

Because the Holy Spirit thinks she's really funny, she timed the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife to coincide with the week of speculation about Brett Kavanaugh and the woman who accuses him of assaulting her when they were in high school. I am sure that preachers, like everyone else, are lining up on the side they were already on, either comparing Kavanaugh to the wrongly-accused Joseph, or pointing out that the imbalance of power makes Joseph more like Emmett Till than like Brett Kavanaugh. I'm just going to set that Supreme Court appointment aside, because I think you all already know what I'd have to say about it. We're going to take a different direction with this story.

I'm interested in the development of Joseph's character. The back story is substantial, and it does him no credit. He's his father's favorite son for no good reason, the 11th of 12, and full of himself. He flaunts the special clothing his father gives him, and he ostentatiously repeats dreams he's had that suggest his superiority to his older brothers. You get the picture of a gifted but obnoxious kid whose giftedness doesn't really make up for what a pain in the butt he can be.

*So of course* his brothers sell him into slavery. Who wouldn't? I've always secretly admired their boldness in seizing the opportunity: no witnesses, a plausible cover story, you might say that God has given them this chance to rid themselves of this meddlesome boy. In fact, the whole Joseph /epic/ repeatedly invites the question of whose side God is on. If you stopped at the end of Chapter 37, you'd think that God was on the side of the brothers, because their problem is solved—Joseph is out of their hair and they haven't had to kill him. Win-win.

I recently heard the story of a pre-hurricane conversation (a different

hurricane, not Florence), when one guy said to the other, “I’m not afraid of this hurricane because I know the Lord will protect us.” The other said, “How so?” And the first speaker said, “He’ll keep the storm stalled over Mobile.” This of course raises the question of God’s relationship to the population of Mobile. And you keep running into that question in the Joseph story, too. Favorite son, coat of many colors, favorable dreams—hostile brothers, sold into slavery. But sold to a really nice guy, Potiphar, soft landing—oh, but now Potiphar’s wife frames him and he goes to prison where he could easily rot to death. Where is God, and whose side is God on?

I think that the betrayal of his brothers and his utter helplessness as a person being trafficked created a crisis for Joseph, a crisis that he handled well. He had been the darling of the patriarch of their household, but that patronage had not protected him. He realized, perhaps, that he could not rely on any powerful patron to ensure his well-being—and so he decided to be guided by his own integrity. Like Queen Vashti in the book of Esther, who refused the king’s order to dance for his guests’ entertainment, Joseph said No to the powerful woman who wanted him to be her boy toy. Both Vashti and Joseph were told to degrade themselves, and each of them refused and paid a tremendous price.

Joseph was thrown in prison, where as far as he knew, his life might end. He had lost everything. Genesis tells us that “the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love,” but that may not have been evident to Joseph at the time. All he did have was the knowledge that he had refused to degrade himself, that he had done the right thing and that he was a trustworthy and dignified person, which could not

be taken away from him. And that knowledge was precious.

We don't know what will happen to us; we walk along the edge of a precipice all the time, and blessedly most of the time we're unaware of our vulnerability. But we really are vulnerable, and sometimes I think every day that we go to bed in one piece is a miracle. The point is, the preservation of our lives and wholeness is not entirely in our hands—but our willingness to let go of the promise of privilege if it requires us to be something we're not *is* in our hands. To return to Judge Kavanaugh for a second (I lied), let's suppose he did do this terrible thing to a girl his age years ago, and that he knows he did. He stands to lose the nomination to the Supreme Court if he admits it, and with that loss goes his chance to influence public policy and the setting of legal precedents in ways that he thinks are important. Surely, surely, God, he might say, I should do what it takes to get this confirmation, even degrade myself by lying.

I don't want him to be on the Supreme Court, but I think I can empathize with his position. But if I couldn't get something I really wanted except by lying, I might ask myself whether it was really right for me to have that thing. If we believe that the Lord is with us even in prison, can we not afford to let go of the prize that would cost our integrity, knowing that God continues to be in our corner? I think that's what the narrator of the Joseph story is saying. When Joseph lost the cushy position in Potiphar's house because he refused to compromise his dignity, that was not the last or most valuable opportunity he would ever have. Even in prison it turned out that there were career opportunities: the chief jailer made Joseph sort of chief prisoner, and he exercised stewardship over the supplies for the prisoners, "and

whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper.” In fact, it was the contacts Joseph made in prison that catapulted him into the household of Pharaoh.

We have the advantage of knowing how the story ends—and we have the luxury of imagining Joseph’s state of mind at every point in the story, because the narrator doesn’t tell us. So it’s easy to be glib about his struggles, but what we do know is that at the end, when Joseph has ascended to high office and his brothers are now at his mercy, begging not just for food but for their very lives, Joseph is gracious and forgives them. He says—and this is our only glimpse into his state of mind—“You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” Which is a powerful interpretive step, to see his incredible ups and downs, times of helplessness and times of prestige, as all pointed toward a great good that would transcend/eclipse his and his brothers’ struggles. “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” Even your awful, murderous, most un-brotherly acts, the worst things you ever did, God incorporated into a redemptive arc. But it’s clearly God’s doing, because Joseph had walked away from grasping for power or survival at any cost; he had said No to what would compromise his integrity, and his good fortune and ability now to help his family come not as the poison fruits of a corrupt life, but as a genuine gift.

Is Joseph’s a happy story or a sad story? It depends on where you stop reading. Even at the happy ending, when the whole family is settled in Egypt and eating three meals a day, you might say it’s sad or foreboding, because of course as soon as Joseph’s boss dies, a new pharaoh arises who does not want the Hebrews in his country. So there’s that. But then God raises up a leader for them and joins them as a pillar of fire by day and smoke by night, so even in the next reversal of fortune,

there is always redemption going on.

At a critical moment in his life, Joseph chose to risk everything in order to be a good guy. He lost everything, in a sense, but that choice allowed him to see that he was still in the hands of God, still in play, still having choices to make and opportunities to matter to others. That is a better thing to have than a temporary position of influence, however enormous, because it frees him—and us—from spending our lives covering up and justifying ourselves and making more noise inside our heads so we won't hear the voice of God calling and offering us real life.

Let us pray.

God of presence, you remained fully with Joseph when he sat long years in a prison for a crime he did not commit. Help us to see that you are always with us, so that we might live faithfully in your world. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.