

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale  
Sunday, June 14, 2026

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Friends, as we are gathered and as we transition back into worship, I invite you to close your eyes, relax your shoulders, take a deep, deep breath, and get yourself centered and comfortable. We are taking the opportunity to breathe in God's mercies. and to breathe out the mercies of God for others.

Breathe in God's mercies.

Breathe out the mercies of God for others.

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Breathe out the mercy of God for others.

Let us pray.

Holy and gracious God, you speak to us across the centuries through your word illumined in our hearts and in our minds. You show us a path. You light a way for our journey. This morning, meet us here as you have promised so that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts may be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from Genesis chapter 45 and tells the story in the first 15 verses of Joseph's reunion with his brothers in Egypt. I invite you to hear these words from our Hebrew ancestors.

*Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all who stood by him. and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it and that the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. 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. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 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. God has made me a father to Pharaoh and a lord to all his house and a ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, "Thus says your son Joseph, "God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me and do not delay.*

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*You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children, and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there since there are five more years of famine to come. So that you and your household and all that you have will not come to poverty." And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth who speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And Joseph kissed all his brothers and wept upon them. And after that his brothers talked with him.*

Friends, these are the words of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

As David launched us last week, our summer sermon series, [laughter] I won't say that again, I promise, is entitled Tell Me a Story; and it's a chance for us to look at some of the stories we think we know from our scriptures and a chance to delve into the depth of them, to be willing to wrestle with the complexity and the unpleasantness of humanity and then, of course, of God's relationship with us through it. So today we find ourselves telling the story of Joseph; and as Whitney shared with the kids, it is a long and sprawling story. Nearly half of the book of Genesis tells the story of Joseph, chapters 37-50. And Joseph's story, like all of the stories in Genesis, is one of very complicated family relationships. We remember that Joseph's father is Jacob, Israel. Jacob, who tricked his own father and brother out of his brother's birthright. Jacob, who fled from his family for fear that revenge would be enacted upon him. Jacob, who was tricked by his own father-in-law into spending 14 years in servitude in order to marry two daughters because he tricked him the first time, not with Rachel, but with Leah at the wedding. When we think about it, even just thinking about Jacob's story, anyone that had read a single self-help book would know that Joseph and his siblings didn't have a lot of chance for normal. There was a lot of family baggage happening in Joseph's family. And as Whitney also shared with the children, there was a lot of pain and suffering in Joseph's own life. As I was preparing for this sermon, I couldn't help but imagine if someone were to make a true story of Joseph, it would find, it would begin with him either being in a pit or in prison, and then that record scratch sound and a narrator go, "I bet you're wondering how I got here," and then flashbacks to how these things actually happened. There are four main movements in the story of Joseph. As Whitney shared with the children, he did have a contentious relationship with his 11 other brothers, mainly the 10 of them. Joseph and his brother Benjamin were the last two, and they seemed to get along pretty well. But Joseph knows that he and Benjamin are Jacob's favorites. And he does not hide that he knows that. Jacob does indeed gift Joseph with a miraculous gift, a coat that the King James called a coat of many colors, but that the Hebrew simply says goes from the palms to the soles, meaning that it was long and luxurious at a time

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when fabric may well have been hard to come by. Not only does he get a coat, not only does he get favorable treatment, but he begins having dreams. And Joseph does not hesitate to tell his brothers about the dreams. Dreams about sheaves of wheat, 11 of them bowing down to one single sheaf. or images of the moon and stars in the sky revolving around one single thing. Joseph, I think, probably knew what he was doing when he told his brothers about how their sheaves of wheat bowed to him and their stars revolved around him. [sighs and gasps] And he's kind of bragging about it a little if I'm going to be honest. So the brothers finally have enough, and they see him coming from far off in his coat with his [gasps] pride and decide, "we'd be better off if he was dead." So they conspire to kill him and to say that a wild animal had done it. But Reuben, the oldest of the brothers, begins to feel a little worried about how that might affect their father. And he begins to second guess. So he says, "How about...how about we don't kill him? How about we just throw him in the pit?" And then while Joseph is in this pit and the brothers are preparing to leave, traders come along; and another brother, Judah, says, "Why don't we just sell him to those traders, and then we'll take his coat and be done with him and tell father that he was eaten by wild animals?" And so they do. And Joseph is sent from the traders as a slave into Egypt, and the brothers return home, and they break Jacob's heart.

And then the second part of Joseph's story happens. He finds himself a slave in the house of Potiphar in Egypt. And while he is doing so very well, he is good at what Potiphar has asked him to do, Potiphar's wife takes a liking to Joseph. And we know how those stories usually end. Joseph refused her advances, and she accused him of making advances anyway. And Potiphar had him thrown in jail. And so now Joseph is here in jail for quite a while in the third stage of his journey. And it is here that his dreams return. He begins having dreams and having the ability to interpret those dreams. In fact, he became well known in prison because he could tell people what their dreams meant. And lucky enough for him, someone who had been in the prison with him, whose dreams he had interpreted, ends up serving in Pharaoh's palace. And when Pharaoh begins to be having dreams about fat calves and lean calves that are all pointing toward years of famine and years of surplus, this person was like, "Wait a minute. I know someone who can interpret dreams." And Joseph then somehow finds his way into Pharaoh's house, interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, preparing Egypt for the seven years of famine that are coming, using the years of plenty to set aside to prepare for what would happen. And in the course of all of that becomes high up, trusted of Pharaoh. Pharaoh giving him authority and rule over many, many different things. And it's here that the famine is raging throughout the world at that point. And Joseph's brothers find their way to beg Pharaoh for assistance. not knowing that it is their brother there. Their brother is the one that holds the key to their salvation. Now, they don't recognize him. And it's not any wonder. It has been years since they've seen him. And if he's serving in Pharaoh's house, he is dressed and made up and speaking as if he is Egyptian. And his brothers have no

