

Genesis 39: 1-6, 9, 19-23  
“Who’s Back There?”  
September 6, 2020  
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### **Title Slide**

The text I’ll focus on this morning comes from Genesis 39...lean in & listen attentively...

### **Scripture Slides - Genesis 39:1-6, 9, 19-23**

### **Title Slide**

#### **Let us Pray:**

Come, O Holy Spirit, come.  
Come as the fire and burn,  
Come as the wind and cleanse,  
Come as the light and reveal,  
Convict us, Convert us, Consecrate us...until we are wholly thine.

And now, Lord, my prayer is simply this:  
That the words of my mouth  
And the words of all our hearts will be found pleasing and acceptable to you,  
for you are our rock and our redeemer...Amen.

### **Slide - Theater Stage**

#### **Sermon**

If you’ve ever been to the theater, then you know many parts weave together to form the whole story – by this, I mean, the whole drama – what happens in front of the audience is supported – held up – by goes on behind the curtain.

What occurs onstage is made believable by what goes on backstage.  
The ring of a doorbell – the spotlight on a character’s monologue *happen* because someone behind the scenes & who knows the script, stands at the ready to make sure the “supporting” elements will happen that help to make the story believable.

The person who stands on stage, between the audience and the curtain, must trust in the one behind the scene to do their part.

The more the person in front of the audience trusts the one behind the scene to do their job – the more real the story becomes.

### **Title Slide**

This morning's text from Genesis 39 works in a similar way. What we see in front of our eyes is supported by the One behind the scenes. Genesis 39 is Joseph's story – just after his brothers has sold him into slavery.

Of interest in this morning's text – in fact throughout all of Chapter 39 – God is nowhere seen as overtly in front of the audience. Rather, God and God's presence – though noted to be with Joseph – is neither localized geographically – neither is it dramatic or spectacular; God's presence is unobtrusive; God is at work behind-the-scenes – empowering the story to be made real.

Joseph is never reported as saying or believing God is in the mess he finds himself nor does Joseph ever blame God for putting him in this situation. Joseph most likely has some sense – some shred of faith – that God is at work in this situation – and God is probably active in a way that for the time being only God might know.

Genesis 39 also never offers evidence sin-generated events – such as those happening in Joseph's life right now – are the direct will of God. Joseph tells Potiphar's wife in verse 9 – sin is “against God” – hence contrary to the Divine will.

I think it's important to note here something about God – God realizes that God *does not always get God's way in this world*.

The Divine presence in this world and in our lives **does not** indicate “preventive medicine” or “quick fixes” for whatever may befall a person of faith.

Life's reality with regard to “quick fix” mindsets – is that – and perhaps more than we care to admit – when we want “quick fix” it is for situations we've spent a life time living into. Something which does not happen overnight will not go away overnight.

This morning's text, however, **does hold** an implication as to how God works in the world: not in overwhelming power, rather *in and through* the ambiguities and complexities of life.

As people of faith, we put our faith into practice when we stand on the stage of life and believe – trust – or at the very least hope – that God is at work *in and through* the ambiguities and complexities of our lives – in relationships – in circumstances – ...whether we see God or not – we have faith – we have hope –

Or, as I like to think, **we have to have faith** that God is with us – even if *behind-the-scenes* – otherwise life can become unbearable.

Joseph's response to his circumstance has a way of saying to the reader that he has come to terms that even when one believes in God – sometimes *bad things happen to good people*.

- The doctor calls and life detours down a road we would never choose to go down.

- A senseless tragedy hits us like a sucker punch in the stomach and we find ourselves living into each day as though we are caught between two realities – not quite asleep though not quite awake either – continually asking, “Is this really happening?”
- We find ourselves visiting the depth of our loneliness as we realize the companionship of our beloveds are no longer present anymore – whether it be the result of death; distance or some other factor.
- We find ourselves talking with aging parents about long-term care and living wills.

We begin to question God’s presence – God’s plan – God’s purpose.  
We may find ourselves asking “Why?”

I wonder sometimes though, if a more adequate question is, “What?” – What can God do with such a tragedy?

Having just said that, please do not misunderstand me, I am not discounting the **why** question in favor of the **what** question – both are important – I am just wondering...

Perhaps, Martin Luther can help us out.

#### Slide – Luther Quote

Luther once said, “God can ride a lame horse or shoot straight with a crooked bow.”<sup>1</sup>

As faithful, better yet, as faith-focused people, we do not believe that we have an answer to life’s tragedies.

