perhaps too easy—to miss the pain in Joseph's story. Because we like the happy ending of his being reunited with his family, we can be quick to brush past the fact that his own brothers threw him into a pit and sold him into slavery. We can be tempted to overlook the injustice of his serving a prison term that he did not deserve because he soon will rise to power in pharaoh's court. Honestly, I'd rather look away from this seamy story and cut to the happy ending, too, but then I'd miss the hard edges and the difficult middle, the very pieces of the story that push us to look more closely at the heartbreaking reality of distorted human relationships not just in the pages of scripture but in our world today.

Our long love story with God reminds us that the God we worship and follow comes to us and remains with us in the midst of our brokenness, just as he was with Joseph. This God calls us to open our eyes to the brokenness,

³ Towner, Sibley. *Genesis: Westminster Bible Companion*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) 258.

to be agents of God's healing, too. The ugliness of the past week has been difficult to stomach. The disdain and hatred that have been on display are hard to see, which makes this story uncomfortable. I'd rather read something else, anything else, really. But, it is a luxury to turn away from the sordid and the suffering in scripture. It is a sign of privilege to turn away from the sordid and the suffering in our world. As people of faith, as Christ's friends and disciples, we do not have that luxury or that privilege. In our baptism, we are called to be part of Christ's love for this broken world. We are called to recognize that people throughout the world are still trafficked and enslaved. We are called to pay attention to the excessive numbers of people who are wrongfully imprisoned. We are called to listen to voices of women, men, and children who have suffered at the hands of friends, strangers, family, neighbors, teachers, clergy, or coaches. We are called to confront systems that feed on racism, cynicism, bullying, and fear. We don't get to turn a blind eye or make excuses or write off entire classes or genders or orientations or races or nations, because the God who creates us, redeems us, and sustains us and all that we love does not. Instead we give thanks for the God who is with us in the mess and for the love that saves us and gives us life even as we look on the pain of the world. We lean on God's grace when we find ourselves looking away. And when we find the strength to watch for the ways God is already redeeming the world and righting the wrongs, without fail we will catch God red-handed. We will see the deep red passion of God's heart, the dark red devotion of God's righteous anger at all that is broken, all that is wrong. We will see God's hand not only in the happy endings but in all the broken places, weeping alongside the slave, the prisoner, the brokenhearted and bringing new life even now. We will see God at work in the life of Valentino Dixon, a man with a gift for drawing whose sketches of golf courses caught the eye of *Golf Digest* writers. They heard his story and helped him gain freedom after serving 27 years in prison for a crime he did not commit.⁴ We will see God at work in the lives of the women of Thistle Farms, a ministry that houses and helps heal women who have been addicted, trafficked, and abused.⁵ With God's help, we, like Joseph, will turn and face all of the ugliness the world can throw at us with faith, courage, and humility. We will join God's holy work of transforming shame, hurt, anger, disdain, and loss into something loving, good, faithful, and true. And by the grace of God, we may be caught red-handed, too, in the very best way.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ <https://www.golfdigest.com/story/for-valentino-dixon-a-wrong-righted-murder-charge-vacated-by-court-after-serving-27-years-in-prison>

⁵ <https://thistlefarms.org/pages/model-impact>