

**Being in the Right Place at the Right Time  
Genesis 39-41**

**John W. Vest  
Fourth Presbyterian Church—4:00 Worship  
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This week we are continuing our series on the Book of Genesis. More specifically, we are continuing the story of Joseph and his brothers. Last week we heard the beginning of this dramatic story. Joseph was the favorite son of Jacob, which caused some tension, to say the least, with his eleven brothers. It turns out that Joseph was gifted by God with the ability to receive and interpret dreams. He shared with his family two dreams that clearly indicated they would one day bow before him. This enraged his brothers, who plotted to kill him. Thanks to the intervention of two of the older brothers, they ultimately spared his life—but they did fake his death after selling him into slavery. As his father wept bitterly at the apparent death of his favorite son, Joseph was sold as a slave into the house of an Egyptian named Potiphar, the chief officer of Pharaoh, commander of the royal guard.

This is where we pick up the story of Joseph today. I want to suggest that in these episodes Joseph is a man who continually finds himself in just the right place at just the right time. This portion of the story covers three chapters. I will read part of it from scripture and summarize the rest to move things along. Let us begin in Genesis 39.

*When Joseph had been taken down to Egypt, Potiphar, Pharaoh's chief officer, the commander of the royal guard and an Egyptian, purchased him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man and served in his Egyptian master's household. His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made everything he did successful. Potiphar thought highly of Joseph, and Joseph*

*became his assistant; he appointed Joseph head of his household and put everything he had under Joseph's supervision. From the time he appointed Joseph head of his household and of everything he had, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's household because of Joseph. The LORD blessed everything he had, both in the household and in the field. So he handed over everything he had to Joseph and didn't pay attention to anything except the food he ate. (Genesis 39:1-6a)*

We see already that Joseph is a special person, blessed by God with special gifts. Despite his misfortune—namely, his fight with his brothers and being sold into slavery—he finds himself placed in a position of great power. He is put in charge of the household of one of the most powerful people in all of Egypt. And, like King Midas, everything he touches seems to turn to gold. Potiphar's entire household is blessed because of Joseph. It is really quite remarkable how this dreamer from Canaan has so quickly risen from being a slave to becoming a man of power and influence.

Yet, for all of his fortune, Joseph seems to find an equal measure of misfortune. It turns out that Potiphar's wife had eyes for him and tried to seduce him. But Joseph, loyal to his master, would have nothing to do with her. After many rebuffs, she decided to make a more aggressive move. She literally threw herself at him and grabbed his clothes. When Joseph ran away, she held on to his clothing and he was stripped naked as he fled. Standing there, rejected and scorned, with Joseph's clothes in her hands, she called for help and lied about what had happened. She said that it was Joseph who threw himself at her. As you might imagine, Potiphar is enraged and throws Joseph in jail. Once again, the roller coaster ride that is Joseph's life takes a nosedive.

As I continue from the Bible, we find Joseph in prison.

*While he was in jail, the LORD was with Joseph and remained loyal to him. He caused the jail's commander to think highly of Joseph. The jail's commander put all of the prisoners in the jail under Joseph's supervision, and he was the one who determined everything that happened there. The jail's commander paid no attention to anything under Joseph's supervision, because the LORD was with him and made everything he did successful. (Genesis 39:20b-23)*

Again, even when things seem to turn against him, Joseph finds success. He is so blessed by God that even the worst situations turn out well. Just as he rose to the top of Potiphar's house, he rises to the top of the prison and once again finds himself in a position of power and influence.

In prison, Joseph is eventually joined by both the wine steward and baker of Pharaoh, who had somehow offended the king. While in prison, the two of them had dreams that they could not understand. Joseph put his skill at dream interpretation to work and told each one what their dream meant. For the wine steward, it was good news: he would be released and returned to Pharaoh's court. For the baker it was bad news: he would be executed. Both dreams came true—the wine steward returned to the court of Pharaoh and the baker was executed. Unfortunately for Joseph, the wine steward forgot Joseph's request to put in a good word for him once he was freed, so Joseph remained in the prison for two more long years.

