

PSALM 36:5-10

⁵Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.
⁶Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
your judgments are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike, O LORD.
⁷How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
⁸They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
⁹For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.
¹⁰O continue your steadfast love to those who know you,
and your salvation to the upright of heart!

GENESIS 39-40

Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. ²The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. ³His master saw that the LORD was with him, and that the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. ⁴So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. ⁵From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had, in house and field. ⁶So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge; and, with him there, he had no concern for anything but the food that he ate.

Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. ⁷And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, 'Lie with me.' ⁸But he refused and said to his master's wife, 'Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. ⁹He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?' ¹⁰And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her. ¹¹One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house, ¹²she caught hold of his garment, saying, 'Lie with me!' But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside. ¹³When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, ¹⁴she called out to the members of her household and said to them, 'See, my

husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice; ¹⁵and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside.’¹⁶Then she kept his garment by her until his master came home, ¹⁷and she told him the same story, saying, ‘The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me; ¹⁸but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside.’

19 When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, ‘This is the way your servant treated me’, he became enraged. ²⁰And Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison. ²¹But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. ²²The chief jailer committed to Joseph’s care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. ²³The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph’s care, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper.

Some time after this, the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker offended their lord the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, and he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison where Joseph was confined. The captain of the guard charged Joseph with them, and he waited on them; and they continued for some time in custody. One night they both dreamed—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—each his own dream, and each dream with its own meaning. When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. So he asked Pharaoh’s officers, who were with him in custody in his master’s house, ‘Why are your faces downcast today?’ They said to him, ‘We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them.’ And Joseph said to them, ‘Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me.’

So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, ‘In my dream there was a vine before me, and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms came out and the clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh’s cup was in my hand; and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh’s cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh’s hand.’ Then Joseph said to him, ‘This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days; within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and you shall place Pharaoh’s cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer. But remember me when it is well with you; please do me the kindness to make mention of me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this place. For in fact I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews; and here also I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon.’

When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favorable, he said to Joseph, ‘I also had a dream: there were three cake baskets on my head, and in the uppermost

basket there were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head.' And Joseph answered, 'This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days; within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head—from you!—and hang you on a pole; and the birds will eat the flesh from you.'

On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, he made a feast for all his servants, and lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants. He restored the chief cupbearer to his cupbearing, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand; but the chief baker he hanged, just as Joseph had interpreted to them. Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

SERMON

When the Japanese invaded China in 1937 during World War II they round up American, Canadian, British, and other non-Chinese citizens and corral them into concentration camps. The camps were brutal and terrible places to live. The captives lived in near starvation conditions, guarded by barbed wire, Japanese soldiers, and attack dogs. News of massacres and atrocities committed by the Japanese army, such as the well known attack on Nanking, floated into their camps, and even as they kept daily life moving along, prisoners knew that at any day they could be on the receiving end of a devastating attack from their captors. It was, for lack of a more forceful term, an anxious and frightening time.

One of these camps was known as Weixian. When the Japanese invaded this area, they came across a boarding school, populated mostly with the children of American, British, Canadian, and Australian missionaries. The school, and all of its students and teachers, was taken captive and moved to the camp. The teachers, it turns out, had the foresight to bring with them books and supplies, as well as all of the Girl Guides and Brownies uniforms they could gather up. Here in the United States we have Girl Scouts, around the world the same program is known as Girl Guides. The children were

taken to this camp, far away from their parents, with only their teachers, and we know about their story today thanks to the logbooks kept by the “Brown Owls,” the leaders of the Girl Guide troop of Weixian Concentration camp.

Each day the Brown Owls would lead their troop of girls through the typical activities of a scouting troop. The girls worked hard to earn badges, they participated in school work and camp chores. They sang songs and put together talent shows for the prisoners of the camp. On one Christmas Day, the logbook says the girls performed a song they would sing all the time, it says, “we might have been shipped to Timbuktu, we might have been shipped to Kalamazoo. It’s not repatriation. Nor is it yet starvation. It’s simply concentration in Chefoo.”¹ Chefoo was another name for their camp. The Brown Owls found ways to turn the work of camp life into games and competitions for the girls. They would form teams to collect the coal dust left over in the quarters of the Japanese captors. Then they would race to mix the coal dust with dirt and water, compact it into bricks, which they would then burn as fuel for their own meager potbellied stoves.

It’s a bizarre and macabre story. The picture is jarring: we can imagine this troop of girls in their smart green uniforms and cloth hats, racing each other to form bricks of coal dust and mud, with the end result being that, at least for one night, they won’t die of hypothermia. It’s insane and sad and beautiful all at once.

