

# Sermon Text for March 16, 2025

By Guest Minister Rev. Dr. Michael Wilson

## Sermon: “Is This What You Imagined?: Or How’s Your Life Going?”

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**March 16: Second Sunday in Lent**

First Scripture: Genesis 41: 9-16

Second Scripture: Matthew 20: 1-16

Life rarely has the trajectory that we imagine. Maybe you imagine (or imagined) fun in school, good grades (hopefully along with easy schoolwork!), a beautiful wedding, kids, living close to family, nice holiday meals, meaningful work, good pay, stable employment, Social Security checks that arrive on time. We imagine that if eat right we will live longer. We imagine that if we parent well, our kids will turn out fine. And it works. Sometimes. Actually, I think it is accurate it to say that much of it works a decent amount of the time. In general, it is better to have an apple than, say, a bag of UTZ BBQ potato chips. Overall, delaying gratification opens up more and better choices in the future. If you ask me, I’ll always recommend education. I think it prepares people for a better future. But none of it works all of the time. And if you are imagining “all of it all of the time,” well, you are in trouble. And here, I think, is the secret truth of most of our hearts – we imagine that it is going to work out more of the time than it does. This morning we are going to hear a part of the life of Joseph – and if you don’t know that bigger story, I’ll tell us more. His life is not what he imagined. Then we are going to hear a parable about The Kingdom of God – which is not what they imagine! In the middle of we imagine colliding with what actually happens in our lives, though, is the best news in the universe – it is the gospel. It is where God is at work. When life is not what you imagined, it is not the end. It where God shapes you for good, for your own flourishing, and for the flourishing of the world.

Genesis....

Joseph begins life as the favored (and pampered) son with only opportunity ahead of him. There is so much for him to imagine. Here he is trapped in prison with no way out. Not what he imagined. Life is fragile. The world is fragile. The natural world for sure – with its hurricanes and its fires in LA and its droughts in the Sudan. Those fragilities often expose the physical fragility of our lives. There is also the fragility of species nearing extinction and ecosystems that hang in the balance. But particularly fragile is not just the external natural world – it is the world that we construct. The expectations we lay on ourselves. And our children. And our parents. And God. It is what we imagine. The things in life like a certain standard of living or certain amount of stability to which we think we are entitled. Those worlds are fragile. They burst in the amount of time it takes to get a cancer diagnosis or be on the receiving end of a reduction in force. Those are fragile worlds. But you are not. Or at least you need not be. Mostly, I believe that you need not as fragile as you might think you are. How do we know this? The cross of Jesus Christ. Where nails, pain, and death itself are not enough to destroy. And then there is Joseph and this parable – an extraordinary story and an extraordinary parable – where the most important thing that we learn has to do with the character of God.

Matthew

Prayer.

My God Is So Big

My God is so big, so strong and so mighty  
There's nothing my God cannot do  
My God is so big, so strong and so mighty  
There's nothing my God cannot do  
The mountains are his  
The rivers are his  
The skies are his handy works too  
My God is so great, so strong and so mighty  
There's nothing my God cannot do  
There's nothing my God cannot do

There's nothing my God cannot do  
For you

First – great job – Thank you, kids. Thank you, Jonathan. Good job yourself

Second –

Some people might say...

So think about Joseph in prison. Or those people who have worked all day – and then get told everyone gets the same amount...

Or perhaps your own life at some point –

“If God really in charge of things, he must really be inept! Or unskilled. Of, if God is in charge of everything – is he mean? “

Because Look at my life: of all things are happening, at all disappointments. If God in charge of things, he must be incompetent!

Now this passage of Matthew – did you get that. People in the middle without work – what is going on? People at the end who worked all day – What is going on?

This part of the book of Genesis, is probably the very best place anywhere in the Bible that addresses directly that thought: "Why are these things happening to me?" What is going on and where, God, are you in the midst of it?"

When Joseph was a young man, a 17 years old here. Let's look at what's happened to him. Look at where he is going. We see in chapter 37: verse 2 it says, “He brought their father a bad report about them”. And commentators tell you that the word “bad report” - this Hebrew word for bad report - is a word always means a “false report”, a lie, or at least a misrepresentation of some kind. Here you have a kid that is turned into a liar. Tattler at best, probably a liar.

