

Fashion Statement

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I am wondering about what you think of my new robe? It was lovingly stitched by one of our own church members, Faith Reynolds. I wore it a couple weeks when I was playing Joseph out in the courtyard, so I thought I would try it on again. That black robe didn't seem to keep as many of you awake as I'd hoped, so I thought the rainbow effect would jar your attention at least for a couple minutes. I'm not sure it goes with the penny loafers – but it's something new and different, a bold fashion statement I would say. Most of you I hope will endure me wearing this for the rest of my time here this morning. But I suspect if I was announcing today that this was not just the robe of the week, but the robe from now on – you might have a little different thought about it. Perhaps you might feel a greater liberty to weigh in with your own opinion and comment. Maybe you might have some more critical thought on the color selection, or the length, or the sleeves or the collar or even on the person who made the choice to wear it. Maybe you might wonder about what kind of statement was being made by the one who is donning it. Perhaps we'd all turn into Joan Rivers and do our red carpet critique. It is the risk you take when you state your preference, when you express your fashion. Not everybody is going to like the state of your affairs. Not everybody will appreciate your taste.

In our journey through God's great story we find ourselves this morning inside the story of Joseph. The story of Joseph finds itself inside this greater story of God's promise – first to Noah to never again destroy the earth, and then to Abraham who was promised to be the father of many nations – and now those nations of Abraham – the family tree of Abraham -- are now emerging out of the sons of Jacob. Twelve sons who will form the twelve tribes of Israel. And Joseph is the

youngest son. The youngest of twelve brothers. Now I am the youngest of four brothers – and let me tell you it ain't a cake walk. When you are the youngest of four brothers you walk around with this target and bull's eye on your back. When you are the youngest of a bunch of boys – not only are you the victim of psychological and physical warfare – but then when you run to mom for help you're always tagged with being mamma's little boy. There's no winning. So can you imagine being the youngest of 12 brothers? And then can you imagine your father's gift of the new colored coat? A coat of many colors. None of the other eleven received such a coat – but now little Junior has. Now when I was young I wouldn't have considered a colored coat a gift. I suppose it's the equivalent of getting today a new car. The first eleven brothers got bicycles and you get the Jeep Wrangler. And then on top of that – young Joseph starts dreaming dreams that suggest that he's the one whom the other eleven will someday be serving. Visions of grandeur. This is not the way to endear yourself to your brothers. And so as the story goes the brothers gang up on him ... strip him of his coat ... and sell him to slave traders who take him to Egypt and sell him to an Egyptian government official. And then, as we read in our story this morning, the wife of the official, Potiphar's wife, tries to seduce poor Joseph and Joseph refuses – and since no good deed goes unpunished, he gets thrown into jail – the victim of false accusation.

Now as I said a minute ago – this is all a part of God's great story and the story is about God's promises – but to see what's happened to the young Joseph – shunned by his brothers, sold into slavery, and then thrown into prison falsely – well it doesn't sound so promising for Joseph. Sometimes living the story of promise it appears --- sometimes being what you believe God wants you to be – sometimes expressing the true fashion of who you are – can end you up in unpromising places. Alone and in prison.

Prison time seems to be a big deal in the Bible. You kind of earn your stripes in the Bible when you get sent to prison. Jesus spent some time in prison – the dungeon cell at Caiaphas' house. Peter and John get thrown into prison. Paul and Silas get beaten and shackled in prison. The apostle John gets exiled to the prison island of Patmos. Prison is big deal in the Bible – and all these prisoners were

there because they were trying to live out the promise. They were doing what they thought God wanted them to do. They were showing their true colors.

I'm not sure what we think about that anymore. I'm not sure today we connect anymore the idea of the promises of God and in prison. I don't hear too many preachers today, myself included, talking about how the promise of God might land you in jail. In fact, we might think that jail time for the local pastor would be an embarrassment and an outrage. I've told some of you about the time when I was a kid and being in the room when my mother got a phone call from my father who had just been thrown in jail. My dad was a respectable Presbyterian pastor – it's just that he picked the wrong town in which to participate in a civil rights march. So into jail they threw him. Now knowing my dad and knowing why he had been thrown in jail – I remember, strangely enough, feeling so proud. But you won't be surprised to learn that there were a bunch of elders who weren't so proud of their pastor. It made for an interesting Session meeting.

So when it comes to the promises of God we don't often think of such promises with jail time in mind. What we want to hear is that the promises of God always come up roses. The promises of God always have a happy ending. The promises of God end up with pennies from heaven. But there are a bunch of people in the Bible who might beg to differ with us.

And so it explains how the Genesis writer can say about the poor young Joseph sitting alone in a foreign prison: "The Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love." You can be alone and you can be in prison – and you can know the promised presence of God and his steadfast love.

