Genesis 39
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More than Footprints

On our path through the Hebrew Scriptures so far this fall, we have met Noah, whose story includes a ragged rainbow and reminds us of God's promise to be faithful to God's beloved creations, come what may. Last week we met Abraham and Sarah, the couple voted least likely to be blessed, whom God sets apart to give birth to a family more numerous than the stars and to be a blessing to the nations. This morning we meet Joseph, Abraham and Sarah's great-grandson. Joseph may be one of the better-known characters from the Old Testament. He's the dreamer with the coat of many colors. Some of us know him from the musical, others may simply remember him from Sunday school or Vacation Bible School as the obnoxious little brother who tattles on his siblings, parades around in his fancy coat, and then tells his brothers about his dreams. In his first dream and others that follow, Joseph sees sheaves of wheat bowing to his sheaf of wheat and the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him, too. The dreams are the last straw. The brothers have had enough. In the end, Reuben, the oldest brother steps in and persuades the others to leave Joseph in a pit and "lay no hand on him," because Reuben plans to save him.[1] The brothers strip Joseph of his robe and leave him in the pit with no food or water or hope of being rescued. Without Reuben's knowledge, Judah and the others sell Joseph as a slave for twenty pieces of silver. Reuben and the others return to their father Jacob with Joseph's empty and bloodied robe. Jacob is

[1] Genesis 37: 22, NRSVue

overcome with grief, and he "refuse[s] to be comforted."[2] Our reading for this morning picks up the Joseph story at this point. [Read Genesis 39: 1-23.]

I was a senior in high school when I preached my first sermon. Sadly, I can't remember what the biblical text was, but I do remember using a poem that you may have heard at some point. The poem is known as "Footprints":

One night I dreamed a dream.

As I was walking along the beach with my Lord.

Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life.

For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,

One belonging to me and one to my Lord.

After the last scene of my life flashed before me,

I looked back at the footprints in the sand.

I noticed that at many times along the path of my life,

especially at the very lowest and saddest times,

there was only one set of footprints.

This really troubled me, so I asked the Lord about it.

'Lord, you said once I decided to follow you,

You'd walk with me all the way.

But I noticed that during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life,

there was only one set of footprints.

I don't understand why, when I needed You the most, You would leave me.'

[2] Genesis 37: 35, NRSV

He whispered, 'My precious child, I love you and will never leave you

Never, ever, during your trials and testings.

When you saw only one set of footprints,

It was then that I carried you.'[3]

In the sermon, I remember sharing my confusion and grief in over the death of another student from my high school a few years before. The poem had given me great comfort, because I hadn't been able to see how God could possibly be present in a time like that, and yet, I had managed to come through eventually, with my faith largely intact. The poem made sense to me. God was present if unseen, so the footprints message rang true.

The Joseph story doesn't mention footprints, but it does have quite a bit to say about hands. In the Hebrew language, the words for hand and power are similar, so hands and power are closely linked.[4] The one who has their hand on you is the one who has power over you, it seems. Early on the brothers have the power when get their hands on Joseph and his robe and plan to end his life. Reuben comes to Joseph's rescue, sort of, and "delivers him out of their hands."[5] Joseph winds up being sold as a slave, and Potiphar buys him. The Hebrew tell us that Potiphar frees Joseph from hand of the Ishmaelites.[6] Potiphar has eyes to see what Joseph accomplishes through God-given talents and then entrusts his household to him, by putting everything in Joseph's hand. Later in the story, Potiphar's wife seems to hold all the cards, to

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[3] Margaret Fishback Powers, "Footprints," as cited here: https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/21210.Margaret_Fishback_Powers

[4] Westermann, Claus. *Genesis 37-50, A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986. p. 66. As noted by Mary Ann McKibben Dana in her paper for The Well, 2014.

[5] Genesis 37:21, NRSVue

[6] Walter Bruggemann, Genesis, *Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, p. 314

hold Joseph's life in her hands. She has the power to undo all that he has accomplished, to rip all power, all security from him, when she clutches his garment in her hand.