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clue who he is. But Joseph recognizes them immediately and decides [clears throat] to see what their metal is. And so he demands that they bring the youngest brother, Benjamin, his father's other favorite. And then when Benjamin is there, he has a servant slip a goblet in Benjamin's bag so he can accuse Benjamin of theft, and he demands that Benjamin stay there at the palace to serve for his crimes. And his brother's defense of Benjamin is really what breaks Joseph's shell, because Reuben and Judah in particular say, "Do not make us return home without our brother. It will kill our father. Take us in his place. Our father is broken and mourning, and we cannot add to that suffering." And that defense of both Benjamin and of Jacob makes Joseph tell them the truth. "It is me, your brother Joseph." And eventually in our text this morning, we see that there is glad reunion. Even if the brothers are a bit skeptical at first, they don't know what to say or how to respond really. But Joseph's speech in our text today redefines all of that journey that I just reminded us about. It redefines the grief, Jacob's grief, Joseph's grief at what happened to him, the grief of the brothers. It redefines their guilt, everyone's guilt. It ceases to repay anger with anger and pain with pain. Joseph says, "God sent me before you to preserve life. And not just the life of this family, but that of the Egyptians and the neighboring countries, too." For Joseph, the picture has gone so much wider than what the brothers see.

Now, this spring, our Christian parenting class had the opportunity to study a book by Meredith Miller. It's called *Woven*, and it was about ways in which to nurture family spiritual life in ways that basically—the tagline was “creating a spirituality that your children don't have to heal from.” And a central piece of this book was her focus on God-centered storytelling. She argues that we do ourselves and our children a disservice when we read our scriptures as if people are the central characters, as if there are heroes and villains. She talks about how when we tell the stories of scripture as if the characters are no different than Spider-Man or Iron Man, or they're just moral lessons for us to learn, our children are not connecting with God. Our families are not connecting with God, because the central actor in all of our scripture is God, the God that created heaven and earth, the God that walks with us all. And I think the Joseph story is an excellent piece for us to rethink how we are thinking about God-centered storytelling because throughout the last sevenish minutes of this sermon, I've been talking about Joseph, about Joseph's story, about Joseph's journey. But God is the central actor in Joseph's story, as Joseph reiterates it to his brothers in chapter 45. Throughout these chapters, throughout all of Genesis, but we're talking about Joseph today, the text tells us implicitly and explicitly that God was with Joseph. That God's hand directs all of the confusion of human guilt toward a gracious goal. That that is the point of Joseph's story. That God is at work in spite of, through, and against all human effort. Because while God was present with Joseph, it didn't absolve him of bad things happening to him, but God carries Joseph through.

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But it's important for me to say to you explicitly this morning that doesn't mean that God caused all those bad things to happen to Joseph. God didn't cause these times in Joseph's life [gasps and sighs] just for Joseph to learn a lesson. What we see in Joseph's narrative is life in the ancient world. The trials and tribulations of everyday living. The complexity of family relationships, the reality of geopolitical politics, of how well we care for the earth, of droughts and rain, of plenty and want. And yet, in the midst of all of those things, God is present. not far away, not removed, but with us and with Joseph in the highs and lows and in the middle roads of life.

Now friends, it is easy in our world, very very easy to get distracted, to look at the pain and sorrow in our own lives and in the lives of those around us, to ease into despair, to rail about the absence of God. It's easy to fall victim to the type of thinking that says God blesses those who God loves and the devil can take the hindmost. That the trials and tribulations of everyday life in our world are punishments for sin, are roadblocks from which we must develop some deep personal growth. The story of Joseph tells us that God is with us through it all. That God is with the suffering of the world. God is working within those things to bring healing and wholeness. Even when we can't see it, even when we don't want to see it, even when it is our fault, something has happened. And most especially when it is not.

That in the hardness of life, of everyday living, of our own faults and the faults of our human neighbors, God is deeply present and that God is with us. To quote Frederick Buechner, the presence and grace of God means something like, "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Do not be afraid. I am with you."

So in this world for us today, friends, I wonder how we turn our hearts to God. how we tune ourselves to God's presence in and amongst those things that are painful, in and amongst guilt and suffering and sorrow, in and amongst complicated family relationships and geopolitical realities.

How do we turn ourselves, attune ourselves to God's presence with us?

I don't know that I have a simple answer, but I do know that in the story of Joseph, there were plenty of times he was unsure what was next, and he did not know where he was being led and clearly could not have trusted what was happening. And yet, he kept trusting and he kept believing because God was there with him.

It is my hope that we can go from this place awakened to the presence of God in our lives and in the lives of all of those around us this day and every day. Amen.