

## Thy Will Be Done

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(Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28)

Psalms 105:1-6, 16-22

O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,  
make known his deeds among the peoples.  
2 Sing to him, sing praises to him;  
tell of all his wonderful works.  
3 Glory in his holy name;  
let the hearts of those who seek  
the LORD rejoice.  
4 Seek the LORD and his strength;  
seek his presence continually.  
5 Remember the wonderful works he has  
done,  
his miracles, and the judgments he has  
uttered,  
6 O offspring of his servant Abraham,

children of Jacob, his chosen ones. ...  
16 When he summoned famine against the  
land,  
and broke every staff of bread,  
17 he had sent a man ahead of them,  
Joseph, who was sold as a slave.  
18 His feet were hurt with fetters,  
his neck was put in a collar of iron;  
19 until what he had said came to pass,  
the word of the LORD kept testing him.  
20 The king sent and released him;  
the ruler of the peoples set him free.  
21 He made him lord of his house,  
and ruler of all his possessions,  
22 to instruct his officials at his pleasure,  
and to teach his elders wisdom.

If you grew up with at least one sibling, you can relate to the story of Joseph: the childhood pecking order; the youngest always "left out"—teary-eyed, snotty-nosed, forehead pressed against a locked door, crying, "Let me in!" And the sibling jealousies: "*How come he got more french fries than I did?*"

Just *imagine* all that in a family with twelve sons—and four mothers, each trying to push her sons to the front to get their father's attention and affection. But in today's Lectionary reading from the Hebrew Scriptures there was no contest. Four women bore him children, but only Rachel had Jacob's love. And Joseph was her first-born—the baby; the apple of daddy's eye! And a spoiled brat!

His name was Joseph, and his story begins in *Genesis 37*, when he was 17. He went to the fields where his brothers were tending the sheep, and he brought back a bad report about his brothers. "Tattle-Tales" seldom win points with older brothers.

The other kids wore "hand-me-downs"; Joseph got a new coat.

And Joseph was a dreamer. He dreamed he and his brothers were bundling sheaves of grain, and his brothers' sheaves gathered round and bowed down to his sheaf. And Joseph told his brothers about the dream [Remember: he was his father's favorite; but not necessarily the smartest!]

So it's hardly a surprise that Joseph's brothers get fed up; although the severity of their response is a bit shocking: they considered killing him. But the oldest brother, Reuben, calmed them down: "We don't want his blood on our hands. Let's just throw him in this old dry well," which they did, and we almost feel like applauding. The little brat got what was coming to him. Reuben intended to leave him in the well a couple of hours, cooling his heels; learn his lesson; then Reuben would pull

him out and send him home with his tail tucked between his legs. Served him right.

But there was a lump in the gravy. When a caravan came by on its way to Egypt, another brother, Judah, had another idea: sell Joseph to the traders! They'd be rid of him, and his blood wouldn't be on their hands. So, behind Reuben's back, they did that; told Jacob a wild animal killed him. And Jacob—whose name had been changed to Israel—mourned for his favorite son.

Today's reading from *Genesis* stops there; but the *Psalm* summarizes the whole story. It follows Joseph into Egypt, where he became the houseboy of Potiphar, Pharaoh's Captain of the Guard. Through a series of events which are fascinating stories in themselves, because God was with Joseph, he rose through the ranks until he was second only to Pharaoh.

When drought and famine gripped the land, because God was with Joseph, Egypt was well-prepared, and had food aplenty.

Meanwhile, back home, Joseph's family wasn't faring so well, so Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy food, and guess who they meet? They didn't recognize Joseph; but he recognized them. He played with their minds a bit, then revealed himself. There are some tense moments; but Joseph forgives his brothers, and provided a place for them to bring their father and to live through the duration of the drought. Turns out, they stayed much longer; but that's another story.

Joseph is seen as one of the "Christ figures" in Hebrew Scripture: he virtually comes back from death to become the means of salvation to the very ones who condemned him. And the story says repeatedly in some form, "God was with him."

What does that mean? God was with him? Does God intervene in the affairs of humanity? Does God engineer and direct world events? People of faith claim to have free will; but, then turn around and say, "God is in control." Isn't that a contradiction? If God is controlling human history, where is the free will?

Each Sunday we pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven." How is God's will accomplished on earth? The question is valid: does God pull strings and push buttons and make things happen? Is God in control?

The text doesn't use the word, control. It says God was "with" Joseph. That's an important distinction. As Christians we worship in the name of One of whom the prophet said his name shall be called "Emmanuel", which means, "God With us."

I know: the Bible is full of references in which God did this or caused that to happen, and I grew up being told I wasn't supposed to question God or the Bible. In retrospect, I think they meant, "Don't question what we tell you about God or the Bible." I have never questioned whether God did this or whether God caused that to happen; but I've always been curious: "HOW did God do it?"

I think there's a hint in today's Lectionary readings.

