

Joseph in prison

This week we jump from Abraham and Sarah to their great-grandson Joseph. Joseph is one of the twelve sons of Jacob, who was renamed Israel.

The Joseph story begins with a dream. Joseph's dream. Joseph dreamed that he and his brothers were binding sheaves of grain when his sheaf stood upright and those of his brothers bowed down to his.

A second dream was similar – in that dream, the sun, the moon, and 11 stars were bowing down to Joseph.

Joseph's dreams are how God communicated with him. Those dreams tell that Joseph would one day rule over his family – he would rule over Israel. You can imagine how that might have been unpopular with his brothers. They were already jealous because Joseph was Israel's favorite son and this did not help.

You might remember the story about the coat of many colors his father gave to Joseph. It was popularized by the musical Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. The other brothers did not get such a fancy gift from their father. They grew to hate Joseph.

So, when Joseph was sent out to check in with his brothers in the fields, they kidnapped him, threw him in a cistern, and then sold him as a slave to a band of merchants passing by. The merchants then sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an Egyptian official.

That's where the story picks up today.

What I mostly want to talk about in connection to Joseph's story is God's purpose versus God's plan. The difference is subtle, but I think important as we think about how we speak of God's presence in the midst of injustice and suffering.

So first, let's remind ourselves what God's purpose is. If you remember from last week, God called Abraham and Sarah to leave their home and go to the land God would show them. God promised them land. God promised many descendants so that they would become a great nation. And God promised to bless them, so that through them all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Blessing is God's purpose. Life. As we follow the story into Matthew's gospel Jesus will call it the kingdom of heaven, a kingdom ruled by love. In Luke and Mark it's more often Kingdom of God. In John's gospel Jesus says that he came to bring abundant life.

Life...blessing...love. That is God's purpose. For all the families of the earth.

Joseph's dream tells us that in some way, he will rule and his rule will be marked by God's blessing of life.

When we hear over and over in the Joseph story that God was with Joseph and faithful to him and made everything he did prosper, that's what's happening. Egypt is blessed through Joseph. It's not until later in the story that Israel is – we'll come back to that in a minute.

But God's purpose to bring life and blessing can be hard to see amid the bad stuff that happens. In this story, there's a big interruption in God's purpose. The one who will carry the purpose forward is first a slave and now a prisoner. Is this part of God's plan?

Some would say yes. But I don't believe so. From the very beginning, it's been clear that God's purpose of creating a beautiful world of love and harmony would be opposed by the forces of evil.

Joseph is a victim of those opposing forces. But of course, it's not the end of the story. God continues to be with Joseph. Through Joseph, the other prisoners experience a little of God's life and blessing.

But that's not the end of the story either. While in prison, Joseph correctly interprets the dreams of two other prisoners. Fast forward a couple years, and Pharaoh has a weird dream.

In that dream, 7 fat cows rise up out of a river followed by 7 emaciated cows.

The emaciated cows devoured the fat ones. None of Pharaoh's seers could figure it out.

Finally, someone remembered this guy in prison who was pretty good at interpreting dreams. Joseph was called up to Pharaoh. Joseph said the dream meant there would be seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine.

He was released from prison and put in charge of the entire Egyptian economy. His practices and policies built up enough reserve that when the famine did hit, Egypt was ready. Joseph's work allowed Egypt to thrive during the famine when people in other places starved.

One of those places was the land where Joseph's family lived. The rest of Genesis tells this story, but in a nutshell, Joseph's family wound up in Egypt. Because of Joseph they did not

starve. God's purpose to bless the world through Israel was kept alive because Joseph kept his family from starving to death.

But his family did indeed end up bowing down to him. His dream came true.

God's purpose from the very beginning has been to create a world of beauty, peace, and love.

God put special creatures in the world – humans – to be the caretakers and co-creators in creating this world.

But these humans have repeatedly thwarted and threatened God's creation. That was not a part of God's purpose. It wasn't God's plan. But it was a risk God accepted by giving these humans a mind of their own.

God then set aside this special family. The idea was that through a covenant relationship with God they would bring that purpose of life and blessing to the whole world.

Egypt really was the first nation to benefit from that blessing. But Egypt also became a threat to the purpose. In this story, that threat came from a specific Egyptian couple – Potiphar and his wife.

But between this story and next week's story, God's purpose will appear to have died completely. After Joseph's rescue of Egypt and his family, Israel would prosper and multiply in Egypt.

But the memory of Joseph would die. The numbers of Hebrews in Egypt will threaten a new pharaoh, and the Hebrews would become slaves. Next week's story will focus on God's rescue of those slaves.

To recap – God's purpose is life and blessing for the whole world. People muck it up. God's plan then is to enter in to all those mucked up places and continue to work to push God's purpose forward, however hidden that work might be.

That's really the entire biblical story – the story of God. The Bible tells us repeatedly what God's purpose for creation is. It tells the story repeatedly of humanity mucking it up. And then it shows God breaking in to the disasters humans create.

God will work to bring liberation through Moses...justice through the prophets and the exile...and ultimately death and resurrection through Jesus Christ. And then we'll look back

and see that the pattern of death and resurrection is repeated throughout these old testament stories.

So, what does that tell us about our own time? When we look around at everything going on, I'd have to say that God's purpose of life and blessing for everyone is under a little stress.

To be sure, we get of glimpses of it – part of our role as Christian witnesses is to acknowledge and point out places where we do see God's purpose unfolding – successful programs to help poor people get back on their feet; places where work against racism chips away at the inequalities;

places where healing happens and reconciliation and forgiveness happen; places where a space is created for the most marginalized people to have what they need to thrive.

But we can also see the scepter of climate change looming over God's purpose for life and blessing for all creation.

There are still people who barely survive because of policies and practices that exclude them from a life of well-being. And some of the most vile and hateful stuff comes from people who claim to be Christian.

None of that is God's plan. There continue to be forces of evil that work against God's purpose for life and blessing for all of creation. What is God's plan is to meet us in the midst of all that's gone wrong, and however hidden it might be, continue to work to push the purpose forward...the purpose of life and blessing for all of creation.