

“WYSIWYG”

August 20, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania
The Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Text: *“Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come closer to me.’ And they came closer. He said, ‘I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.’”*

(Genesis 45:4-5, NRSV)



Photo Credit: Joseph's "coat of many colors," by Joan Brunner
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/joaniebee/4198595202/in/photostream/>

The story of Joseph, like many of the narratives of Genesis paints the human family in an array of hues and patterns; the amazing colors of a “technicolor dream coat;” though the particulars in each of these stories is often fraught with danger, toils and snares.

The story of Joseph is about a blessed boy – his Father’s favorite – among a slew of sons all loved, yet not fully understood. Joseph, the youngest of twelve born to Jacob (also called “Israel”), is the dreamer. He dreams amazing dreams. One of the dreams puts him at odds with his brothers: he dreams that each brother is a sheaf of wheat and all the others bow to him; he dreams later that all of them shall bow before him and this leads to his brothers despising him in their hearts. (See Genesis

37:1-11). The gift of the "coat of many colors" given to Joseph by his father underscored their hatred of him; separating him from them (Genesis 37:3-4).

Rather than kill him, the brothers conspire to sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt where he becomes the servant of a master whose wife makes illicit advances towards Joseph . . . He flees from her, but she has him thrown in prison and there he sits; and there he dreams; and his dreams help him go far and to rise up in amazing ways, to extraordinary purposes and ends (See Genesis 39-44). What would you see, where you in Joseph's place?

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

This story is a soap opera, yes? Too cruel and inhuman to be believed – with plot twists and turns which defy logic; the kind of story one reads in the racks at the checkout counter next to the gum and candy. The kind of story enquiring minds wants to know about . . .

But it is a true story . . . This is a story of a child of God who had every chance to turn his eyes from God; to stand in derision and thumb his nose at the Almighty, but who in time and with mercy and grace eventually received his evil-hearted brothers in their desperation and loved them into life again, saying, *"I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here . . . God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God . . ."*

(Genesis 45:5, 8a)

Is that what Joseph was thinking when he scraped the mud from his face and hands, trying in vain to climb the walls of the pit into which he had been thrown by them? Is that what came to mind when he fled naked from his master's house in fear and loathing? Did that thought form in his mind as

the floor of his Egyptian prison cell crawled with vermin and its rank smell came into his nostrils with every breath? How is it that Joseph – of all people – could find in his life the presence of God?

An old poem of Frederick Langbridge (1849-1922) offers the following image:

*"Two men looked out from prison bars.
One saw mud, the other stars."*

In the pursuit of the fullness of human life, everything depends on this frame of reference, the habitual outlook, this basic vision that I have of myself, others, life, the world, and God. What you see is what you get.

Consequently, if you or I are to change, to grow into persons who are more fully human and more fully alive, we shall certainly have to become aware of our vision and patiently work at redressing its imbalances and eliminating its distortions. All real and permanent growth must begin here. A shy person can be coaxed into assuming an air of confidence, but it will only be a mask – one mask replacing another. There can be no real change, no real growth in any of us until and unless our basic perception of reality, or vision, is changed.¹

W-Y-S-I-W-Y-G (pronounced "Wissy-wig") is an old computing term from the early days of personal computing: "What-you-see-is-what-you-get"; the input you enter is the same as the output you will receive.

"One saw mud, the other stars . . ." Clearly Joseph saw God's stars there in Genesis 45 when he made peace with those who had done him wrong. But there was nothing like stars in his eyes those other times . . . there was only tangle and brush and bramble – a wilderness which seemingly led nowhere, yet seemed everywhere . . . And through it all he perceived in it the will of God.

I think were we to be caught up in a maelstrom of desperation and deliberate acts beyond our control, we'd prefer to live it out like Dorothy from Kansas and "follow a yellow brick road!" . . . If we have to live life out of our control and instead lived in the hands of God, we prefer god to make life plain: "There, follow that yellow brick road, over there, see it?"

But as I live, I do not experience anything like a yellow brick road in front of me. W-Y-S-I-W-Y-G .

Sometimes what is in front of me are brush and brambles, or any number of roads (a jumble of

potential paths), perhaps only "two roads diverging in a yellow wood" to invoke the poet, Robert Frost, but neither way is brick, and "lay equally in leaves no boot has trodden black."

