

I have a hard time with Joseph's story. It was my bright idea – in a moment of sheer weakness – to suggest that we spend 4 weeks this month talking about Joseph. I have no idea what I was thinking. I really, really have a hard time with Joseph. What's my problem with Joseph's story? I cannot hear the story of Joseph without hearing the Andrew Lloyd Webber, Tim Rice musical. As far as I'm concerned, the story of Joseph is only told correctly when it is sung – as in full-scale West End musical where Pharaoh sounds like Elvis, Joseph is Donny Osmond, and there's an amazing Technicolor dream coat. And the coat can't just be multi-colored. It must be red and yellow and green and brown and scarlet and black and ochre and peach and ruby and olive and violet and fawn and lilac and gold and...well...you see what I mean. And yes. I know the musical by heart.

Did you know that Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream coat was the first musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice to be performed publicly? And it was performed in St Paul's Cathedral in London years before it ever debuted in the West End or on Broadway? Of course, I didn't see the original. Yes, I'm too young. But I do, vaguely, remember the first time I saw the musical. It wasn't on Broadway or even the West End, though I did manage to see this in London a few years ago. It's taken a bit of collective family remembering but the first time seeing Joseph would have been in the cafeteria of Chapin High School. My mom's youngest brothers were both playing absolutely critical ensemble roles. We think Mark was one of Potiphar's guards. And we're pretty sure that, in a very ironic casting decision, my uncle Mike was one of the hairy Ishmaelites. (If you met Mike now you'd understand the irony of the hair Ishmaelite.) So yeah, I have a hard time with Joseph – because I have to try not to break out into song.

We left off last week at the point in the story where Joseph's brothers have sold him for 20 pieces of silver to those hairy Ishmaelites who promptly carried Joseph off to Egypt, where the rest of our story plays out. Let's see if I can manage to read this without the use of jazz hands... Genesis 39:1-6

Doesn't sound too bad, does it? But of course, for this to be an entertaining play, there's always another plot twist. Genesis 39:7-20

Remember about a month ago, I preached a sermon about misbehaving women? Potiphar's wife is not who I was talking about! She's in a whole other category of conniving characters – played in one rendition of the musical to absolute perfection by none other than Joan Collins of Dynasty fame. How appropriate. Ensuing dance scene begins with very interesting costumes. Potiphar's entrance – full rage. Cue jail scene – Joseph, now shirtless and alone – sings lovely and moving ballad. Followed immediately by an ensemble number where everyone in jail encourages Joseph saying, "We've read the book and you come out on top!" (This is the part where jazz hands might be appropriate...)

Joseph's story, as told in Genesis, has the workings of a great musical. In fact, it has the workings of a long-running, Tony winning musical that's been turned into one film with an animated version in the works. I have a hard time with Joseph's story. Because for me, it is a much-loved musical. But for Joseph, our central character, his life was actually anything but song-worthy at this point.

Cut through the fancy costumes, the music, the dance numbers and we have a young man who has been sold – by his own brothers – into slavery. We have a man who's taken to a foreign country to work as a slave in another man's household. This is a story of human trafficking. For all of the success Joseph has in Potiphar's house, it is Potiphar who reaps the benefit, not his slave. Joseph repeatedly tries to do the right thing, to be faithful in a foreign land and yet for everything he does well, nothing seems to work out. From beloved son to slave to prisoner. Could it have gotten much worse?

In a way, the writers of Genesis themselves treat Joseph's story as an entertaining historical saga, one where Joseph moves from one horrible situation to another but we don't notice because everything works out fine and there's this tidy ending that conveniently explains how we get to Moses and the Exodus. They'd read the book – they knew who came out on top. And so Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice change nothing about the story, simply add a bit of music to it, and wind up with a hit. I wonder how Joseph would feel about this version of his story?

Before we join the writers of Genesis and our Broadway friends at the happy ending, we need to spend a little more time in the debacle that is Genesis 39. Cut off from any family in a culture where family was everything. He is betrayed by those who should protect him and pays a high price for someone else's deception. He has no recourse for justice, no hope for parole, and no one who would stand up for him. Genesis 39 glosses over the years that go by as Joseph spends his days in dead-end situations, just trying to do the best he can wherever he winds up. I think if Joseph were to write his own musical, his would sound much more like *Les Misérables*.

