

Living On This Side of the Rainbow **Genesis 45:1-15**

Somewhere over the rainbow skies are blue. The grass is always greener on the other side. Nobody knows the troubles I've seen.

These are some of the sayings and common quips that hold an almost universal fact: Most people live out their lives waiting on something to happen to make them happy. Always sure that happiness is just around the corner, or just over the rainbow, they wait for someone to show up, some circumstance to change, some situation to develop. They're waiting of a job promotion, a marriage situation to improve, for someone to move out, someone to move in, children to grow up, or have nicer home in a better neighborhood. Then, and only then will they be happy.

A part of what I understand it means to be made "in the image of God" is that we're given freedom of will and choice. It means that in all our circumstances we have a choice in how we are going to respond. We're not always in control of our circumstances, but we're free to choose how we will respond to our circumstances. We're responsible.

I don't intend to give you a religious cliché and send you home today. Cliches usually work only in theory. When tested by the realities of life they often turn out to be what they are – just a cliché. In other words, I don't want to imply that we need only go along with the contemporary song – "Don't worry, be happy." There are situations where it would be hard, if not morally wrong, to simply accept the present situation. There are times when we need to work to change our situation. There are times when our dissatisfaction should lead us to confront and challenge the status quo. The Nazi death camps should have been challenged and were. The institutionalized prejudice of our government preceding the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s should have been challenged. An abusive situation in a family or marriage should be challenged. But at the same time, the Christian needs to develop an inner strength, a resolve to rise above circumstances ... and in the words of the Apostle Paul, "In all things be content." Again, this is not a "Do nothing – Don't worry, be happy theology." It's a biblical principle to fortify us for the very harsh realities of life. I guess a good prayer would be the one attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, now used as a motto for AA:

God, give us the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."

This morning, in the form of a narrative that covers 10 chapters in the book of Genesis, I'd like to tell you about a man with an amazing gift to be happy under the present circumstances. He didn't live his life singing "One Day Over the Rainbow." He learned how to embrace life on this side of the rainbow. He learned to bloom where he was planted. He was forever rising above adverse circumstances, while serving faithfully in favorable circumstances. His name was Joseph. Many of you know his story. If you don't, you would benefit from learning it.

Sermon Body

Scene 1: Joseph, a Son in Jacob's House (Gen 37)

Joseph was Jacob's favorite son. He was more like a grandson than a son, both in age and personality. Apparently he got a little spoiled as a boy. He was sheltered, pampered, privileged and somewhat arrogant.

And he was a dreamer. Dreamers get in a lot of trouble don't they. Jesus was a dream and look what happened to him. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream and we remember what happened to him. Somehow in Joseph's dreams he always achieved a position of honor. Rather than keeping his dream to himself, he freely told his brothers. They were jealous and resentful. These unblessed sons watched for an opportunity to unseat their father's pet. Their time soon came.

Joseph was sent by his father to check on the welfare of his brothers who were tending sheep. When he arrived, they tossed him into a well. If we didn't know the rest of the story we'd probably look down into that well and say, "Welcome to the real world Joseph."

Later, they decided to sell Joseph to a band of traveling traders. He was carried off into Egypt, away from Palestine forever. For all he knew he would live the rest of his life as a slave in a foreign land.

Scene 2: Joseph, A Slave in Potiphar's House (Gen 39).

Joseph found himself far away from family, friends, and homeland. He was a slave in Potiphar's house. Potiphar was the captain of the guard, an officer of the Egyptian pharaoh. How would he react to his new situation?

Psychiatrists tell us that the 2 most common reactions would be fight or flight. Joseph could've struggled against his circumstances, cursed his brothers, and lived with resentment. As a slave he could've done as little as possible and certainly only what was demanded. Or he could've watched for the opportunity to escape and lived for some future day when he'd be free. But what did he do?

He wasn't free to choose his circumstances, but he was free to choose his response. The choice was his. He chose to "live on this side of the rainbow." He lived where he was, not in a fantasyland on the other side of the rainbow. He worked hard. He was clean and honest. decent and bright. His religious background gave him a basic trustworthiness. He worked his way up through the ranks until he became Potiphar's chief butler. Potiphar made Joseph overseer of his house and "left all that he had in Joseph's charge (Gen 39:6).

Then came the episode with Potiphar's wife. It's the age-old story of the bored housewife and the handsome, young Hebrew slave. Her husband was seldom home and constantly busy. Taking advantage of a time when her husband was away, she tried to seduce Joseph. Once again, the choice was his. He refused. Potiphar's wife was insulted and furious. Joseph was falsely accused and sent to the royal prison where he was thrown into a dungeon.

Scene 3: Joseph in Prison (Gen 39)

You would think it would be bad enough being in jail for doing something wrong, but Joseph was falsely accused. He was in prison because he did the right thing. What would he do now? How would he respond to his new circumstances?

He could've reacted with bitterness, asking, "Is this the reward for righteousness?" He could've allowed the resentment to grow. He could've spent his days plotting revenge on Potiphar's wife. Or he could've watched for some opportunity to escape, lived for the day when he would be on the other side of the rainbow.

Notice again, Joseph wasn't free to choose his circumstances; he was free to choose his response. The choice was his. He chose to "live on this side of the rainbow." He worked hard and proved that he was dependable and trustworthy. He worked his way up through the ranks until (READ Gen 39:22-23).