But even more than that was these dreams. Look, the first time he tells his brother the dream - and it's pretty obvious the meaning of the dream - his

brothers are furious, as “they hated him!” So he gets another dream, and what did he do? He went right back. And what is that mean? He tells it to them again! It means that he at the very least is pathologically insensitive to the impact of his own behavior on the other people. But the very worst is he's becoming an evil person. He's becoming an arrogant person. He's becoming a cruel person. And you see Jacob himself - and the Jacob you should remember as someone who adores Joseph - Jacob had to “rebuke him” (it's a very strong word). And what it means is that Joseph's way (in which he was telling people these dreams) must have been incredibly hubristic, incredibly arrogant, and incredibly overweening, that even his father, even Jacob had to call him out.

So that's Joseph's life: He was on a path to becoming a schoolyard bully. He was spoiled, selfish, insensitive, arrogant, shallow, maybe even evil person. And then the brothers. Hebrew narrative is pretty spare. It doesn't say things unnecessarily, doesn't give unnecessary details. But three times (verse 4, 5, 8) – what it says: “Hate!” “Hate” is growing in them. It's like this lava underneath this family. It's going to blow the top off their lives, and the whole family. So, what do we see? Underneath what looks like a really nice, big, prosperous family: hidden brokenness, hidden depth of brokenness and sins that are going to destroy the family, if somebody doesn't deal with them.

Genesis is not a book of principles or a book series of statements about God or life. It is a story. And if you are willing to make the connections between this story and your story – it can be your story.

Because for many of our lives – the surface – can look great. We smile at one another. We present a good front. But underneath – Hurt. Failure. Broken Relationship. Arrogance. Anger.

So start there. Here's what I find – most people have a hard time telling the truth – about their own past. About our own hurt and pride and anger – and how that has either threatened or actually really hurt our own life and the lives of others. But here we are.

It helps when other people tell their stories. We don't feel so alone – or so ashamed. And here it is right in the pages of the Bible. If you and I don't tell the

truth about our brokenness – I don't think we can ever move towards the healing and transformation that we so desperately need.

So know this - particularly about Joseph. Also about others around us. Joseph has a chance, early in life, to tell about someone else – he takes it. Probably twists it to make himself look good and the others bad. And, two, this chance to interpret dreams. Let's call that a life skill of his. Different people are good at different things. I've seen some of you produce things with your hands – Pastor Bob's office – oh, someone made that. Amazing! But let's just say that this is something that Joseph is good at. There are depths to go with that dreams – but I can't go everywhere and I'm not going those places today. Joseph – like you – skilled. And with some significant character flaws. If we are willing to tell the truth – that is every single person here. Skilled. And flawed.

Fast forward to our chapter.

Joseph is in prison. For something he did not do. If you know this story – he has translated some more dreams, for two people. With that he got a promise – a promise that the person he helped would remember him and help him. Which did not happen.

Here is a man who twists the truth and who is unbelievably conceited. He ends up in prison. The truth has been twisted on him – more than once.

Let me suggest to you that the normal course for a person like that – would be to, as quickly as possible, extract revenge.

So – what happens – he gets called before Pharaoh. He uses his gifts. He doesn't shy away from it – this is interesting. He has been burned the other two times. The first time he uses it arrogantly and he gets thrown in a pit. The second he uses it helpfully and he gets left in a dungeon. But he does it again.

Lots of people. Quite frankly, lots of you – gifted people. But burned by life or others. Started to think that they don't have things to give to the world or the church. No, No, not me, I'm only... I don't buy it for a second.

So he brings forth his gift – but he doesn't reference himself. He doesn't twist it at all so that it looks bad for the person who abandoned him. OR good for himself.

So – how does that happen?

From arrogant to humble.

From insecure – because that is the underside of arrogance – to strong.

From trying to put other people down to making sure that he is doing what is best for everyone?

How does this happen?

Two things –

The hidden grace of God – what God is up to – in this story and in our lives.

The expansive character of God – notice what Joseph says – I cannot interpret your dream. But God can. Somewhere along the way – God started to make a difference in Joseph's life.

Matthew – we are in the gospel of righteousness – how do we become right with God?