I have a hard time with the story of Joseph. Because once we cut away the music and the happily ever after, we find a good young man who never seems to catch a break. And it's a story that raises that pesky question we all ask: Why do bad things always seem to happen to good people?

For most of us, our lives – even the most faithful lives – will never play out like a musical. Happily ever afters are hard fought, and we all spend time – like Joseph – feeling like we are dealing with one difficult situation after another. We may not have been thrown in jail but many of us can name at least one time in our life where we've sat in what seemed like a hopeless place, wondering if we'd make it out.

What does it mean to remain faithful when it all hits the fan? When we feel stuck, abandoned, betrayed, alone, and at a dead-end, what does faithfulness look like? And where exactly is God in all this mess?

I have a hard time with Joseph's story because he reminds me that sometimes, despite my faithful efforts, despite my hard work, despite my feeble attempts to love God and love my neighbors, things don't always work out – and faithfulness doesn't equate to having a charmed life. Joseph worked hard in Potiphar's house, proved himself to be trustworthy and loyal. But in remaining faithful to God, loyal to his master, and to himself – Joseph wound up in jail.

What does it mean to be faithful when everything around us is falling apart...and where exactly is God? "But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love..." Genesis 39:21

The writers of Genesis seem so absolutely certain, almost nonchalant in verse 21 about God's presence with Joseph in his Egyptian prison cell. Like it's a no brainer. Of course God was with Joseph! But I wonder if Joseph felt as sure of God as they were... What is it they say about hindsight and its perfect vision? It's easy enough to look back over Joseph's life and see clearly the ways God actively worked in him and through him, despite the difficult circumstances. We've read the book – we know he comes out on top. But Joseph didn't have the luxury of hindsight. The writers wrote with certainty. Joseph lived in faith.

I have a hard time with Joseph – especially with chapter 39. I want the musical with fun songs and fancy costumes. But Genesis 39 won't let me get there. To be honest, this chapter has been hanging over my head for several months now – ever since Alex (rather gleefully, I think) told me that I "got" chapter 39 for my week in the series. Yeah, remind me not to let him divide up the assignments again. What in the world does Genesis 39 have to say to any of us?

Yesterday was a day that I wanted more than anything to have the musical. In fact, I've been waiting all summer for yesterday – a chance to see Joseph on stage again. With one set of papers turned in, a sermon finished, and one day off before beginning another round of assignments this week – yesterday was going to be my day for the be HEA with Joseph and Pharaoh and the songs and the dance. But even as I was enjoying the musical, I was getting updates on my phone from Charlottesville. Yesterday was a reminder that even as we want the songs and the joy, we can't just skip ahead to the end. We have hard work to do here. Because loving our neighbors is not always easy. I – we – promised in our baptism and our confirmation vows to resist evil and injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. Did I mean what I said? Will my actions in the coming days reflect my vows? Yesterday was a powerful reminder that faithfulness and comfort are not the same thing and like Joseph discovered, doing what is right doesn't always feel good.

What does it mean to be faithful in the middle of Genesis 39, when the world is in chaos around us? And where exactly is God in all of this brokenness?

In the 14th century in Norwich, England, a young woman named Julian asked a similar question. As an anchorite, Julian devoted her life to praying for the world. And what a hard world she lived in! The plague swept through Europe taking out as much as one third of England's population. The Hundred Years' war raged, peasants revolted and were violently suppressed. What does it mean to be faithful in this? Where exactly is God? In a series of divine conversations, Julian struggled to see how faithfulness and suffering could intermingle. But amid her wrestling, in the midst of her own illness, and the brokenness of the world came words of confidence and assurance:

"See that I am God. See that I am in everything. See that I do everything. See that I have never stopped ordering my works, nor ever shall, eternally. See that I lead everything on to the conclusion I ordained for it before time began, by the same power, wisdom and love with which I made it. How can anything be amiss?"

And from those words of assurance, Julian was able to say: "All shall be well. All shall be well. And all manner of things shall be well. For there is a force of love moving through the universe that holds us fast and will never let us go."

So here we stay until next week, in the prison of Genesis 39. Here we ask, what does it mean to be faithful when it all hits the fan. And we, like Joseph, live by faith. And yet, we have read the book and we know – even though times may be rough in the present – we know who comes out on top in the end. For the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love. And the Lord is with us and shows us steadfast love. All shall be well. All shall be well. And all manner of things shall be well.