One night, two years later, Pharaoh himself had two dreams that he did not understand. In fact, all of Egypt's religious leaders could not interpret the dreams. Taking note of the situation, the wine steward suddenly remembered his experience with Joseph in prison. He told Pharaoh about this Hebrew prisoner that could interpret dreams, so the king summoned Joseph and asked for an interpretation.

Joseph told Pharaoh that the dream predicted seven years of plentiful crops and abundant food followed by seven years of severe famine. Knowing that he once again found himself in just the right place at just the right time, Joseph seized the opportunity and made a further recommendation to Pharaoh. I will finish this part of the story from the Biblical text.

*Joseph said, "Now Pharaoh should find an intelligent, wise man and give him authority over the land of Egypt. Then Pharaoh should appoint administrators over the land and take one-fifth of all the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. During the good years that are coming, they should collect all such food and store the grain under Pharaoh's control, protecting the food in the cities. This food will be reserved for the seven years of famine to follow in the land of Egypt so that the land won't be ravaged by the famine."*

*This advice seemed wise to Pharaoh and all his servants, and Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find a man with more God-given gifts than this one?" Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, no one is as intelligent and wise as you are. You will be in charge of my kingdom, and all my people will obey your command. Only as the enthroned king will I be greater than you." Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Know this: I've given you authority over the entire land of Egypt." Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, he dressed him in linen clothes, and he put a gold necklace around his neck. He put Joseph on the chariot of his second-in-command, and everyone in front of him cried out, "Attention!" So Pharaoh installed him over the entire land of Egypt. Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh; no one will do anything or go anywhere in all the land of Egypt without your permission." Pharaoh renamed Joseph, Zaphenath-paneah, and married him to Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara the priest of Heliopolis.*

*Then Joseph assumed control of the land of Egypt. Joseph was 30 years old when he began to serve Pharaoh, Egypt's king, when he left Pharaoh's court and traveled through the entire land of Egypt. (Genesis 41:33-46)*

From slave to the second most powerful person in all of Egypt. Joseph's story is quite a tale. It is a remarkable story of ups and downs, twists and turns. Yet through it all, Joseph continues to do well. No matter what conspires against him—the betrayal of his brothers; the seduction and deception of Potiphar's wife; the forgetfulness of the wine steward—no matter what, Joseph finds a way to succeed. What a charmed life! More true to the story, what a blessed life! The author of this remarkable story clearly intends to convey that God was responsible for Joseph's great success. Joseph's abilities to interpret dreams are a gift from God. God blessed every situation that Joseph faced such that even those around him received blessings. God made sure that at every turn, Joseph would prosper and move toward the end of becoming the person in Egypt whose power is eclipsed only by Pharaoh himself.

It will become even clearer next week, at the conclusion of this great narrative, that the story of Joseph is ultimately a story of providence. "Providence" is a theological concept which suggests that God shapes, guides, and controls human history such that God's desired outcome comes to be. In both Western philosophy and theology, there is a perennial debate about the relationship between free will and fate. Are our paths determined by the plans of a higher power, or do we have complete freedom to chart our own course?

Most recently, this debate has been captured in the fascinating film, *The Adjustment Bureau*. In this movie, a politician played by Matt Damon discovers a behind-the-scenes organization that keeps the trajectories of individuals on track according to predetermined

plans. Like any good hero of American fiction would do, Damon's character embraces his individualism and free will and fights against the course that has been set for him.

Perhaps you have thought about this with regard to your own life as well. Has there been a predetermined plan for your life, or is the future a blank slate determined purely by the choices you make? Has God intervened in your life—the way God intervened in Joseph's life—in order to bring about certain outcomes, or are you left on your own to fend for yourself?

This has been one of the great questions of my own faith journey. I go back and forth about how much I think God is directly shaping my path and how much I feel left alone to choose my own adventures based on what I know—or think I know—of God's will for my life and for the world.

In the heat of the moment, depending on the situation I find myself in, I can go either way. Sometimes it feels as if God is right there with me, guiding my steps toward what I assume is a happy ending designed for me. Sometimes it feels as if I am left to figure things out for myself and make an educated decision based on my experiences and my attempts to glean wisdom from our faith tradition.