Two years later, Pharaoh himself was troubled by a dream. In his dream he was standing by the Nile. Seven fat, healthy cows came up out of the Nile and fed on the grass. Seven thin, sickly cows came up out of the Nile and ate the 7 fat cows. The pharaoh's wise men couldn't interpret his dream (Gen 41:1-8).

Evidently, the chief butler was in the "know" and he knew Pharaoh was having trouble finding an interpreter. Joseph popped into his mind. He said, "I had a strange experience when I was in the slammer. I had a dream. A Hebrew named Joseph interpreted it for me. It came out exactly as he said it would."

So Pharaoh sent for Joseph. Joseph told him the meaning of his dream. There would be 7 years of abundance followed by 7 years of famine. Joseph even proposed a solution. He said that granaries should be built to store the surplus grain during the 7 years of abundance. And an administrator should be appointed to oversee the process. Pharaoh was impressed.

Scene 4: Joseph, the Prime Minister in Pharaoh's Palace (Gen 41)

(READ Gen 41:40-41) This was the best thing that had happened to Joseph since he received the coat of many colors from his father years ago. Here were some different circumstances, good circumstances. How did he react? With pride, saying, "Finally I'm getting what I had come to me all along?" With self-indulgence? Did he use his new situation to insure his own future? Pad his own pocketbook? Did he simply look out for number one? Did he use his new resources to get revenge on Potiphar's wife? Or what about his brother? Now he could get those punks once and for all.

Even though Joseph wasn't free to choose his circumstances; he was free to choose his response. As usual, the choice was his. He chose to "live on this side of the rainbow". He chose to bloom where he was planted. He worked hard. He carried out the plan he had submitted to Pharaoh. Notice Gen 41:57: [READ]

His brothers were part of that group that came from Canaan to buy grain. They bowed themselves with faces to the ground before Joseph. Joseph could've said, "Remember those dream I told you about years ago? Even if he thought it, he didn't say it. What he did say to his brother is found in (Gen 45:7-8). Unseen forces had been at work in Joseph's life. God had been involved in it all along. In Christian theology we call this providence.

Scene 5: Today and Our Choices

I know there are valid differences of opinion about this subject of God's sovereignty and man's freedom. But as I see it, we're not free to choose our circumstances; but we do have freedom in our responses. The choice is ours. How are you responding to your circumstances? Are you "living on this side of the rainbow" where your feet are on real ground?

Many are fighting all the way. They curse their circumstances. They live with bitterness and resentment. They do only what life demands. They spend most of their energy studying how to get revenge on those who have shortchanged them. They may not be responsible for the circumstances which surround their unhappiness, but they are responsible for how they respond to those circumstances.

Some of us run away. Seeking an escape. Living for the future. Looking for the pot of gold on the other side of the rainbow. Some, not liking the reality of their lives try to escape into a fantasy world of alcohol and drugs. Others are constantly running, on the move from town to town, church to church, place to place, trying to find some ideal set of circumstances – and thus, happiness.

Robert Hastings has beautifully described their search:

Tucked away in our subconscious minds is an ideal vision. We see ourselves on a long, long trip that almost spans the continent. But uppermost in our minds is our destination. A certain hour and we'll put in the station with bands playing and flags waving. . . . However, sooner or later we must realize there's no one station, no one place to arrive once and for all. The true joy of life is the trip. The station is only a dream. It constantly outdistances us.

"When we reach the station that will be it.

When I buy the new 450 SL Mercedes Benz, that will be it!

When I put the last kid through college, that'll be it!

When I get that promotion, that'll be it.

When I have that nest egg for retirement, that's be it! And I'll live happily ever after.

Unfortunately, once we get "it", then "it" disappears. The station somehow hides itself at the end of an endless track.

So stop pacing the aisles and counting the miles . . . Life must be lived as we go along. The station will come soon enough.

I think it's true to say, the happiest people I know are those who have learned or are learning to "Live on this side of the rainbow." If you're on this side of the rainbow, you may not reach the pot of gold, but you can enjoy the beauty of the rainbow from one side as well as the other. God has given us some lee-way in our decisions. Maybe we haven't chosen our circumstances. But we do, in a very real degree, control our responses.

My experience with most pregnancies is that both the men and women involved are overjoyed when they learn they are pregnant and when they finally have the baby. The months in between aren't so wonderful. Weird cravings, extra weight, uncomfortable sleeping positions are the norm. Most of us don't want to think about being pregnant FOREVER. But you may know some people who are handicapped in some way as long as they will live. Maybe not in a physical sense, but maybe they carry with them an

emotional scar that will always be a part of them. It never leaves. I can't claim to have perfected the art of "living on this side of the rainbow, and I recognize I'm unscarred in a variety of ways. But I have to believe that Paul was right, that he spoke authoritatively when he said (Phil 4:12) "*I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation . . .*" What a powerful statement. What a bulwark against the ups and downs of life. What a wonderful thing to be able to "live on either side of the rainbow." What a source of strength to be able to sing with the Psalmist, "*This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it*" (Ps. 118:24).

Conclusion

We can't all be like Joseph. But we can all learn from his life as recorded in Holy Scripture. We even have knowledge of revelation that was unavailable to him. He didn't have the 10 Commandments, much less the comfort of a risen Savior by his side. But he "bloomed where he was planted," he "lived on this side of the rainbow." And he had to live in some pretty bad places – a pit, a prison to name a couple. And so this is a word for us.

Don't live your life longing for blue skies somewhere over the rainbow. Someone has said that today is often crucified between two thieves: our regret of yesterday and our fear of tomorrow. Today is really all we have. Life must be lived as we go along. Life must be lived on this side of the rainbow.