

Sermon Preached by  
Melanie Smith  
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church  
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Text: Genesis 37.1-4, 12-28

## **“Through the Middle”**

Growing up, part of my bedtime routine was listening to bible stories. My parents had found tapes where the bible stories were dramatically read in an engaging way—and they thought that this was a good way for me to fall asleep...

Looking back on some of those stories, I have questions about my parents choices—because some of those stories may not have led to the best dreams...but as a result of those tapes, I fell in love with many of the narrative stories in the bible.

Sarah, the mother of many nations, Moses the liberator of the Israelites, Ruth who became part of Jesus lineage, David the shepherd boy who fought Goliath and became King over Israel, Peter, the faithful disciple who became the rock of the church.

Thanks to those tapes, these stories, especially the ending of these stories, are etched in my mind. But it wasn't until years later, when I went back and reread some of those stories, that a fuller picture of who those people were started to emerge;

Yes, Sarah and her husband Abraham had become the mother and father of many nations—but part of Sarah's story also includes the doubt she faced that God would keep God's promise—the years she spent trying to conceive, the laughter that bubbled up in the face of angels who told her she would conceive in her old age...

Yes, Moses liberated the Israelites and led them to the promise land, but he also spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness, leading a people who rebelled and infuriated him, and he himself didn't get to cross over into the promised land.

Ruth is one of a handful of women, listed in Jesus lineage, but she experienced great pain—as a Moabite woman who married an Israelite but was widowed — leaving Ruth vulnerable.

David the small shepherd boy who defeated the unstoppable Goliath and became king over Israel—also allowed his power to blind him, leading to corruption and murder.

Peter—a faithful disciple—whom Jesus nick named the rock, saying “upon this rock I will build my church” but who was also the one who denied Jesus three times on the night Jesus was executed...

Revisiting these stories, the nice endings that are often associated with them was pulled back to reveal the long journeys underneath.

The story of Joseph is one of those stories where the ending is probably familiar—Joseph is put in charge of all the Land by Pharaoh. Joseph oversees seven years of prosperity followed by seven years of famine, during which time Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt looking for food...over the course of events Joseph ends up saving not only the brothers who sold him into slavery but his entire family...

It’s a beautiful ending—but one that comes after a long lifetime of struggle. I think it’s part of human nature that we want to skip to the end, to see how everything worked out—to get to the happily ever after...

But it’s in the middle of stories, where decisions have to be made and the future is unknown, that we get to see the messy humanness of our heroines and heroes of faith—and where we get to wrestle with understanding God’s presence...

In our story this morning, we meet Joseph as he moves from the beginning of his own story into a very messy, broken and uncertain middle.

Joseph is introduced as the beloved son of Jacob—whom we met in last week’s story—Jacob had multiple wives with whom he had children, but apparently it was Joseph, the son of Jacob’s old age, whom he loved more than any other of his children.

And that belovedness wasn't a secret, it was shown by the gift of a coat with long sleeves—or a coat of many colors.

And if family favoritism wasn't enough, Joseph also had dreams—in verses 5-11, of chapter 37, Joseph shares his dreams with his family—where they were all binding sheaves of wheat in the field, then all their sheaves bowed down to Josephs. Needless to say, his older brothers weren't exactly thrilled with the idea that they would bow down to him.

So when the brothers see Joseph coming from a long way off, they conspire, at first to kill him—but then listening to Reuben they come up with another plan—they decide to strip him of his robe and throw him into a pit—then—seeing Midianite traders approaching, opportunity knocks, and they sell their brother for 20 pieces of silver.

While this is where our story for this morning leaves off, it's important to know a little more of the middle of Joseph's story.

Joseph winds up being sold to a man named Potiphar who was an officer of Pharaoh and the captain of the guard. Joseph was entrusted with overseeing Potiphar's home—and it was while he was there that Potiphar's wife made false accusations, and Joseph was thrown into the king's prison.

It's here, in the lowest of the low points, in the messy middle of Joseph's story, that the author of Genesis, makes this comment, “But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love.”

This seems counter intuitive...How...how is God with Joseph? Circumstances could not seem worse! Sold by his brothers, enslaved in Egypt, accused of wrong doing, thrown into prison...but somehow God is with Joseph, revealing, God's steadfast love even as the future is unknown.

It seems like we each have stories that we are in the middle of, a place where we are making decisions and the future is unknown.

Relationships where feelings have been hurt, harm done and communication has broken down.

Challenging decisions about school re-openings and whether or not to return to classrooms—putting friends and families at odds.

The chronic illness that won't let go, the new diagnosis that's hard to comprehend, The loved one battling addiction, the job that has fallen through, the business that might have to close.

It's in the middle of these stories that we hear the words echoing from Genesis “but the Lord was with us and showed us steadfast love.”

How is God revealing her presence to us as we sit in whatever sorrow, pain or grief we're experiencing?

How is God comforting us in the depths of our loss—in the places words can't reach and go unspoken.

How is God sitting with us as we wrestle with hard decisions—unsure of how the future will pan out?

How are we witnessing God's presence and steadfast love in the middle of our messy and unfinished stories?

This past Wednesday I woke up feeling more tired than when I went to sleep. It took a few hours and a couple cups of coffee to shake off the cobwebs and feel somewhat awake. There were phone calls and emails, and more than a few feelings of frustration toward technology as I wrestled with website errors.

It really wasn't a good day—but over the course of a few hours—I had two phone calls with friends that were unexpected—both work in church settings and together we talked about some of the challenges we each face—the struggle of attempting to stay connected over videos and zoom meetings, learning new technologies—sharing ways we've found to do ministry during the time of Covid—and in each call we found things to celebrate.

In the middle of this messy story of attempting to do ministry virtually, God was present and showed steadfast love through friends calling to share concerns, to complain, to celebrate and most of all to laugh...

I will be the first to admit, that I have a strong desire to skip the middle of our stories—the place where uncertainty and confusion make the future unknown—but it's in the middle of the story, in the uncertainty and chaos, the brokenness and heartbreak, that God is made known—not with promises of what will come, or of prosperity, but with presence and steadfast love.

Whatever story we are in the middle of, may we find comfort in the middle of the stories of the women, men and siblings of faith who have gone before us,  
In Sarah's laughter, and Moses' leadership,  
In Ruth's trust and David's courage,  
In Joseph's faithfulness and in Peter's cry for help from amongst the waves...  
Because the God who is for us and for our healing, is with us in the midst of whatever story we're in, revealing God's steadfast love.

May it be so, for you and for me, amen.