

COVENANT COMMUNITY
Meta-stories in the Pentateuch

LESSON FOUR: A MANY COLORED COAT AND THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD
THE SAGA OF JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

Opening prayer

Lord, open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world around us. Grant us vision to see where your providence has been at work in the world and in our lives. Let us glimpse how we can advance your purposes today. Amen.

Navigating this lesson

What is meant by “providence”? What do we mean when we say some event was “providential”? Only because Joseph was sold into slavery was he in a position to save his family from famine. God moves in mysterious ways! This lesson does not intend to explain providence – only to celebrate the mystery of it.

Read *Genesis 37:1 – 50:26*

Focus texts: Genesis 37:2-37; Genesis 42:1-9; Deuteronomy 8:1-20;
Acts 16:6-15; Romans 8:28-31

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Some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted but getting what you have, which once you have got it you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known. – Garrison Keillor

Sara Miles runs the food pantry at Saint Gregory of Nissa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. Her life took an unexpected turn when one day she held the bread of Communion in her hand and then took it into her body. Much to the amazement of her friends she went on to be baptized. She has written several excellent small books about her spiritual journey, including Take This Bread, Jesus Freak, and City of God.

In a recent article she asks the question, “What is the most important word in the Bible?” Is it Jesus? Love? Sin? Mission? God? Mercy? She says the most important word in the Bible is “with”.

"with"

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was **with** God, and the Word was God. { *John 1:1* }

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is **with** us.” { *Matthew 1:23* }

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am **with** you always, to the end of the age. { *Matthew 28:19-20* }

We open our worship saying: “the Lord be **with** you.” We proclaim that the Word was made flesh and came to dwell **with** us. We often conclude our gatherings with the benediction: “and may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be **with** us all.”

Notice: **with**, not *for*.

Remember that distinction as we explore the Biblical meta-story of providence. God is **with** us. God accompanies us, delights in us, plays **with** us, suffers and abides **with** us. In trouble and in doubt, when everything goes perfectly and when things fall apart: God is **with** us.

The story of Joseph (*Genesis 37-50*) has been adapted as an opera and as a four-volume novel. It would make a compelling TV reality show.

Here’s the story in a nutshell:

Jacob (AKA “Israel”) is Abraham and Sarah’s grandson. He has two wives and two concubines. All told, he sires twelve sons. He has daughters, too (*Genesis 37:35*), but they don’t get named in the story. Joseph is the youngest of Jacob’s twelve sons. As the baby of the family Joseph is his elderly father’s pet. His father gives him a flamboyant coat of many colors. His brothers resent him.



[Joseph said to his brothers], “Listen to what I dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.” His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?” So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. { *Genesis 37:6-8* }

What did Joseph expect! His angry brothers conspire to kill him, but then instead they sell him to a traveling caravan of spice traders. They pour goat blood on his beautiful coat, show that to their father and say Joseph was killed by a lion. Jacob grieves.

The spice traders sell Joseph to a wealthy Egyptian named Potiphar. Slavery was prevalent throughout the Middle East at the time. Joseph works hard and proves himself worthy of responsibility. Potiphar makes Joseph (still a slave) “overseer of the house.” Joseph runs things well and Potiphar prospers.

[Shield the children’s eyes from this next part.]

Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. And after a time his master’s wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, “Lie with me.” But he refused... { *Genesis 39:6-8* }

Good for Joseph! But Potiphar’s wife is like the proverbial “woman scorned.” Again she invites Joseph to sleep with her and again he refuses. As he runs out of the house, she grabs his garment and rips it off him. She screams “Rape!,” everybody comes running. She holds up his garment as evidence and Joseph is arrested. Joseph ends up in a prison cell with two disgraced employees of the Egyptian Pharaoh. This ends the exciting first act of the Joseph “drama”, and it concludes with a significant clue – that important word: **‘with’** . . .