¹ <https://gimletmedia.com/episode/28-shipped-to-timbuktu/>

Years after the camp had been liberated in 1945, one of the Girl Guides, Mary Previte, who lives in New Jersey today, looked up one of her former Brown Owl leaders, Miss Carr. She asked Miss Carr how and why the teachers had done what they did, continuing about life as usual with the girls, in the midst of great injustice. Miss Carr filled in the other half of the story for her. During the days, the Brown Owls did their best to keep life as normal as possible for the girls...requiring proper manners, even though they were literally eating pig slop out of soap dishes because they didn't have any plates, teaching class, reminding the Girl Guides to each do one good deed each day, as their oath required of them. And then at night the teachers would gather together to pray that when the Japanese arrived, that the death would be swift, shot in the back next to a pit, so neither the children nor they would have to suffer a prolonged death, nor the sight of the others being killed.

The Brown Owls, not much older than the Girl Guides themselves, used the ingrained optimism and order of the Scouting movement to maintain, as best they were able, the childhood of their charges, in the midst of grim and overwhelming darkness.

And their story, in its own way, reminded me of a modern take on where we find Joseph this week. Joseph, when we last left our hero, had been sold into slavery by his own brothers. Marched off to the foreign land of Egypt, he was bought by Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. While enslaved by Potiphar, Joseph seems to have found favor. I sort of think of him acting a bit like those Brown Owls. Despite desperate circumstances, Joseph seems to be the kind of guy who is going to do his best to do a great job at whatever he's been tasked with. And in this case, his hard work and the faithfulness of

God lead to him being promoted to the enviable position of overseer of Potiphar's house...about as respectable a position as a slave could hope for.

But then, as seems to be the case for Joseph, disaster strikes again. The desperate housewife of Potiphar, after a lengthy failed seduction, one day accuses Joseph of assault, and he is summarily tossed into prison, to be forgotten and left to die. But, as is his pattern, Joseph receives the favor of the Lord, dusts himself off, and it seems that he does all right. Ever the hard worker and optimist, Joseph is quickly promoted to care for the other prisoners...a sort of Brown Owl to his own Girl Guide troop in prison. He is respected by the prisoners and the guards, alike.

And then, one day, Joseph gets his shot at freedom. The cupbearer and the baker of Pharaoh have been tossed into prison, and they begin having haunting, confusing dreams, and so they seek out someone to interpret them. And who should be there with them in prison, but our very own dream interpreter, Joseph! He interprets their dreams, and asks each to remember him as they are called back into the presence of Pharaoh, to plead his case and speak on behalf of the injustice done to him.

The dreams do come true, the baker is hanged and the cupbearer is restored to his position in Pharaoh's court, but as is the pattern, the cupbearer does not remember poor Joseph, and so, injustice heaped upon injustice, he remains in prison, serving a term for a crime he did not commit, at a job he was sold into, in a country he did not choose to enter, sent there, chained up by his very own brothers.

And this is yet another reason why Joseph's story has such staying power for us, thousands of years later. I think we resonate with this idea that life is inherently unfair. Injustices, both slight and significant, are something we experience in our own lives and observe in the world around us. We know that sometimes good things happen to bad people, and bad things happen to good people. Joseph's situation keeps spiraling downward, despite his best efforts; the children of missionaries are very nearly starved to death in a prisoner camp.

But this is what we can take from Joseph and the Brown Owls, it's all about the resilience they bring. I think they are both excellent and powerful examples of what the Apostle Paul tells us to do, "to rejoice in all circumstances." I wonder if a major part of the reason both Joseph and the prisoners of Weixian Camp survived, and even in their own weird ways thrived, was because of the fact that they brought optimism, hard work, kindness, and a spirit of gratitude to even the darkest of circumstances. There's something in these stories of their lives being kept intact because of their own internal joy. Not to say that it was happy or easy work, but as we will see, they emerge with their souls intact, which is no small feat. And beyond that, they blessed and improved the lives of the others around them. That's a beautiful example of what we might call Christian charity. Living our lives optimistically, with generosity and kindness toward others, upholding our end of the social bargain. We know injustice exists, we know life is going to be unfair, but I think part of our calling, as people of faith, is to trust in the faithfulness of God, which provides us with a peace that surpasses understanding.

And this is one of the most difficult callings placed upon us as Christians, especially as American Christians. We're hardwired to care deeply about what is fair and just. We want criminals to be punished for their crimes, we want good citizens to receive an award. But so often that's not how the world works. Injustice is going to be a part of our experience. And what Joseph and the Brown Owls call us into is the invitation to be people of resilience and charity, gratitude and hard work in the midst of any situation we find ourselves in. It's sort of the next step after Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek...after doing that, we're supposed to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and get back to the work God has set in front of us, no matter how disorienting it may be. This is not to say we should not fight back against injustice, because that is certainly a part of our calling, as well as a part of these stories. But in the midst of injustice, we are called to do more than fight back. We are called to live like Joseph: with compassion, generosity, and gratitude toward all people, to love our enemies, as difficult as that may be. Thanks be to God for this good and challenging word. Amen.