It's not that hands or the power they represent is inherently wrong or evil. It's what one does with the power in one's hand that matters. Joseph's brothers want revenge. The slave traders want a profit. When Potiphar's wife holds the garment in her hand, she can only think about payback for Joseph's rejection. It matters how hands are used; it matters who or what guides the hands. Each time Joseph is handed power, he becomes a trusted and faithful caretaker, and God prospers the work of his hands.

Genesis tells us several times that "The Lord was with Joseph."[7] Do you notice when this statement comes? We are told that God is with him when he's a newly acquired slave working for a foreign master in a strange land. We are told God is with Joseph when he is wrongly accused and tossed into prison. In other words, we are told that God is with Joseph at the exact moments when it doesn't look like it. And in these moments, an Egyptian official and a palace jailer are the ones who are there with Joseph, too, and they are the ones who recognize God's handiwork, God's activity in the midst of these darkest moments, even if they cannot name this activity or give God the credit. They see good things happening through the work of Joseph's hands, and these outsiders, these non-Israelites, these members of other nations entrust this foreign slave with everything they hold dear. During these "trials and testings," to use the language of the poem, God works in the darkness to open eyes and hearts and minds, and, yes, hands, so that Joseph, this blessing-carrier can survive and even prosper. This flourishing, this prosperity does not look like the prosperity some preachers try to sell us. Here God gives us a

[7] Genesis 39: 2, 3, 21.

different definition of prosperity that does not simply mean a beefed-up bank account or pricey portfolio belonging solely to one person or one family. Prosperity looks like a community flourishing under Joseph's care. Yes, he benefits, but he is not alone. In fact it could be said that the community around him—strange as it may sound—plays a role in Joseph's prospering. Potiphar hands over his household; the jailer hands over the prisoners. These two men hand Joseph the raw materials for his hands to work with. They hand him the power to sculpt a good, prosperous, and even saving outcome for himself and others. More than footprints, God's care for Joseph has human handprints all over it.

As we were reminded in God's promise to Abram, God fully intends to bless the nations through human beings. To bless someone means something more than creature comforts and multiple cars in the garage. To bless someone means to want and work for another's well-being. Joseph carries on the family legacy of being a blessing to the nations beyond his own family, to the communities outside of his own. By the grace of God, Joseph can see beyond his family's drama and betrayal. He can see and name the ways God works through him to save his family and the people of Egypt from famine. He is a blessing to his family and to the people of Egypt. And they are also blessings to him.

As we enter this season of reflecting on the gifts God has poured out on us, we are also called to consider how and where God is calling us to be a blessing not simply to our own little community tucked between North Union and Church streets but also in and for God's larger world in 2027. How will our hands, our gifts help our neighbors thrive and prosper? How will our footprints show our neighbors that we are with them and that God is with them in the darkest and most divisive of times?

When I look back over the path I have traveled, I now see that I overlooked some footprints along the way. I also realize that God's presence was never contained in one set of footprints. After that student died too fast and too soon, I can see the footprints of parents, coaches, teachers, pastors, rabbis, and priests who circled around the student body. I see the handprints of those who faithfully supported us, loved us, and walked alongside us as our idyllic world was shattered and rebuilt. In the days that followed my mother's death, there were footprints leading to and from our kitchen door, there were handprints all over the chicken salad and the silver polish. When my family and I have suffered our greatest losses, when the night has been darker than dark, there have been countless footprints, handprints, and knee prints from doctors who sat with us in sterile hospital rooms, from friends who dropped everything to race to our side, and from strangers who folded their hands and dropped to their knees to pray. The Lord was with us. God still carries us. Yes, God's footprints are there, and by the grace of God, as I glance back to that beach, the path through the sand looks much more like the site of a festival than the trail of a solitary stroll.

Thanks be to God. Amen.