



NOT YOUR AVERAGE JOE: PART I

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It's great to be back speaking this morning. I hope you enjoyed getting to hear a few fresh voices over the past 3 weeks. It was good for me to take some time to look toward the future and pray about what's next for New Day. Can you believe we're coming up on our 1 year anniversary? God has done so much in 12 months, and we're still just getting our feet on the ground. It was great to get some time to think about our second year and where we want to go. We'll be talking a lot about our next steps throughout the fall.

I'm excited to go into the fall with a series focused on the life of Joseph. Everyone I told about this series said how much they like the story of Joseph. I feel especially qualified to talk about him since I played him in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat!* Actually, that's a pretty silly show that doesn't convey the depth to the man's character and how large he stands in the Bible.

Did you know that more space is devoted to his story than any other character in Genesis? More than Adam and Eve, more than Noah, more than even Abraham. He's one of the most familiar people from the Bible, and I would guess that a majority of American's have heard at least part of his story.

One reason for the coverage he gets is that he is what we would call a "type" of Christ. His life foreshadows the experience of Jesus. He was the suffering son who saved the world, and as we go through the story over the next few weeks, we will see the parallels pretty clearly.

But where I would like to focus our attention is on the fact of Joseph being an example of what it means to follow God. His life provides us with so many lessons of what it looks like to be a disciple. Big concepts like decision making, dealing with temptation, forgiveness and faith all shine through in Joseph. His life has more than a good plot – it's extremely applicable to our lives today.

Let's look at the start of his story in the Bible.

Gen 37:1-11

Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan.

This is the account of Jacob.

Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it."

His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.

Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

Now there's some good family tension for you. The stage has been set for some nasty business that will follow. This family is like something out of the Godfather, and it didn't start with Joseph.

Back when his father Jacob was a boy, he was his mom's favorite, and she tricked her husband into blessing Jacob instead of Esau. Jacob had to flee for his life, so he of all people should have been aware of the dangers of playing favorites.

Then Jacob married two sisters, who were constantly fighting for his affection. There was a huge sibling rivalry over who could produce the most sons, and they each gave Jacob their servants as wives as well to up the ante a bit. Joseph was the firstborn of the favorite wife, and he didn't come along until after many of his brothers were already born. When he arrived on the scene, it was already a family in disarray.

But it was when Joseph was seventeen that things began to escalate. I consider this the starting point of his journey of faith.

The first thing we're told is that Joseph gave his father a bad report on his brothers. He and some of his brothers were in charge of the sheep. We're not told what it was they did wrong. We just know it was bad enough that Joseph had to make two decisions:

1. Am I going to go along with this?

Joseph could have participated in whatever the activity was. But something in his conscience was not at rest. When you're 17 and you're the youngest in the group, it's a hard choice to say, "I can't join you." I don't know if it's the same for girls, but guys get a pack mentality, and you don't want to be the odd one out. As a freshman in college, I did a lot of things I never would have dreamed of doing on my own, simply because that's what my friends were doing and I didn't want to be left out. Joseph was strong enough to say no. I can't go along with this.

2. Who has my loyalty?

Once Joseph decided whether or not to participate, he also had to decide whether he was going to keep quiet about it or if he should tell his father. It is one thing to just look the other way when something is going on, and it's something else entirely to risk the repercussions of blowing the whistle.

Joseph lived in his father's house. His dad had supported him, put food in his stomach and clothes on his back. Joseph had to decide whether he was going to just take advantage of that hospitality or if he was going to really live like he was Jacob's child and look out for his interests.

I once had a coworker who was the only one in our office who could do her job. One day out of the blue I got a call from another company getting a reference for her because they were about to offer her a job. I was really torn as to whether or not I should say anything to my boss. I knew if we were going to have to hire someone, we needed to do it quickly, but I didn't want to make the other person mad by sharing something she didn't want to share. I eventually came to the conclusion that my boss had a right to know because it was going to have a significant impact on the company, and if she had some advance warning, she could be better prepared. I knew who buttered my bread, and I felt that was the more important allegiance for me.

Joseph knew that his dad needed to know what was going on out in the fields. I'm sure he also knew his brothers well enough to know how unhappy they would be when they found out. He chose to honor his father and bring himself in line with his will rather than that of his brothers.

I call this the starting point in Joseph's faith journey, because I think we all have to come face to face with those two questions any time we're at a spiritual crossroads. We find ourselves in a situation, confronted with a choice and we say, "Am I going to go along with this?" A big part of the Christian life is developing personal accountability to God. The great thing is that we can make that choice at any time. Even if we've already

started down a wrong path, the question is right there with us: Am I going to keep heading this way with everybody else, or am I ready to say enough is enough? I can't do this anymore. I'm stopping, I'm turning, I'm going back.

Joseph was dealing with the context of family, but it happens all the time on the job. There's a subtle pressure to go along. Just the other day, I was talking with Ed Rodrigues. He works for a tire company that takes care of a lot of fleet cars, and sometimes when they go out to inspect the cars, there's a pressure to invent things that are wrong and needing repair, because otherwise the company doesn't get paid. Ed had the courage to say, "If you're wanting me to lie, I can't do it." His boss respected that and doesn't ask Ed to do that anymore. But that's a scary stance to take when that boss can instead decide to fire you for not going along.

The Christian walk is one of constantly swimming upstream and going against the tide of society that's headed a different direction.

The second question that we face with Joseph is also the same. Who has our allegiance? Are we ready to put ourselves fully in line with our Father and his will? Will we see his concerns as our own concerns?