One of the great written documents of American history and Church history for that matter was written from jail. It's actually called *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* – written by Martin Luther King, Jr. King was thrown into jail for participating in a peaceful march in Birmingham, Alabama. And he read in the paper that the white clergy in town were questioning his tactics as a pastor – and why he felt compelled to rush the civil rights movement. So he took the very same newspaper and in the

margins began to compose his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* and tried to explain why the African-American population couldn't wait. He included these words:

Even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are at present misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's destiny. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence across the pages of history, we were here ... If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.

Sounds like a man who believes in the promises of God.

So the promises of God get embedded in Joseph's life and what that means is a coat of many colors that makes his brothers jealous. And what that means are dreams that make them hostile. And what that means is being sold into slavery. And what that means is the rejection of tempting advances. And what that means is solitude in a cell. Such is what happens when you show your true colors. When you make a fashion statement.

When I was a boy I remember seeing a movie called "Brian's Song". It was a movie about the friendship between two NFL players – Gayle Sayers and Brian Piccolo. One black the other white who were roommates in the 1960's – something unheard of in the NFL back then. The movie is one of those tearjerkers that made grown men cry when in the movie – as in real life -- Piccolo died of cancer. But what the movie never mentioned was earlier when Piccolo was in college playing for Wake Forest they hosted the University of Maryland who at that time – 1963—had on their team the first and only black player in the entire ACC – Daryl Hill. Wake Forest was known as the most hostile of the ACC campuses when it came to race. So when Daryl Hill took the field and made for the bench

it was Brian Piccolo, all by himself – no coaches at his side – who crossed the field from his own bench and shook the hand of Daryl Hill and then escorted him to the Wake Forest stands and put his arm around him to say – this man is welcome here.

Sometimes when the promises of God get imbedded in your life you have to go it alone.

In 1973 when the Republican Senator Mark Hatfield – a deeply committed Christian was asked to speak at the Presidential Prayer Breakfast he found himself sitting at the head table in between President Richard Nixon and the Rev. Billy Graham. Fairly intense company. Who wouldn't want to be sitting between the President of the United States and Billy Graham? Hatfield reports that he never felt more alone than when he sat there, because he knew that in a few minutes – driven by his Christian principles of non-violence -- he would show his true colors and stand and take the President to task over the Vietnam War. And yet when he stood to speak, Hatfield later recalled, a peace came. It's what happens when the promises of God imbed into your life – you can feel pretty alone and you can feel pretty much at peace. What Hatfield didn't expect was to be put on the White House hit list and to receive a letter of rebuke from Rev. Graham.

So a young man sits in his prison cell and wonders what is going to happen. He is alone but he is not alone. The Lord was with him and showed him steadfast love. Because you know the truth is in God's great story – this great drama that unfolds from the heart of God – this great drama to which we are invited to play a part – we never quite know what the next scene is. We don't know how the story will go. Young Joseph in a foreign prison has no idea how it's going to go. He doesn't know that the coat and the dreams and the refusal to temptation and the prison – he doesn't know that it's all a part of this great story where he finds acceptance by the Pharaoh and trust to be in charge of a nation's food supply and all in all to be a Savior to his own family and country. "You meant it for evil," he says to his brothers, "but God meant it for good." Joseph doesn't know any of that as he sits in his cell alone. All he knows is that the promises of God are imbedded within.

And I suppose that's all we could ever know – that the promises of God are imbedded within. And God asks nothing more than for us to trust in the promises. Trust in the promises. Because somehow they are the plot behind the whole story.

And so it was for the young man sitting alone in a prison cell. There because he trusted in the promises of God. There because he believed that Hitler's Third Reich was bringing an end to the world and he had to put a stop to it. There because he believed that God had a better way than the Aryan nation. But once there and all alone – Dietrich Bonhoeffer didn't know how it would turn out. How would the story end for him? Each day when the jailer walked the path to his cell would it be to take him to his execution. And sure enough one day it was just that.

But while in his anxious wait he wrote a poem in which he gave words to his solitude and worry and finished by saying:

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!

And as they took him to the gallows, his fellow prisoners heard him say, "This is the end for me - but then again for me, this is only beginning".

Who knows what colors you have to wear? Who knows what dreams you are to dream? Who knows what temptations you have to resist? Who knows what convictions you have to pursue? Who knows what direction God is leading you to? Strange things can happen when the promises of God imbed within your soul. Sometimes they take us to a very lonely place. But as alone as we are, we are never alone. For the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. That no matter what colors we have to show, no matter what fashion we have to state, no matter what justice we have to pursue, no matter how uncertain we are as to the rest of the plot – the One who pens the story is the one who shares with us the cell.