

Moving Out of Scare City: Scared to Death: *Genesis 47:13-26*

Norwalk Christian Church, October 11, 2015, Pentecost - Ordinary Time, Year B, Moving Out of Scare City Series

It's not the way you thought the story of Joseph would go. You remember Joseph, the son of Jacob, the great-grandson of Abraham, beloved by his father, but hated by his brothers. You remember the coat, his technicolor dreamcoat, that his father lavished on him. His brothers hated him for it. Hated him because he was the favorite. Hated him so much, that they faked his death, and sold their little, baby brother into slavery.

Then they took that technicolor dreamcoat, the mantel of their father's favor, and covered it with animal's blood, and presented it to their father. Your favorite son is dead. And they organized a funeral for their brother.

Meanwhile, Joseph was very much alive, living as a slave in Egypt, in the house of a man named Potiphar. He was, again, the favorite, and Potiphar put him in charge of the whole house. But then, Potiphar's wife became jealous and one day she came on to Joseph. Joseph fled, knowing that an affair with his boss's wife would be detrimental to his life, which was surely Potiphar's wife's plan. She told her husband that Joseph attacked her. And Joseph was sent to prison.

While in prison, Joseph reveals he has a skill. He can interpret dreams. And when one of his fellow prisoners has a bad dream, Joseph interprets it for him. Years later, as chance--or God--would have it, that same man is working by the side of Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, when one night, Pharaoh has a terrifying dream. They summon Joseph, and the rest is history.

Joseph tells Pharaoh what his dream means. Egypt will have seven years of abundance --more wealth and harvest than they would know what to do with. And then, then, they would have seven years of famine.

Pharaoh, amazed at Joseph's gift, promotes Joseph from prisoner to second in charge of all of Egypt, and makes Joseph the pointman of preparing for the famine.

Years later, in the midst of the famine, everyone flocks to Egypt for help. Everyone, including Joseph's brothers. He tricks them at first--the least he could do to brothers who faked his death. But soon he reveals his identity. "What you meant for evil, God meant for Good," Joseph tells them. And Joseph's entire family, including his father, moves to Egypt, where Joseph cares for them.

And then we come to the story we read a few moments ago. It's not one I had even heard of until a few years ago. After this great tale of Joseph going from rags to riches, turning life's most impossible situations into opportunity. After Joseph, seeing God work around every corner of his life, turning fear into hope, we get this story.

Egypt is still in the midst of severe famine. The storehouses of Egypt have enough, but, well, as they say, you can't let a good crisis go to waste. An economic crisis is a great time to solidify Pharaoh's power. People are desperate and they will do anything for food.

That's exactly what happens. First, they spend all their money buying food from Joseph. Then, when all the money is gone, they say to Joseph, "Give us food! Why should we die before your eyes? For our money is gone."

Joseph says, "Okay, I'll give you food. But give me your livestock, first." So they give Joseph their livestock.

When the food is gone, they come back, "We're out of food. We still have no money. And all our livestock are yours. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord than our bodies and our lands." And listen to what they say, "Shall we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land in exchange for food. We ... will become slaves to Pharaoh; just give us seed, so that we may live and not die."

Here's what Joseph should have said: "Look, y'all, I got this. God gave Pharaoh a dream warning of famine, and we've been preparing for this for years. That's why I'm here. There's no need to fear. God will provide!"

That's what he should of said. But Joseph no longer works for God. Joseph works for Pharaoh.

And Joseph, the one who had been saved out of slavery by God, the one who had been promoted to power in order to do good--accepts the people's deal, and sells them some seed in exchange for their lives.

All the people become slaves...well, except the Priests. Pharaoh takes special care of the priests. Gotta buy off the ministers, so they will bless all that Pharaoh was doing.

The people lavish their praise on Joseph. "You have saved our lives! May it please my lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh." And with an economic transaction, the people become slaves.

Welcome to Scare City. In Scare City, there are no residents, only slaves. In Scare City, there is never enough. Never enough money. Never enough food. Never enough time. Pharaoh is the mayor of Scare City, and his lie is the operating principle: There is not enough, so grab all you can.