In hindsight, as I tell the story of my own life in a way similar to how we tell the story of Joseph, or anyone else from our vast canon of literature, it seems as if there has been a design to the whole thing. While I can imagine different outcomes, had I made different decisions or encountered different situations, the way my life has progressed seems to me to be the only way it could have resulted in the person I am today. To be sure, a different history would have produced a different me, but thinking about my life in narrative terms inclines me to see the

fingerprints of providence in the course of events that have brought me to this place at this time.

As I try to explain the concept of providence, I often share with my confirmation classes a little bit of my personal history. I began playing football when I was in third grade. As you might gather from my general build, football was pretty much the only sport for which I had any natural talent. After eight seasons of football, I was finally poised to be a starting lineman on our varsity team. But, a nagging pain in my lower back during the summer before my junior year season grew progressively worse and I was eventually diagnosed with two herniated disks at sensitive locations of my spine. The nature of these injuries was such that I was forced to quit contact sports like football. As a sixteen year old boy, I felt like my life was ruined. I have no idea whether or not I could have played football in college, but I at least wanted the chance to try. To this day, I have vivid memories of turning in my football equipment and walking away from the field-house for the final time as a football player.

But, what I thought was a tragedy turned out to be a blessing. Because I suddenly found myself with more time during my junior and senior years of high school, I was able to focus even more on my studies and I ended up being the valedictorian of my class. I also found time to become involved in my church youth group and eventually felt called to ministry during my senior year. Because of my grades and test scores, I was able to attend a much better college than I could have playing football. This college, it turns out, had a religious studies department that completely reshaped my understanding of Christianity and my call to ministry. I was able to spend a year studying abroad in Israel, a year that significantly shaped my academic and religious development. Because of these experiences, I was able to come to Chicago for my

seminary training at the University of Chicago. Here, my sense of call to ministry has been shaped and reshaped even more. After formative experiences serving a church in the western suburbs, I married a wonderful woman, was called to Fourth Church five years ago, and now have the most incredible two and a half year old son.

Did all of this happen *because* I injured my back in high school? Probably not. But in the 20/20 vision of hindsight, it certainly seems to me that injuring my back in high school sent my life in a particular direction—a different direction than the one I had in mind—which has culminated in me being here in this place at this time with the particular set of experience that has made me who I am.

Did God *cause* my back injury in order to make this all happen? I'd like to think that God isn't in the business of causing pain and suffering in order to bring about certain outcomes. Yet I do have the sense that God has helped me respond to various situations in my life in such a way that things turned out the way they did.

Maybe I'm imposing too much purpose and pattern to the events of my life, but it sure seems as if what we see in the story of Joseph is not that dissimilar from what we see in many of our own lives. As you look back on your life, do you have a similar sense that things have happened in just the right way to bring you to where you are now? I'll admit that it is easier to think about this when times are good and we're on top. It's harder to discern God's purpose and plan when we are beaten down and lying in the bottom of a pit. And I know that sometimes things happen that completely defy reason or meaning or any sense of design or purpose.

But perhaps the real take away from the story of Joseph is not the stringing together of life events in order to discern a direction and purpose. Biblical providence seems to be about more than simply connecting the dots between experiences and saying that God is behind it all. Rather, the story of Joseph shows us that the most important thing is what we do with the situations in which we find ourselves.

Good or bad—in charge of Potiphar’s house or fleeing from his wife; stuck in prison or running the prison; a slave in Egypt or Pharaoh’s right hand man—Joseph recognized when we was in the right place at the right time, and he seized those opportunities to use the gifts that God had given him for the greater good. In the end, Joseph saves his family and all of Egypt, all because he took advantage of being in the right place at the right time.

I wonder if the same might be true for us. Whether we are in a good situation or a bad situation, could it be that we happen to be in just the right place at just the right time? Whether things are good or bad, could it be that we have been set up to use our own God-given gifts to do something good? That certainly puts a different spin on how we interpret difficult or even tragic times. Maybe these are prime opportunities to use our gifts to make a positive impact in the world.

Where are you right now? Are you in an up or a down? A high or a low? A good situation or a bad situation? A triumphant moment or a tragic one?

Wherever you find yourself, ask yourself this: are you in the right the place at the right time? Is God calling you to use your gifts to do something good, perhaps even something great?

And if so, what are you waiting for?

Amen.