

The word now is to ‘represent.’ To show up, be present- to be there to let folks know that what you stand for is present and you are there for others. This sermon starts with the Hebrew word “Hineini”- ‘Here I Am,’ and a passage of scripture when someone is called to acknowledge their presence to another. Sometimes the call comes from God (in a mysterious voice), or from an elder/mentor. In every case the call asks the hearer to be ready to say yes and then to venture into a new task at hand; to ‘represent’, as they say.



Seldom does the hearer know what’s in store for them, but in their ‘yes’ comes the support of God’s presence. So it is with our Bible story for today, a tale that dates back to around 1500 BC, in one of the most adventure-filled and dramatic stories of the Bible. There are hidden gems in this story that reappear through scripture in the most unexpected places. Underneath it all, most often sight unseen, is the truth that God believes in us more than we believe in ourselves, and God’s ways are not always our ways. It takes something out of the ordinary for us to recognize this in our lives and the story of Joseph exemplifies this better than any other story in the Bible. When we say “here I am” to God, it’s a two-sided deal; I commit myself to One who is ready, willing and able to support me in my journey, even in unexpected and sometimes unknown ways, entrusting myself into God’s loving promises. And God follows through in ways sometimes more mysterious than we can fathom.

I really need to begin this sermon with a story- and an unexpected one. It was a week ago Wednesday when I drove into my driveway and saw a flood of water rushing across it. It wasn’t a rainy day, so I wondered where the water was coming from. Emma was with me and it didn’t take her long to figure it out.

I have a wooden deck on the back of my house, and water was gushing up through the boards. The pipe leading to my backyard hose had burst because of the deep freeze and thaw that we had just gone through. I should have known better and turned the water off when the

deep freeze was coming but hadn't done that. I ran inside and turned the water off from inside my basement.

Taking care of the matter was easy enough with some turns of the knob, but it gave me a 'flash back' of a memory from when I once worked with pipes and plumbing as a thirteen-year-old assistant to my Uncle Mick, who was a plumber by trade.

At that moment of turning the knob, I almost heard his voice come back to me. I spent most of the summer of 1970 on my very first job, tagging around after him from house to house, basement to basement- carrying his toolbox and handing him the tools when he needed them. That was my job description. I remember more than once when we'd be in an old dusty basement and he'd be in an awkward place, both arms up around the pipes, barely able to move, and he'd yell, "Tommy- where are you? I need so-and-so wrench!" (He had put different colored electrical tape on a bunch of wrenches so that I'd know the right one to hand him.)

Obediently I'd snap out of what I was doing (maybe messing around with a spider's web in a far corner of the basement), and I'd shout, "here I am, here I come!" That happened pretty often through that summer, enough that he joked about it at summertime family picnics for many years thereafter.

What I remember most about it all was the sense of responsibility I felt, working with a man I looked up to... (Uncle Mick had been a Medic in the Korean War- he was a burly guy with a very no-nonsense way about him.) My job, as much as anything else, was not to disappoint him.

That's how I envision Joseph hearing his father's call to come when he was called.

"Here I am," he said; no questions asked; he 'represented', front and center.

Now, think about this a second. To whom did you show up for when you were 13 years old? With what attitude did you bring yourself when you were called? What was the feeling going on inside you? Love, respect, devotion, fear? Do you remember that feeling?

Joseph shows up for his father ready and willing. He didn't know what was going to be asked of him. It wasn't his own agenda he was going to be following; he was going to fulfill his father's request.

He also knew something of the larger family dynamics that were going on. He may well have known that his older brothers really didn't like him; that they thought he was a spoiled brat, too smart for his own good and their father's favorite for no good reason, but maybe he didn't even see that, (who knows)?



What we do know is that he follows his father's request and begins a journey that takes him longer and farther than he ever could have possibly imagined. Instead of just going the 20 miles up to Dothan to retrieve his brothers, he begins a trek that will take more than 20 years. He is carted off to Egypt as a slave to a government official, Potiphar, and then the real adventure begins. Joseph's ability to interpret dreams pays off handsomely and saves him from some potentially embarrassing and life-threatening situations. He accurately predicts the future and prepares the Egyptian people for an impending famine, both saving those people and providing a refuge for his own brothers who flee to Egypt for food.