Walter Brueggemann¹ tells the story of "Martin Niemoller, the German pastor who heroically opposed Adolf Hitler". When he "was a young man", "as part of a delegation

¹ Brueggemann, Walter, "The liturgy of abundance, the myth of scarcity", *The Christian Century*, 3/24-31/99

of leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church he met with Hitler in 1933. Niemoller stood at the back of the room and looked and listened. He didn't say anything. When he went home, his wife asked him what he had learned that day. Niemoller replied, 'I discovered that Herr Hitler is a terribly frightened man.'

See, Pharaoh has a lot of names: Hitler and Bin Laden, Al Queda and Isis, Wall Street and Dow Jones, Washington and Madison Avenue, and all the towers of power that make up the core of Scare City--they are all terribly frightened people, who are convinced that there are not enough good things to go around, so they must do what they can to have it all.

And we have bought into their lie. We have moved into Scare City.

We are a people of great riches, let we can never have enough. It doesn't matter if we have more than what we will ever need, we must have more still, and panic sets in if there is ever a threat to what we have.

Then we show up in church, and we sing, "Great is your Faithfulness, O God! All I have needed, your hand has provided."

We live, torn between these two stories, the stories of God's Abundance, and the story of Scare City. But too often, it seems, Scare City wins the day.

After all, we like to build our churches right in the middle of Scare City, where fear instead of faith motivates our actions. Giving is down. Attendance is down. Things aren't the way they used to be. If we change, people will be mad, and then they may not come.

So, we cut costs and corners. We squelch anything new and experimental. We take no chances for our faith, we just keep things running smoothly. Keep everyone happy, as we ignore the leading of the Spirit. Because famine is around the corner. And famine is no time to be following the Spirit and rocking the boat.

But there is another story. A story of God's abundance. A story that began, well, in the beginning, Genesis 1, the Creation story, where God creates everything there is, and says, "It is good, it is good, it is very good."

But by the end of Genesis, Pharaoh is spreading the lie: There is not enough.

Who do you believe?

If you're like me, you open your Bible, but keep looking out the corner of your eye at the status of the market. If you're like me, you think the whole world will fall apart if the other guy wins the election. If you're like me, you give, but you wonder if you've given too much. If you're like me, you want to trust and to let go and follow the Spirit, and yet

you're scared. Scared of what others may say. Scared of the consequences. Scared that your faithfulness will be rewarded with suffering.

If you're like me you celebrate Thanksgiving, and moments later, go buy much more than you ever could need or afford. You thank God for God's good gifts, then stand in front of the pantry, saying, "There's nothing to eat."

If you're like me, you constantly worry that at any moment, your cell phone battery will be dead and you will be cut off from the world.

And am I the only one who knows we just got paid and there's money in the bank, yet when checking out at Target, and the debit card machine stalls--just a moment--my heart sinks because I know--I just know--my account *must* empty. But when the cashier says, "Approved!", I enter back into God's amazing abundance.

If you're like me, you teeter on the edge of these two worlds, standing in the middle of the Jordan River, with one foot in the wilderness and one foot in the promised land. One foot in God's abundance, and the other in Scare City.

I know I'm not the only one. We are afraid. Afraid of rejection. Afraid of failure. Afraid of irrelevance. Afraid that the ones who love us the most will leave us alone. Afraid that all we have will be ripped from us. Afraid of the other, that they will take what we need to live: take our jobs, take our safety, take our power, take our church.

Scare City is a terrifying place. But it is an allusion. It is made up. It is a lie, created by Pharaoh and passed down from Genesis 47 until now. And the future of our church, of our world and of our lives depends on which story we will believe.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, "If God is for us, who can stand against us? ... For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That is the gospel. That is the truth. All that we have, all that we are, all that we will be, begins and ends with God. And our lives are gifts from God, too precious to sell into the slavery of our fear.

What *are* you afraid of? If you haven't already, write it down on that post-it note. Give it a name. Cancer. Death. Irrelevance. A loved one's death. Afraid there's not enough time. That they won't love me. That the pain will never go away. What are you afraid of?

Now let go, and trust in God's abundant love. Hear God singing over you:

"Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name. Come and follow me, I will bring you home; I love you and you are mine."