The chief jailor committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the Lord was **with** him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper. { *Genesis 39:22-23* }

Joseph gains a prison reputation for interpreting dreams. Prisoners come to ask what their dreams mean. In time the Pharaoh discovers he can't get along without his two disgraced employees (they were his winemaker and his baker). So he commutes their sentences and puts them back to work. Two years pass. Pharaoh has a series of disturbing dreams. Pharaoh's wizards and viziers cannot interpret them. But Pharaoh's winemaker whispers in his ear, "There's a young Hebrew in your prison who's a whiz at dream interpretation." Pharaoh thinks, "What have I got to lose?" He orders Joseph brought to him.

Pharaoh describes two disturbing dreams. In the first dream seven thin emaciated cows gobble up seven sleek and healthy cows. In the second dream seven plump ears of grain are consumed by seven blighted ears of grain. Joseph says, "It means there will be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of drought. Famine will spread across the land. But you still have time to fill your warehouses with the surplus from these seven coming years of plenty. Do that and there will be enough to feed people during the seven years of drought."

Pharaoh is impressed. His Cabinet is impressed. Pharaoh appoints Joseph Secretary of the Interior for all of Egypt, gives him a signet ring, a gold chain, a chariot and a wife. As the curtain comes down on act two Joseph is "riding high."

[Pharaoh] had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command; and they cried out in front of him, "Bow the knee!" Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt.
{ *Genesis 41:43* }

The third act in the Joseph "drama" opens on a sorrowful scene. Famine has spread across Egypt and all the surrounding lands. Only in Egypt are warehouses stocked with food.

Moreover, all the world came to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout the world.

{ *Genesis 41:57* }

Ten miserable beggars appear before Joseph who is doling out food to people from “all the world.” When he sees the beggars Joseph flees the room and weeps. The ten miserable beggars are his brothers! Only young Benjamin has been left behind as a comfort to their aged father, Jacob.

The ten brothers do not recognize Joseph in his Egyptian finery and Joseph does not reveal his identity. He speaks Egyptian to them and accuses them of being spies. He binds Simeon as a hostage, gives the others enough grain to see them home (along with money hidden in the sacks of grain), and orders them to come back bringing their younger brother.

Jacob gathers up all the spices and balms the family owns; he collects all the money they have and he releases Benjamin hoping against hope that the mighty Egyptian will spare the young man. The brothers, this time including Benjamin, return to Egypt.

Joseph is beset with conflicting emotions. He cruelly sets up his brothers to be accused of thievery. They grovel and Joseph toys with them. It is an ugly ugly moment . . . but finally Joseph cannot sustain it. He sends his Egyptian assistants away and he reveals himself to his brothers.

The drama could end there, with the twelve brothers weeping and laughing and hugging. But it does not end there because it is part of a larger story, a meta-story, the story of God’s **providence**. Joseph sends the brothers back to Canaan **again** – this time to bring their father. This is an important link in the meta-story of **providence**, because it explains how the Israelites all ended up in Egypt – where the next “book” in the Pentateuch (*Exodus*) begins.

The word “**providence**” appears only once in the entire Bible (*Acts 24:2*). Nevertheless it is one of the Bible’s great meta-stories.

The dictionary gives “providence” two definitions:

- *a looking to, or preparation for, the future*
- *the care or benevolent guidance of God or nature.*

For our purposes we can combine the definitions: **providence** means God’s benevolent preparation for the future.

Abraham Lincoln emerged from the distressing years of the Civil War “with the sense that Providence had taken control of his life, that he was a small instrument in a transcendent task.” (David Brooks, The Road to Character, 2014).

It was **providential** that Joseph was in a position of power in Egypt, or the family would have perished in the famine. The twelve tribes sired by the twelve brothers became the nation (Israel) that would become the womb for Jesus.

The evangelist St. Paul wanted to take the Gospel of Christ’s resurrection to Asia, but he was “forbidden by the Holy Spirit.” He finally ends up in Macedonia which was not on his itinerary at all. It was second best. “Plan B”.



