

August 13, 2017 – “Joseph and That Sinking Feeling” – from Genesis 37.12-28, – Rev. Mike Eggleston

My car’s music system mostly plays Broadway musicals when I’m driving. When it’s short trips in the electric car, I usually hear short clips from the musical “Hamilton.” But for longer drives in my wife’s car, the music I’ve sung along to for the last two months has been “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.” I hope some of you are familiar with Joseph. It was Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Weber’s first musical. It’s full of light, almost silly songs drawing from many musical styles. Why Joseph has been playing on my trips in the last ten weeks is because the book of Genesis has given us our Hebrew lectionary readings for the last ten weeks. Except that Joseph is all about Joseph. While our Genesis scriptures until today have brought us only up to Joseph’s parents. But hurray, today the lectionary has finally caught up with Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.

So. Telling today’s verses in a different way, the narrator sings, “Next day, far from home, the brothers planned the repulsive crime.” And Joseph’s brothers sing, “Let us grab him now, do him in while we’ve got the time.” The narrator sings, “this they did and made the most of it. Tore his coat and threw him in a pit. . . Then some Ishmaelites, a hairy crew came riding by. In a flash the brothers changed their plan.” The brothers sing, “We need cash, let’s sell him if we can.” And before long, one of the main musical themes of Joseph is introduced, ““Poor, poor, Joseph, what’cha gonna do? Things look bad for you, hey, whatcha gonna do? Poor, poor Joseph, sold to be a slave. Situation’s grave, yes, sold to be a slave.” That musical theme, poor, poor Joseph, recurs several times. So a few songs later it’s “poor, poor, Joseph, locked up in a cell. Things aren’t going well, locked up in a cell. And even the most powerful man on earth soon has his troubles. “Poor, poor Pharoah, what’cha gonna to, dreams are haunting you, what’cha gonna do?

That’s enough singing from me for now, because by starting the sermon in this way, I’ve dug myself into a pit. And it’s a pretty common pitfall for preachers of Joseph’s story. You see, the account of Joseph and his brothers which fills the last 14 chapters of Genesis is a mature story. But it’s often taught as a children’s story. The story of Joseph and his family resolves many of the conflicts found earlier in Genesis, rivalries that still haunt us today. But Joseph’s story is passed over by the lectionary, given just two Sundays out of three years of Sundays. And now, I’ve done the same thing. I’ve spent a fourth of this sermon treating Joseph lightly. It is good fun that way. Sunday schools have had a great time throwing little brothers into a pit. Youth groups have gleefully replayed the lustful older woman tearing the toga off handsome Joe. Genesis 37-50 makes good melodrama. Yet the story of Joseph is also profound. So I have to switch sides now from the silly to the serious.

Start with this. It is not a light thing to be thrown into a pit, sold to be a slave, locked up in a cell. You probably know that our United States holds the largest number of incarcerated people of any nation on earth. We’re second among all nations for the highest percentage of our population locked up a cell, second only to a tiny nation, the Seychelle Islands. The Seychelles have 750 people incarcerated, one percent of their population. We have 2,220,000 people in prisons or in jails, somewhat under 1% of our people, plus another 4,750,000 out on probation.

As for slavery, it’s illegal everywhere in the world. Except, reputable organizations that are dedicated to truly ending slavery estimate that there are 20 million to 50 million people still enslaved today, people held against their will, compelled to do involuntary labor, sold reportedly for as little as \$50 in some places for a lifetime of manual or sexual labor. The nations with the highest percentage



of slaves are Mauretania and Haiti, each with perhaps 4% of their people enslaved. America has a much better record here. Though I cannot forget that the most publicized bust of slavery in our time came right in my hometown of El Monte, California, in 1995. 72 Thai nationals were freed from slavery from a two-story boarded-up chain-fenced garment factory. The 72 women had been lured from Thailand and promised a better life. But here they were forced to work 16-22 hours daily, with armed guards 24/7, and no contact with the outside world allowed. When the US Department of Labor and California Labor Commission and El Monte police finally broke it up, some of the women had been enslaved for over 7 years. I'll put in a good word here for many people, including the Episcopalian Church of Tujunga and the United Methodist Church of North Hollywood, who helped give shelter to the freed slaves. Thanks also to US attorneys, who won a \$4 million settlement against retailers and manufacturers who had profited from the forced labor. The last I read about this said that all 72 had been able to finally settle as naturalized US citizens, and were gainfully employed. At the same time, I would put in a good word for many who work and volunteer with prisoners, through such organizations as Kairos Prison Ministries and Prison Fellowship and Prisoner to Pastor. I know very little about these, for we each have our own gifts and we each have our own limits as to what we can do. Still, anyone can fall or be pushed into a pit sometimes, as Joseph was. Thanks be to all who help people out from the pits that we fall or are pushed into.

