

# *Dreams Make a Difference*

## *Providence of God Series 3*

by

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Genesis 41:14-40

<sup>14</sup>Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was hurriedly brought out of the dungeon. When he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. <sup>15</sup>And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.” <sup>16</sup>Joseph answered Pharaoh, “It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.”

<sup>17</sup>Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “In my dream I was standing on the banks of the Nile; <sup>18</sup>and seven cows, fat and sleek, came up out of the Nile and fed in the reed grass. <sup>19</sup>Then seven other cows came up after them, poor, very ugly, and thin. Never had I seen such ugly ones in all the land of Egypt. <sup>20</sup>The thin and ugly cows ate up the first seven fat cows, <sup>21</sup>but when they had eaten them no one would have known that they had done so, for they were still as ugly as

before. Then I awoke. <sup>22</sup>I fell asleep a second time and I saw in my dream seven ears of grain, full and good, growing on one stalk, <sup>23</sup>and seven ears, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprouting after them; <sup>24</sup>and the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. But when I told it to the magicians, there was no one who could explain it to me.” <sup>25</sup>Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “Pharaoh’s dreams are one and the same; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. <sup>26</sup>The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. <sup>27</sup>The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, as are the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind. They are seven years of famine. <sup>28</sup>It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. <sup>29</sup>There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. <sup>30</sup>After them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; the famine will consume the land. <sup>31</sup>The plenty will no longer be known in the land because of the famine that will follow, for it will be very grievous. <sup>32</sup>And the doubling of Pharaoh’s dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about.

<sup>33</sup>Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. <sup>34</sup>Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land, and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plenteous years. <sup>35</sup>Let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and lay up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. <sup>36</sup>That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to befall the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine.” <sup>37</sup>The proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. <sup>38</sup>Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the spirit of God?” <sup>39</sup>So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. <sup>40</sup>You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you.”

This is the third time that Joseph has moved from a desperate situation to a position of power and responsibility. The story began when his brothers threw Joseph and his favorite son status into the pit, then sold him into slavery, but he quickly rose to a position of prominence in Potiphar's house. The pattern of Joseph's fall and rise which we saw last Sunday in Potiphar's house, is repeated when he lands in prison and becomes an ideal citizen in the jailhouse. Even there he became so competent that the warden appointed him to have responsibility over the other prisoners.

It's there in prison where the Dreamer Joseph becomes the Dream Interpreter. Joseph interpreted the dreams of two fellow prisoners, the Baker and Cupbearer of Pharaoh. His interpretations are realized but when the Cupbearer is released from prison he forgets all about it, and Joseph continues to languish there. Today the story picks up two full years later when Pharaoh has a dream so vivid it begs interpretation. His Cupbearer, now back in service as the chief wine steward of Pharaoh, remembers the young Hebrew who has a special gift for interpreting dreams.

Our text finds Pharaoh summoning Joseph from prison to interpret his dreams. Once again, in the midst of circumstances far beyond his control, Joseph rises to power for the third time. And this time, the rise is steep – Joseph ascends to such great authority that in all of Egypt, no one is greater than Joseph except for Pharaoh himself. Immediately following today's passage, we read that Joseph is thirty-years-old at this time, and Pharaoh gives him an Egyptian wife, with whom he has two children. The names of his sons are derived from Hebrew verbs. The first is named Manasseh meaning *to forget*, and the second, Ephraim, *to be fruitful*.<sup>1</sup>

Joseph has forgotten his brothers' betrayal and all his hardship; and trusts that God has now made him fruitful in his position of high regard. The importance of the names signifies Joseph's present circumstance – a move from his suffering in the pit, in Potiphar's house, and in prison to his current

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen O'Connor, Genesis 25B-50, Smyth and Helwys, p. 165.

of blessedness with a wife, children, and an incredibly good job. Now, he can forget the past and what came before (or so he may think for a while). He continues into a future of fruitful blessing.

Biblical scholar Robert Alter likens Joseph's situation here to the efforts so many refugees and immigrants undertake to forget the past when they leave their homeland, displaced by traumatic suffering, for another country where their dreams might make a difference to help them escape the pain of the past in order to begin a new life. What do we call so many of them today? We call them Dreamers!

Cuban-American biblical scholar Francisco Garcia-Treto proposes that Joseph may be the first in the Bible to assume a hyphenated identity. He points out that Joseph's experience as a captive among a foreign people bears strong similarities to experiences of immigrants in the United States when he takes on what we call a *hyphenated* identity.<sup>2</sup>

In today's story he clearly becomes an Egyptian- Hebrew. As do so many people who are forced to leave their homeland, their culture, even their language to escape inexplicable violence and to survive. Think: African-American. Cuban-American. Italian immigrant. Asian-American. Haitian. Remember – the ancient people of Israel and Judah were displaced by the Babylonian exile, and over time they sacrificed a lot to find a safe and more humane life for their families. Sometimes people are forced to forsake their native identity, assuming new names, manners, language, and cultural expectations while simultaneously trying to forget the past as a means of survival. But they can never fully shake the trauma of their experience as we will come to see.