On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. { Acts 16:13-14 }

Lydia and her household were converted and baptized that day – by Paul who wished he were somewhere else. Lydia was a successful business woman - a dealer in purple cloth – and she was able to provide leadership and hospitality, shaping one of the most influential churches in early Christendom. C.S. Lewis reminds us: “God can use even the wrong road to get you to the right place.”

The only “right place” is deeper into the heart of God. Good lives are not defined by how many accomplishments get checked off our personal “to do” list, but by how well we handle life’s “second-bests.” Paul might have lamented his failure to reach Asia. Instead he responded to Lydia who was right in front of him. Lydia was “second best” to Paul, but not to God. Paul’s meeting with Lydia was **providential**.

Jane Kenyon was a respected American poet. She struggled with severe bipolar disorder. After several years battling a rare form of leukemia, she died at the age of 48. That was not the life she would have chosen, but with the verbal economy of a great poet, she offered this advice: “Trust God and be where you are.”

The only church in the small town where I grew up was a Methodist Church. My Dad would have preferred to be a Presbyterian but that meant driving seven miles to another town. So we were Methodist. My college chaplain thought Methodists, with their great inclusiveness, were rather sloppy in their theological thinking, so I resolved to switch to Presbyterian when I got to seminary. Presbyterians were known for their rigorous theology.

Seminary students were expected to fulfill a year of “field work,” putting in several hours a week (usually leading the youth group) at one of the local churches. I set up interviews at a Presbyterian church in Berkeley and a Methodist church in Oakland. Carol and I set out on a Sunday morning to attend worship at the Presbyterian Church where I would later be interviewed for a student field work position. We were running late and had trouble locating a parking space. Finally we found the small church and a parking space quite near it. I parked and we dashed inside. About 15 minutes into the service I realized we were in an Episcopalian church!

So I missed the Presbyterian interview entirely, showed up for the Methodist interview on Monday morning, accepted that position, found myself working in a neighborhood bursting with African American youth and a church building that included a gymnasium. Here was my “Lydia”. I was eventually asked to become pastor of that church and I spent my 20s with a congregation who shaped me at least as much as I shaped them. And after more than 40 years as a Methodist pastor here I am in a church that doesn’t care if you are Methodist or Presbyterian!

Did God fill up those Sunday morning parking places so I wouldn’t be able to find the Presbyterian Church? No! God doesn’t work that way. Nevertheless, I can say it was **providential** that I stayed within the United Methodist Church where I found a congenial spiritual home and plentiful opportunities to serve. I’m hard-wired for Methodism. Every congregation I served has taught me significant lessons. And I was privileged to share important moments with them. That led to 40 years on Plan B, a different path from the one I thought I had chosen.

God owns all the roads. God can use even the wrong road to get you to the right place. Cancer is not “God’s will” for you – but God owns that road too. Divorce and widowhood are not “God’s will” for you – but God owns those roads also. Unemployment, poverty, fractious family life, these are not “God’s will” for us, but God owns these roads as well.

Our calling, our vocation, the only “right road” for us is one leading deeper into the heart of God. The religious term for this is *surrender*. That sounds like giving up, but in the religious sense “surrender” does not mean “giving up.” It means knowing that God is real and that God is **with** us. It means allowing God to make use of our lives on whatever road we travel, glorifying and trusting God wherever we are, being there for every Lydia along the way.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? { *Romans 8:28-31* }

Only at the end will we discover how God was for us. But we can be assured, at all time and in all places, God is **with** us.

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SOME QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION
AND FOR REFLECTION, PONDERING, CONVERSATION

Can you identify moments when providence was at work in your life?

How do we discern “God’s benevolent preparation for the future” today?

Can Federated Church or Federated Church Women be more intentional about playing a part in God’s benevolent preparation for the future? How?

How does luck differ from providence?