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## Suppose She's Telling the Truth

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Genesis 39:1-23

*[Joseph and Potiphar's Wife]*

**39** Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. <sup>2</sup> The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. <sup>3</sup> His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. <sup>4</sup> So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. <sup>5</sup> From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. <sup>6</sup> So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge; and, with him there, he had no concern for anything but the food that he ate.

Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. <sup>7</sup> And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." <sup>8</sup> But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. <sup>9</sup> He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" <sup>10</sup> And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her. <sup>11</sup> One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house, <sup>12</sup> she caught hold of his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside. <sup>13</sup> When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, <sup>14</sup> she called out to the members of her household and said to them, "See, my husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice; <sup>15</sup> and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside." <sup>16</sup> Then she kept his garment by her until his master came home, <sup>17</sup> and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant,

*whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me;<sup>18</sup> but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside.”*

*<sup>19</sup> When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, “This is the way your servant treated me,” he became enraged. <sup>20</sup> And Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison. <sup>21</sup> But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. <sup>22</sup> The chief jailer 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. <sup>23</sup> 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.*

To this text, I've three questions: What if Potiphar is a **good** guy? What if we remember what we know about how history gets written? What about Jesus' example regarding where to stand when it comes to justice?

From the text, I've two conclusions: The only truth I will ever know for sure is my own; likewise you and your truth. Forgiveness is not the same as justice; and justice matters, too.

Let's pray: *“Open our eyes and ears that we may see and hear the truth, O God,” may be the hardest prayer of all to pray, O God. For fear of all the truth might show and tell us about our own lives. For the wrongness of our thinking and believing. For the depth of our need to feel safe inside that thinking. Give us courage for praying and then for receiving what we've prayed for, trusting you are with us in the light as well as in the dark. Amen.*

In my own defense, and for the record, this sermon is no Saturday night special. I picked this text months ago, having no idea it would be all over the news this week – an allegation of sexual assault in the highest realms of government. I could have gone with the Matthew text, but it is hardly easier. *“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely.”* Both demand faithfulness in a world full of liars. And if only that were the only problem! The greater problem lies in that the world rewards NOT whoever tells the truth but whoever lies the best.

To refresh your memory on Joseph: he's the second youngest of Jacob's twelve sons – the brat, remember. The one Jacob loved the most. The one Jacob went and had a special coat made for. The brother who dreamed that he was king and all his brothers bowed down to him like slaves. He loved to tell them about his dreams. So they decided to kill him and take his pretty coat. But at the last minute they got the chance to sell him to slave traders. So they dipped the coat in goat's blood and took it to their father as proof that Joseph was dead. The traders carried 17-year-old Joseph to Egypt and sold him to an official in Pharaoh's cabinet, a man named Potiphar.

By conventional interpretation, Joseph can do no wrong. I still think he's a brat – maybe because I had a baby brother. “Prince Tony” we called him. Only boy. First boy on my dad's whole side of the family. Our only boy cousin was also the youngest after three girls. Both those boys hung the stars and the moon, in our grandpa's eyes. If he'd told us dreams like Joseph did, we'd have beaten him up daily. And he would have deserved it.

Brat or prince – there's no rule that says he can't be both! Joseph serves a purpose in the larger narrative. He gets the Hebrews into Egypt, so they can get out again, 400 and some years later. Israel isn't Israel without the Exodus. Without Passover. Without the story of how God is with us and we are chosen – even without the Promised Land. How the covenant is still covenant even without the guarantee of place. How covenant is written not onto stone but upon the human heart. Joseph's purpose persists, however faulty his delivery of it at times.

Potiphar's wife is an episode like so many in a typical hero narrative. Overcoming hurdles and hardships as proof of his unyielding faith in his purpose. In Joseph's case, the purpose is God. In that rendering the woman is the antagonist – the hurdle, if you will. The temptation to be overcome in order to prove faith once again. Joseph passes the test, with flying colors, even. And we can all relax. The truth as we've heard it and known it stays perfectly in place. At least until someone comes along years later and says, “Wait, you don't know the whole story about that guy.”

Getting folks worked up over something that “wasn't even a problem” before. How many times, back in Arkansas in the 80's and 90's, did I hear it said at family gatherings, “*We didn't have no race relation problems till that Dr. King started stirring things up.*” Preachers! They are the troublemakers. Believe me, I don't disagree. In that case, read the story and pretend you're not at church. Does anything at all seem just a little off? Is there anything that doesn't sit quite right?

I have SO many questions – three of which I'm posing here. First: *what if Potiphar was a good guy?* What suggests he might have been? He believes his wife. He believes her, and he takes immediate steps to protect her. Maybe she's lying. But he assumes she's telling the truth. He acts like a good husband BEFORE he acts as a good servant of Pharaoh. Working for Pharaoh is not the same as working for Michael McRobbie. All Dr. McRobbie can do is fire you. Pharaoh can KILL you. That Potiphar believes her may or may not mean anything about her character, but it means something about his. He may be Egyptian – the *enemy* in the narrative – but we cannot dismiss him as without values, values that we share. He loves his family and takes risks to protect it.

The second question: *what do we know about how history gets written?* It is written by people deeply invested in how history gets remembered. American history written by white Americans looks very different from American history written by Native Americans. Why? Because they are very different stories. The same war in our history goes by two very different names: “The Civil War” and “The War of Northern Aggression.”