This is exactly what happened to Joseph and his story is intended to help people who have been through traumatic displacement understand their experiences and begin to heal. His experience is intended to help us see God knows no nationality. As people of faith who live in relative security and

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter and Francisco Garcia-Treto quoted by O'Connor, p. 189

prosperity – this story calls us to understanding, compassion and eagerness to serve those who come into our community as the victims of traumatic displacement.

Back in Atlanta, early in his elementary school years, our son Winston had two teachers in a row who were not a good fit for his personality and learning needs. I'll spare you the details but it felt complicated because James had had great teachers before him, and we were surprised to be in a season of parental anxiety and concern over what felt like two bad matches between our child and his teachers. So after a couple of less than ideal school years it felt like Winston won the lottery by being placed in Mrs. Vilma Clark's third grade. She not only had a keen understanding of each child's particular learning needs, she had a wonderful way of taking a diverse public school classroom and creating a beautiful community of learning.

One morning my husband Larry was there helping put together the children's artwork as a sort of collage on the door of the classroom. While he was quietly doing his thing, Mrs. Clark started the lesson for the day. It was midyear and there was a new student arriving who had just moved to Atlanta from a small town in Alabama. Mrs. Clark started the class by asking the children to close their eyes and imagine.

Then she led them through a kind of meditation: Imagine how you would feel if your family packed up everything in your house and put it in a big truck. Imagine leaving your home where you had spent your whole life, leaving all your friends and your neighbors. Imagine driving into a city like Atlanta with all those cars on the highway, when you had never been to a big city before. Just imagine walking into a new school you had never seen but all the other students already knew where everything was. Imagine what it would feel like not to know where to find the cafeteria, the library, the gym, the bathrooms, not even your classroom. Imagine being in a classroom where you had never seen anyone before, and you didn't know anyone's name and no one knew your name. How would you feel? Would you feel lost? Would you feel sad? Would you feel lonely? What would help you feel welcomed? What could someone do that would feel really kind? What would feel friendly?

And then Mrs. Clark, had the children open their eyes, and she introduced them to the new girl from Alabama. Larry, in the meantime, is working on the art project while holding back tears so Winston won't see him crying! Tears of relief at how wonderful Mrs. Vilma Clark is. Tears of compassion for that new child in the class.

So many elements of Joseph's story suggest that he goes through a process of cultural adjustment typical of today's exiles, refugees and immigrants. We all know that issues of immigration and assimilation are very complex. But as people for whom this biblical story is Holy Scripture – we should be able to close our eyes and imagine their plight, waist deep in water crossing a river with either the worldly possessions or a young child on their shoulders. We should be able to close our eyes and imagine getting off an airplane from Kabul in a big city like Philadelphia with only a dream that might make a difference.

In a few minutes, we are ordaining and installing not one, but two new classes of Elders and Deacons. These friends have already begun their terms and provided leadership and service for our church's ministries. While we have been apart from one another, it's been a challenging time to be the church, when we are accustomed to worshipping and working and serving in mission side by side. Even now, as we continue to emerge from the pandemic and our circumstances are less than ideal. But we have work to do. We have been given a dream for a brighter future and have to work toward that dream together. God's dreams for a more just, equitable, compassionate world make a difference. We are being called even during this unusual time to deepen our faith, to strengthen our discipleship, and to discern where the Spirit of God is calling us as a congregation in ministry and mission.

The story of Joseph and his dreams, the suffering he endures at the hands of others, and the presence of the Lord with him at his low points and the highs, is our story. It reminds us that all of God's people, at one point or another, are sojourners and strangers in the land, and we share those dreams of a better tomorrow because dreams make a difference.

Last weekend I participated in the Installation of my friend John Wilkinson as the pastor of Chestnut Hill Presbyterian Church. John told a story of a mutual friend of ours, Tim Hart Anderson, who serves Westminster church in Minneapolis. It's a story reminiscent of where the church is today. Twenty-some years ago Tim visited Cuba. This was during a particularly difficult time on the island, the end of the 1990s. The decade is called – *the special period* – because of the deprivation and difficulties following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. Tim's group visited the only Presbyterian camp in Cuba. It was in rough shape. Trees were downed from storms over the years, buildings collapsed, hurricane debris tossed around, no electricity or running water.

The church was holding on to the camp, in spite of the mess it was in, trusting that eventually they would find a way to repair things and see it filled again with kids, youth, and seniors. A faithful Presbyterian woman in her 80's, Xiomara, lived at the camp as its "Director." She cheerfully welcomed the group from the U.S. in the midst of the chaos of the place. She invited them to look around and see the potential and the possibilities. Tim remembers he left the group to take a walk across the grounds, carefully stepping over debris. And he came upon two trees still standing, with a wire strung between them. A hand-lettered sign was dangling from it. In Spanish it read: *There will be better times, but this is our time.*<sup>3</sup>

Friends: among the crises in the world and in our country: *There will be better times, but this is our time.* Within the personal challenges each one of us faces in this slow emergence from the pandemic *There will be better times, but this is our time.* On this day of Ordination and Installation for the church: *There will be better times, but this is our time.* That was the dream that carried Joseph through the ups and downs of his life. It just may be the very dream that God has given us to help us make a difference.

*There will be better times, but this is our time.*

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<sup>3</sup> Tim Hart Andersons story told by John Wilkinson at his Installation, Chestnut Hill Presbyterian, 9/18/21.