We want choices, but we fear failure, so we look for the golden highway and say to ourselves, "when I find my niche", or "hit my stride," or "get in the groove," then it'll be right, I'll be right, and happy and full of life and finally be at peace with the person I think I'm meant to be . . . As if there is some cosmic script which is waiting for me to act out; a part or role that I cheat on with every bad choice I make, or diversion I take – and God gets angry and impatient with me his wayward child!

I wonder if that's what Joseph said in those times in the pit and in the prison. *"I wonder what I'll be when I grow up?" This can't be it – can it? These walls . . . they're high . . . I am cold without my robe – my beautiful coat of many colors – given to me by my father . . . what must he think . . . Oh God. What is going on here?!"*

You have those moments don't you? When life seems to flip off the tracks and ground to a halt, or what you thought was a walk in the woods turns into a slip down a hole . . . And sometimes you may feel as though you have been pushed into it; other times it is as though the hole reached up and pulled you in! Nevertheless, there you are and it is nothing like a yellow brick road, and perhaps you despair of ever finding your way again. . .

Corrie Ten Boom, one of the great Christian saints of the twentieth century remembers the times when she got dragged down holes: imprisoned by the Nazis for helping to hide Jews (becoming the story of Ms. Ten Boom's life entitled, THE HIDING PLACE), she never saw her loving father and mother again . . . Unexpectedly, she was reunited with her sister in a concentration camp; yet, no sooner than this joy had been made real, then the reality of fleas and lice became evident in their living conditions . . . It was cause for despair and depression until they realized that even the Nazis stayed away from fleas and lice, so the girls were left alone, and the Bible they had smuggled in to them were

not found, so not confiscated; and the sisters read and prayed and sang the Scriptures through the darkness of their imprisonment . . .

Corrie lost her sister eventually in the camp, but she also found this truth there, too: from our



side, life is hardly anything more than bits and pieces knotted, matted and tied-off. Great starts, but quick and cruel stops . . . Beauty mocked and often marred by ugliness . . . What looks to be a pattern in the making becomes nothing like a pattern over time – lost in a wilderness of bits and pieces of life – the

underside only we can see.ⁱⁱ

But were we able to see that same life from God’s perspective, we see the tapestry which he is carefully working out of the choices which we make and the living which we do – a wondrous fabric of intricate design and beauty – wondrous fair – From God’s side.

What is often lacking in the human heart is the courage to look at the stars, instead of the mud. To look with interest and vitality into the present moment – whether it is full of choices and opportunities – or one limited or uninviting – and make of it an arena for



God’s continuing presence and activity. Why? Because somewhere in your heart’s vision, in your mind’s eye you have taken the time to look over your shoulder from where you have come and have seen clearly and unambiguously a yellow brick road. . . A road you have been walking on all the time, with its share of twists and turns and diversions and surprises – all . . . But unmistakably a road; with signs along the way which read: “The Will of God for me,” “The Will of God for me,” “The Will of God for me.”

My mother was often fond of saying, 'we are the sum total of our choices', but to say that God cannot work within the context of our freedom and the choices we have made is arrogance . . . We can make bad choices, but beyond the reach of God? Life can hit us from oblique angles and knock us flat, but beyond the reach of God? . . . What we often see in this life are the twisted bits and knotted problems left in those choices made – the bottom side of a woven fabric . . . But there is a pattern and splendor from God's eye view of your world . . . What point of view, what kind of faith, will you apply to life?" W-Y-S-I-W-Y-G.

When the great tests of life come to us and we must choose among choices ahead which are hard for us – when we wish it were simply a matter of following the yellow brick road – the grace and mercy of God gives us through Jesus Christ alive in us enables us to look over our shoulder from where we have come. And when we do, like Joseph, we see that yellow brick road stretched out behind us. And it is clear that God has brought us to this place most certainly, for we could not have been so cunning with our choices or with chance . . . And because we see that God has established his will by that road with all its twists and turns, diversions and surprises, we take courage. And like Joseph, we too find deep down inside the faith to go on with the business of choosing and living and being and loving . . . *"For we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose . . . Nothing can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:28 and 38)."* And in that moment of realization we find ourselves trusting in God and having hope once again; trust and hope enough to put one foot in front of the other and step into our future.

W-Y-S-I-W-Y-G – What you see is what you get. What will you do with that view knowing God is present with you in it?

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

ⁱ Author John Powell, as quoted by James S. Hewitt in Illustrations Unlimited; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, p. 415.

ⁱⁱ The pictures displayed are from an exhibit at the Corrie Ten Boom museum and was sewn by Ms. Ten Boom.