Even battles fought at the same place have different names. Antietam – or what? The Battle of Sharpsburg, fought in 1862 in Sharpsburg, Maryland.

The only account we have of Potiphar's wife and Joseph is whose? The people dedicated to the hero narrative of Joseph. The same people who found it possible to bless rascals like Jacob, and David, and so many others. And remembering how history gets written, I can't help but wonder for a moment, *how might Potiphar's wife have told it?* We don't even get to know her name. But just suppose, just for minute, that when she told her husband what happened to her, just suppose she was telling the truth.

Christendom doesn't hang on the answer. We are just walking around inside the text for a minute. I know it feels itchy. But it's okay. It's not a sin to ask questions of the Scripture just because we haven't asked them before. The strongest evidence to me is what I've said already: her husband believed her. He believed her at great risk to himself. Secondly, if she's telling the truth, the story that was concocted and that survived is the same cover story for sexual misconduct that is almost always told: *"It was the woman's fault. She seduced me."* Friends, I've heard a nine-year-old be blamed. A nine-year-old!

Be they teachers and students, bosses and employees, doctors and nurses, pastors and congregants, pastors and staff, the details vary but rarely the plot. When it comes to sex, women are a threat and men are weak. It's not true in either case, but it is still the plot we believe most readily. The plot with which we feel safest. Not Potiphar obviously, just everyone else.

The third bit of evidence: Joseph's own telling. Listen to his own words in verses 8-9, refuting her seduction: *"my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"* Joseph appears to believe that Potiphar is his equal; the man who bought him from slave traders is his equal. It rings of his bragging about his brothers bowing down and foreshadows the torture he will put them through later. *He is not greater in this house than I am.* Yes, Joseph, he is! A fact made most plain when Potiphar threw him in prison once his wife told her side of the story.

But Joseph apparently goes about his business believing this is his house and his staff to do with as he pleases. With one exception. *He is not greater in this house than I am **nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself.*** Now, I could be reading stuff into the text at this point, but it sounds to me like he's thought about it. ***I can have anything in this house I want except you.*** Does that ring of anything else you recall from Genesis? *We can eat off all the trees in this garden except this one.*

Her husband believes her. The cover story isn't even original. Joseph appears to have considered it. Is that enough evidence to prove she's telling the truth? No. Is it enough

to make me doubt him? Absolutely. And enough to remind me that any history has more than one side that must be heard if the truth is to be known.

The last question the text brings to me this morning: *what about Jesus' example when it comes to justice; in particular, with whom are we called to stand?* The New Testament list includes, but is not limited to: the poor, the grieving, the hungry, the thirsty, the widow, the orphan, the refugee, the prisoner, the abused, the oppressed, the marginalized, the enslaved. In a word, *the powerless*. In any given contest, the followers of Jesus join the weakest team. Not because we intend to win; not because we insist on being right; but because we choose to imitate the Christ, and weakness was the path he chose – humiliation before the powers of this world.

In his contest, Jesus's opponents and his friends were liars, every single one of them, from the Temple to the Praetorium. And he did not correct them. He let them lie their pants off and never said a word. Because – and this is what holds my own heart fast – no lie lives forever. Jesus said over and over again, *My time has not yet come*. And when his time finally came, he said all he had to say in rising from the grave.

His rising says that every lie and every death ever buried in the past will not stay there forever! *You shall know the truth*, Jesus told this world, *and the truth will set you free*. Each and every one of you. If not in this world, well then, in the next.

Which brings me to my two conclusions. They are brief. One: this side of heaven, the only truth that I will ever know for sure is my own, and I can make peace with that or not. I know what I have done, and I know what's been done to me. It's mine to tell or mine to keep, as I choose. Others have their side to tell, and people will believe whatever they choose to believe. The same for you and yours. This side of heaven you may be the only person to believe what you know is true – what you have done, what has been done to you. And it is up to you to make peace with that. Maybe someone stole your childhood. Maybe someone stole your trust. But they cannot steal your peace, because your peace was never in them anyway. Our peace is in Christ alone.

Conclusion number two: whatever stories your past contains – stories of being mistreated, stories of mistreating others – God has already forgiven you. That is the gospel truth. There is freedom in God's grace. And in that freedom there is courage. And because of that courage there can be justice. Because forgiveness is not the same as justice, and justice matters too. And without justice, this side of heaven, we cannot begin to taste the peace God means for us to have.

It's not a *buttoned-up, let's-pretend-everything's-okay*, nervous, anxious peace that falls apart, depending on what's on the news, but rather peace that is deep and abiding, that draws in everything I've ever done and has been done to me. And it all sits sweetly in one place, without condemnation, shame or fear. Just peace. And we deserve to be at peace. God means for us to be at peace. For our own joy this side of heaven, and so we

can bring that peace to others. The hard part: peace lives on the other side of truth. Truth desired. Truth confronted. Truth told and listened to and heard.

God is bigger, stronger, and more merciful than any lie any human ever told. Than any secret any human ever kept. Either what you did or what was done to you. We can tell the Lord. And the Lord will help us make it right. Will you pray with me?

*That we don't have to live the way this world lives, O God, we are grateful. That our lives not be a constant balance of secrets and lies, O God, for the courage to be different, to trust you and one another with the truth, we pray. And for the faith and focus it takes in this world right now, O God, to use our privilege to stand with the most powerless among us, for this we pray. Amen.*