Rather, we have a God who enters the story – who enters the tragedy – who stands with us (even if with us seems like *behind-the-scenes*) God stands with us and makes a way through.

We may not always come up with a reason or answer for life’s hurt – though through faith we can cling to one who is with us.

#### Title Slide

Joseph found himself in service to Potiphar – captain of the guard, an officer of Pharaoh – he also finds himself in isolation – away from family and friends – he finds himself to slightly change the words from the title song to the 1980 sitcom *Cheers* “making his way in the world today [and realizing it] takes everything he’s got.”

Joseph also has something else helping him to *make his way* – God’s presence with him. Though it’s something more than **just a** presence, rather it is the **very being** of God who acts in these events that enables Joseph to make it through.

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<sup>1</sup> The Luther quote is lifted from William H. Willimon “Quad Quotes” in the July-August 1999, p. 56 of Duke Magazine.

Presence is one thing – the nature and effect of that presence are another.  
Faith is not just about **how** God reveals God's self – Faith is also about **who** God is.

#### Slide – Genesis 39:21

This God who is with Joseph – is also revealed in Genesis 39:21 as the God who shows steadfast love – even in the midst of tough circumstances – God's steadfast love was available to Joseph.

In the Old Testament Hebrew the word is *hesed* – and there is sense to this word that it describes the indescribable; it defines the un-definable –  
It's like having a feeling though knowing it's more than a feeling.  
What we might call a "gut feeling" – something we just know to be true.

There is also a sense which underlies the word that one realizes it is *unmerited, undeserved, even un-earnable*.

This facet of *Hesed* in Hebrew thought – is the equivalent of *grace* to our New Testament way of thinking.

Put simply *Hesed* is **a** if not **the** defining characteristic of God in the Old Testament.

*Hesed* is the key to opening the mysterious door to understanding **who** God really is.

God's *Hesed* – and God's *grace* – are God's way of deeply loving us – in and through the ambiguity and complexity of life.

God's *Hesed* – God's *grace* – is also God's answer as to how; we too, can deeply love those around us – in and through the ambiguity and complexity of life.

Joseph was able to serve the way he did and live the kind of life he lived because of God's presence and God's steadfast love at work in his life.

We too can love deeply because of God's steadfast love at work in our lives – keeping in mind that loving deeply might mean we will take a few bumps and bruises along the way.

Internationally renowned priest, respected professor and prolific author, Henri Nouwen (*pronounced Now-win*), wrote the following in his book *The Inner Voice of Love*,<sup>2</sup> published the year he died,

#### Slide – Nouwen Quote 1

"Do not hesitate to love and to love deeply...you might be afraid of the pain deep love can cause. When those you love deeply reject you, leave you or die, your heart will be broken...that should not hold you back from loving deeply.

The pain that comes from deep love makes your love ever more fruitful. It is like a plow that breaks the ground to allow the seed to take root and grow into a strong plant.

Every time you experience the pain of rejection, absence or death, you are faced with a choice...

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<sup>2</sup> New York: Doubleday Press, 1996.

### Slide – Nowen Quote 2

You can decide not to love again, or you can stand straight in your pain and let the soil on which you stand become richer and more able to give life to new seeds.”

**[to new growth – I would say.]**

Thus, even in those places of our lives where the pain of rejection, absence and death have taken up residence – even those places can become over time **and** through God’s grace & steadfast love – even those places can become places where new life begins growing.

### Title Slide

The reality of faith is that as we allow ourselves to be loved deeply by God – A God who knows what it is and what it means to have a broken heart –

...as we allow ourselves to trust that while we may not see God overtly in what we are going through God is still very present – God may be *behind-the-scenes* – God however, is still there.

As our faith focuses on the God who is at work in our lives – the God who is loving us deeply – the God whose very presence **and being** is at work within our life circumstance – as we allow ourselves to trust in this God – Joseph’s God **and** our God – we too will see and given time, one day rejoice – as we bear witness to new life growing out of old hurts.

As our lives unfold, may we rely on & lean into the God whose steadfast love and grace are present in our lives...even when we cannot see them because our focus is on what is in front of us while our back is to the curtain.

In times such as these, perhaps we might adapt the words spoken by The Great Wizard of Oz to recall that in times such as these, we would do well to pay attention to the [One] who is behind the curtain.

Amen & Amen.