There's another word of thanks to one other group that I promised to include in this sermon. I attend when able your Earthcare group at St Benedict's. That group is sponsoring many life-affirming events during the Season of Creation coming this September. Then on the first weekend of December your Earthcare Team will sponsor a visit from green theologian Rev. Matthew Fox to St Benedict's. But that's not what I want to pitch right now. Several members of Earthcare have recently seen the movie "An Inconvenient Sequel." See it if you can. It's showing at the Palm Theater in San Luis through this Thursday. What I most noticed in that film was Al Gore saying that sometimes, setbacks have almost plunged him into despair. But he has not succumbed to environmental despair. That rang very true to me. We all get that sinking feeling sometimes. Al Gore points out that we need not succumb to it. Joseph, son of Jacob and Rachel, was one whose experiences led him to become a master at escaping despair, and coaching others in how to not succumb to despair.

Joseph at 17 years old, entering the prime of life, beloved by his father and wearing his splendiferous coat, lost it all in an instant when his brothers attacked him with intent to murder. Poor, poor, Joseph, what'cha gonna do? Well, the lesser of two evils saved his life, as oldest brother Reuben persuaded the others to not kill him. Instead, just throw him down a cistern and leave him to die. Poor, poor Joseph, what'cha gonna do? Well again, a lesser of two evils saved his life. Brother Judah said we don't want his blood on his hands, so, sell him as a slave. So poor, poor Joseph, sold to be a slave. Well, he caught a break again, became a house slave rather than a field slave. Still, Joseph, what'cha gonna do? He made his own choice this time. He made himself the best house slave he could be, became chief steward of Potiphar's household. Then it all collapsed again, falsely accused of rape, locked into a cell. Poor poor Joseph, locked up in a cell. Well, this prisoner made himself a best friend to the chief jailer as well as to fellow convicts. From prison he was called suddenly to give counsel to Pharaoh. You could die just as easily as live if you didn't please Pharaoh. Poor Joseph. But somehow he managed to counsel Pharaoh so well that Joe instantly rose to become CFO of Egypt. The Bible must have left out a few steps here, it must have. But still, poor poor Egypt



and world, faced with seven years of famine. Somehow by this time, Joseph has mastered administration and planning. He saves thousands of lives, including finally the lives of his own brothers and their families. How does he do it? Tell us your secret of overcoming, Joseph. "Hey hey hey Joseph", as Pharaoh sings, "what does it, what does it, what does it mean?"

Now this is Mike speaking, not Pharaoh nor Rice and Weber. For garden variety levels of that sinking feeling, there are some home remedies that we all know. We may not practice these so well, but we know them. To name three, movement, music, and nature have power to lift us up from the pits. Walking or running or swimming or dancing or physical therapy, goes a long way in enhancing well-being. Music, especially if we sing it or make it, also is a strong remedy for the blues, even if it's the blues we're singing. Maybe every kind of music hath charms to heal our hurts. A third remedy we all know for our hurt and pain is nature. Whether it's the garden, or the beach, or the Sierra Club, or golfing or gazing at the stars, being in nature gives us a lift up from sadness. You know this. Nature, music, and movement are natural healers.

Joseph shows us more. Joseph seems to have learned and coached three powerful practices that lead out of despair. First is that he looked for the seams in any tight place, he grew towards the light even when there was very little light. That's why I mentioned his benefitting from the lesser of two evils several times. Joseph became a master at finding the openings, finding a way when there was no way. A second despair-busting trait in Joseph is that he used his own God-given gifts. As the narrator sings, "Strange as it seems, there's been a run of crazy dreams, and a man who can interpret could go far." Joseph was a gifted dreamer and interpreter of dreams. That may have helped him develop his powerful gift for administration. The third despair-beating practice of Joseph is that he found common ground with others. He found common interests with Potiphar, with fellow convicts in prison, with Pharaoh, and finally he adroitly led his brothers to see what they shared in common with him. And now I'm way ahead of the scripture. I'd better wrap up this sermon, by telling of an old friend who on a small scale used the same three despair-busting skills that Joseph used.

John was literally an old friend to me, we celebrated his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. John could still take care of himself, but his wife Margaret had to move to a skilled nursing facility. John moved with her, so that she wouldn't have to be in a locked facility. Seek the lesser of two evils, look for the openings that allow hope and freedom still. Well, the nursing facility still wasn't the best of living situations. So John put his gifts to work. He had one of the greenest thumbs I've ever known, plus, he liked people. John gathered pots and cups and cuttings of plants wherever he could get them. Soon his plants grew and spread. He gave his flowering plants to whichever residents wanted them, of course that was most everybody. Administrators of the nursing home liked John, but they felt they had to keep this nursery within bounds. John, you can't grow plants in the hallways, we need access for wheelchairs and EMTs. Well, then, where can we grow them? How about your office? Plus, the cooks like the potted plants I've given them, they'd gladly have more growing in the dining area. It will add beauty and fresh oxygen and not cost you a dime. Well, maybe we can try that, administrators agreed. John made a desert bloom in one skilled nursing facility. After his wife died, he stayed there, because he now was part of a beloved community of plants and new old friends.

Well, there's one more week of Joseph in the lectionary, as well as an unending supply of the gospels and the psalms and the epistles. Enjoy and learn from them all. Amen.