The entire Joseph saga can read like a fairy tale, a dramatic rags-to-riches, hard to believe story that is too good to be true. But the story of Joseph is an essential chapter of the saga of God's people, a carefully woven novella with deep meaning for people of faith.

Built into this saga are three critical parts of the story of God's people, without which the entire Hebrew Bible would not stand. (The "Salvation History of Israel", "Heilsgeschichte"- in German, is how some Biblical theologians call it.) In Joseph's being taken to Egypt as a captive we learn how it is that the Hebrew people come to be there in the first place, without which there could never have been an Exodus, with Moses and the rest of the Hebrews later gaining their freedom from the Pharaoh.

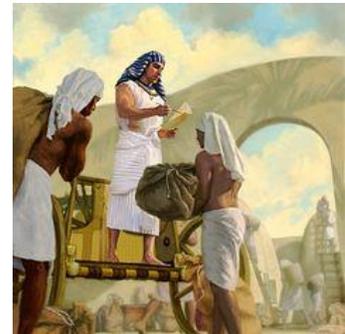
We also get a clear sense of what it means for someone to possess 'courtly wisdom' and worldly savvy, the sage insight and cleverness that prefigures the greatest King of Israel, David.

Finally, we read a story that gives dramatic and unforgettable moments of God's grace, mercy and presence in the most dire and unlikely of circumstances.

When Joseph says 'Here I am' to his father he sets off a chain reaction of events of faithfulness that continue even into our lives. Our stories are complex and compelling, ups and downs, unpredictable and faithful. Maybe we are not Joseph, but we also look to our God with an earnest amount of faithfulness, trust and hope.

Somehow, we have all said 'Here I am' to God, or else we likely would not be here. Our journeys are not all the same, but we are all still called by the same God who is faithful to us even when it doesn't seem like it.

At the end of the Joseph story, after he has become a viceroy in the Egyptian government, having successfully negotiated a grain storage program that saved the Egyptian people from starvation with a surplus to be shared with others, his brothers make an appearance in the court where he presides, in search for food.



It's as dramatic a moment as there is in Hebrew scripture (and there are plenty of dramatic moments!) As his brothers stand before him, pleading for mercy in their father's name, Joseph is overwhelmed with mercy - grateful for all that has been granted him in all the years past, unpredictable as it was. Then he shares with them one of the most quotable quotes of scripture.

"Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good." (50:20)

That is not to say that God intended harm to Joseph (or anyone else, for that matter) - but that God would not walk away from them in their disobedience. In the end, the tables of the story are turned. In effect, Joseph says to his brothers, 'Here I am' - without their asking. Joseph 'represents' God's mercy made real. In 'representing' - just showing up, God is present. Forgiveness overtakes vengeance and mercy outdoes hatred. Through it all, in difficulties, doubts and despair, God stands by the covenantal promises made to Abraham - and somehow Joseph holds on to them as well, counting on God and distributing God's mercy.

So, what does this mean for us?

Whether come here this morning feeling blessed or feeling forsaken, taken advantage of or the recipients of God's favor- God is here for us.

God 'represents.' In this meal prepared for us; God is here. In the voices you've heard call you to serve and in the words of the One who invites you to this table, God believes in you more than you believe in yourself.

Equipped with God's promises, we begin our journey once again- living faithful lives called to seek, share and serve in the loving name of the one who saves us all. Amen.

*God of dreams and hope,*

*You spoke to Joseph in his dreams and those dreams led him into great danger. Yet you used the challenges in his life to save the lives of others. In you, no good thing is accidental. You work in us and through us, even when we are not aware of your presence. Help us to know that you are with us, and that only you are capable of turning all evil to good. We pray all these things in the name of the one whose own nightmares became redemption for us, even Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. Amen.*