Last week – first shall be last. This story – people are waiting, using their gifts. Or not. Waiting, waiting, waiting. Can you hear their frustration? Your own frustration.

Then at the end, other group of people – jealous!

Discover two things:

Expansive character of God! – God invites, uses all, and rewards all. It isn't some quid pro quo

Hidden grace of God – at work in all of their lives. Putting to work those who thought that they were worthless. And humbling those who thought they (we) have it all together.

Hidden grace of God – this is the direct answer to the question of what God is up to in your life.

From Tim Keller

The Bible is not mainly tried to show you how to live a good life. Frankly if it was, why would we be reading these stories? Now of course negatively (by way of negation) you can find some pretty good ways not to raise children in Genesis; and therefore you can find some ways (by inference) how to raise children. But do you think that the author of Genesis wrote it down so we can know how to raise our children better? No. I've had business owners say to me – you know, if you run a business the same way as this parable, you go out of business and don't help anyone. And I say – yes. But that's not the purpose. This isn't a business course.

The Bible's purpose is not so much to show you how to live good lives or even the life you imagine. The Bible's purpose is to show you how grace - God's grace - breaks into our lives, often against our will, and saves us from the sin and brokenness otherwise we would never be able to overcome. The purpose of these Bible stories is not so much to show you how to live a good life. The purpose of the stories in the Bible - every page - is to show you how God's grace breaks into your life against your will, and rescues you from the sins and brokenness, which you would never see, would never be able to overcome. That's what you see on every page of the Bible.

Can I say something to you briefly about the role of suffering? It seems to me that it can do two things. It can make people bitter. I mean, really hard things happen. And our hearts shrivel up and we say – I'm not going to care. I'm not going to trust.

Or it can bust us wide up – where we start to care and we become aware of others and care about them. The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

And same thing about success – can do two things – make people shrivel up and think “I'm amazing.” Or it can make people grateful and expansive and say – wow I'd love for others to get the kind of support I got.

We can become these wonderful, empathetic people who can point others who are suffering or succeeding to God's grace and love.

I actually think the choice is yours. Bitter or better.

Hidden role of grace in your life – even in the most difficult of circumstances.

And the fact of matter is, if an angel shows up and tells you about your faults, it won't work. Nobody ever learned about their faults by being told, they have to be shown. Life has to show you. And I want you to know that nobody actually learns that "God loves you" by being told. They have to be shown.

Parents and lectures – how many lectures do we give? And did we get? How did that go? You know what we remember? Being lectured and being irritated.

I believe that is the, often hidden, purpose and grace of God in our lives.

Which leads to this robust understanding of God's character.

My God is so Big, so strong and so mighty, there's nothing my God cannot do... boys love when they get to be mighty. But what I love is their faces. When they sing about how big God is.

Immature vision of God's bigness – how much God can do for me

Mature vision of God's bigness – God's ways are beyond my ways. God's purposes are beyond me. And God's glory, not my own – that is what is most important.

That image of God – not healthy!

Here is our ultimate vision of God—Jesus who bears a cross. We have a savior who suffers. Who was in a prison far worse than the one Joseph was in.

When suffering hits you, you will always get back in touch with the subliminal deep profound sense - that every human being has - and that is "I really deserve some punishment for the way in which I've lived". No human being can get rid of that. I don't care how much therapy you go to. It's there. It's cosmic. It is part of "the image of God", part of who you are as human being. And when suffering comes, you will lose any sense of God's love unless you see: here is The One who lost the Father's coat, so you can be assured that you have it. Here is The One who lost the Father's love, paying our penalty so we could know - in spite of our imperfect life - God loves us. When I ask God to accept me because of what Jesus has done, I get the coat. I know He loves me. And if you know that, that means if right now today you're in the pit and you're crying out in dereliction, you cry out "Why I'm complete alone?" You're



not. Because Christianity is the only religion that even claims that God has suffered, that God has gone into that pit. That God is there. God has also gone in there in the dark besides you. He knows what it's like! He's suffered with you. God suffered for you! He did! So you're not alone. You can know, even in the midst of your suffering, that He loves you. And that's what you actually need.

That's what Joseph discovers in the dungeon. God doesn't get mentioned until Josephs gets to Egypt. Interesting. People don't discover God when things are good for them. Doesn't mean that God doesn't work in them.