One commentary related to the texts both from *Genesis* and from the Psalm emphasizes "both the hiddenness and the crucial significance of the mercy of God." The *Genesis* reading takes the story of Joseph only to the point in which his brothers sell him to the caravan heading to Egypt. There are no immediate moral conclusions, and God is not even named. But the Psalm summarizes the whole story, and if we read that whole story, it occurs to us that things would have turned out very differently for Joseph (and for Israel) had it not been for the watchful care of the One who called Israel into being. The story drives home the point: "God was with Joseph."

And as the story develops, we see how God was with Joseph, and how Joseph rose to become Prime Minister of Egypt. Joseph was given a gift: he could interpret dreams. When the Pharaoh had a troubling dream, Joseph interpreted it as a message from God that there would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, and he counseled Pharaoh to use the seven years of plenty to prepare for the seven years of famine. And it was made so.

And by using his gift, Joseph became an instrument through which God's will was accomplished. But, while we can catch glimpses of the way God works to accomplish God's will, we never quite get the whole picture—Paul wrote that our vision is blurry, as if through a flawed pane of glass.

Perhaps God had given Reuben the gift of compassion, so that he intervened to spare Joseph's life. Perhaps Judah was given a gift through which he was able to resolve the conflicting needs of his siblings to be rid of their spoiled brother and yet without having his blood on their hands.

The texts don't tell us. The workings of God remain hidden; and yet the crucial significance of those hidden expressions of mercy and grace are revealed by the resulting salvation of Egypt and the moving of that small, vulnerable tribe of Israel under the protective provision of Joseph's care.

And that pattern is consistent throughout the Scriptures; perhaps stated most clearly in the epistle to the Ephesians: all God's people—the epistle says, "to each is given"—gifts that are intended to equip them for the work ministry, for building up the body of Christ. And when the people of God acknowledge, accept, and use the gifts God has given them, then glimpses of God's kingdom can be seen, and a part of God's will is accomplished, "on earth as it is in heaven."

**CALL TO WORSHIP:** (Romans 10:11-13  
NRSV)

**INVOCATION:** Lord, sometimes we feel you are far away; but we know you are as close as hands and feet. In stressful times of uncertainty, we often miss your presence, but we know you are closer to us than our very breath. If we were to cross land and sea, we could not escape your presence. May we be especially aware of your grace and love this hour, and may the shadow of your wings cover us, as we worship in the name of Jesus, who taught us, when we pray, to say, "Our Father, which art...."

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**PASTORAL PRAYER:** Holy God, like a surgeon's scalpel, cut through all our worries, cares, pretense and pride. Enter our hearts and find inside that child You created and love. Be to us a Living Word this hour, and inspire us to live in Your revelations. Let Your truth overcome our slavery to doctrines and creeds; let wisdom overcome our preoccupation with political ideologies; and let peace overcome our fear of one another.

We know the bitter fruit of division that infests our nation, the emptiness of religious nationalism, and the violent consequences of fear and distrust. The newscasts and social media remind us of what happens when we trust in human resources alone for our well-being. Create within us here, today, among our brothers and sisters in Christ, the kind of loving, trusting, self-giving community of faith that can become the yeast of your kingdom--if not around the world, then at least within the sphere of influence of this congregation. Let us know your peace, and your wholeness, so that, in our trust we have no concern for ourselves. We can be your people, without reservation; serving you alone, and finding in that service our own peace and security and abundance.

Loving God, our children begin returning to school this week. Protect them and give them attentive minds and curiosity. Bless our teachers and counselors and administrators. Protect them and put compassion in their hearts and words of wisdom on their lips. And bless parents who face difficult choices and whose parenting skills are being severely tested by these unprecedented days. Give them wisdom and empathy and patience.

Thank you for those who place their own health and even their own lives at risk to keep us safe from contagions and crime and calamity. Protect them and give them calm spirits and discerning minds.

Grant all of us an awareness of your presence, and in that presence heal our brokenness and forgive our belligerent, divisive spirits, in the name of the One whose own loving example can unite us all. Amen.

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**CALL TO STEWARDSHIP:** And the sower went out to sow seed. And the seed was the Word of God, and it fell among the many soils of the earth. And the Word of God that fell on good soil gave increase, and there was a good harvest. And when we sow seed, we may not know on what kind of soil it falls; but we do know a harvest when we see it. For there the Word of God grows and bears fruit.

I want to thank our congregation for your faithful stewardship. We continue to meet our budgeted commitments. We are seeing the familiar pattern of summer slump; so, here is a reminder to continue making your offerings, that they may bear fruit for the Kingdom of God.

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**INVITATION TO COMMUNION:** We come to the Table of Communion where we are known by God, even to the very depth of our being. We are known--the good and the bad; and yet God believes in us. Sometimes we speak only of our trusting God, and forget the example of Joseph, in which God trusted him to use the gifts God had given him. God trusts us with gifts. God hopes in us. God's Kingdom relies on us. At this table, we remember Jesus, and know him as we are known.

**ELDER'S PRAYER:**

**WORDS OF INSTITUTION:** Jesus took bread and said, "This is my body. Take it." He took a cup and said, "This is my blood. Take it." Through this act we receive—and become—the Body of Christ. Let all who believe that, of whatever denomination or creed, join us.