Joseph's answers to these questions put him directly into conflict with his brothers. They hated him. It was a seething, growing hatred that the author of Genesis mentions several times so we won't miss it. There is going to be big trouble as a result.

Two things are really going for Joseph, though – two things that give him the security to keep plugging along. **The first is the unconditional love of his father.**

As I said before, Jacob should have known better than to play favorites. It's never right for a parent to treat their children unequally. He created all kinds of competition between his children, not to mention some deep-seated insecurities in boys who needed to know their father cared.

Jacob was a painfully human and imperfect father, particularly when you see him through the eyes of 11 sons. But let's put that aside for a moment and consider life from the perspective of Joseph. Here is someone who knew without a doubt that his dad would always care about him. He was loved for who he was – the child of Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife who had died. It wasn't about what Joseph did or didn't do – it was his basic identity that Jacob loved. Nothing Joseph did would change that.

And that gave Joseph a huge amount of security in life. He could face the wrath of his brothers and whatever they threw at him, because he felt solid in who he was.

Jacob gave Joseph a symbol of his love in that famous coat. The description of it indicates that it had long sleeves and reached to the floor. It was the kind of coat that speaks volumes. His brothers would have taken it to mean that Joseph had been chosen as the heir. He was going to get the lion's share of the inheritance.

It also said that Joseph wasn't going to have to do the hard work anymore. People with fancy clothes like that were not expected to get them dirty. Work clothes of the day would have been sleeveless and shorter to give better movement. And they wouldn't have been anything you didn't want to get dirty. The coat was a very significant gift.

All that from an extremely broken father. Translate that to us and our experience of our heavenly father and you see how much we have going for us in our faith walk. We are secure in the love of God.

1 John 3:1

What marvelous love the Father has extended to us! Just look at it — we're called children of God! That's who we really are.

That love is based on the fact that we're his — not on anything we do. And nothing can ever change that love.

Romans 8:38-39

I'm absolutely convinced that nothing — nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable — absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.

Having such a strong love that is that secure enables us to face the world and what it brings our way. I love how the Message translation of the Bible puts Paul's words in Romans.

Romans 8:35-37

Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture:

*They kill us in cold blood because they hate you.
We're sitting ducks; they pick us off one by one.*

None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us.

I'd like to be more like Joseph in that kind of courage. In my time by myself, I found out that God had things he wanted to teach me about myself completely apart from what I was trying to ask him to teach me. One thing that stuck out to me was that I still have some deep seated fears about what people think. I care too much about other people's opinions of me. And I really felt that God was telling me I need work in that area. If I really trust that the God of the whole universe loves me for who I am and loves me permanently, who cares what anybody else thinks? We are secure in our place.

Like Jacob, God has shown us how much he loves us by giving us a coat or a robe as well. Again, quoting from the Message version:

Galatians 3:27

Your baptism in Christ was not just washing you up for a fresh start. It also involved dressing you in an adult faith wardrobe — Christ's life, the fulfillment of God's original promise.

Being in Christ is like putting on that robe that covers us completely, head to two. And it says the same things that robe said about Joseph. It tells the world that we don't have to do the work of earning our salvation – Christ has done it for us. And it says we are the chosen heirs.

Romans 8:17

Now if we are children, then we are heirs-heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ...

I have a client who works with his father and is a co-owner of the business. He's a hard worker, smart, nice and with a good business sense. He'll do a good job taking over the company. But you know what? He could quit today and be set for life. He has all the resources he will ever need and more to make it in life, because his father has done so well at providing a future for him. He will never need to worry where his next meal is coming from.

God is no less extravagant. He will always provide for his children. We may never become financially rich, but we have every spiritual blessing we need in Christ. No matter what we face in life, **God's pockets will always be deeper than the need.**

So Joseph's security in the love of his father reminds us of our security in God's love. But Joseph had something else going for him as well, and that was **his God-given vision for the future.** The boy had two dreams that sounded rather cocky: The first one had sheaves of grain bowing down to his bundle. The second dream took things further, with the sun and moon and stars bowing down to him.

Joseph didn't know exactly what they meant, but he knew they were different than ordinary dreams. They spoke of his **place** in the world, and although he couldn't see it, they spoke of the **responsibilities** he would one day have for so many other people.

This was also the first of many encounters with dreams that Joseph would have throughout his lifetime. He became known for his ability to interpret dreams, and this was his first test.

His brothers had no problem discerning the meaning of the dreams and they didn't like it. Jacob knew what they meant as well, and although he yelled at Joseph a bit over them, the Bible tells us he kept the matter in mind. That's because Jacob had experienced his own dreams as messages from God.

They must have been very vivid for Joseph for him to keep talking about them. He had to have known after he talked about the first one that his brothers wouldn't want to hear anymore. But he couldn't help himself when the second one came, and he talked about it as well. The visions gave him courage and motivation, regardless of the reaction from his brothers, regardless of the reaction of his father.

When God calls each of us, he has a vision for us. To follow Christ is to have a future hope. We've talked before about how by its very nature, Christianity is a hopeful and future-minded faith.

The great promise in Jeremiah has been a comfort and encouragement to Christians throughout history:

Jeremiah 29:11-14

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the LORD...

Like the love of God the Father, our vision, our future is secure. It's unshakable.

Proverbs 23:18

*There is surely a future hope for you,
and your hope will not be cut off.*

Knowing that God has plans for us should also be a source of courage to live for him no matter what the reaction is of those around us. But as with Joseph, the dream that God has for us is also one that involves responsibility. Look at Paul's account of his calling:

Acts 22:14-16

Then he said: "The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard."

Our destiny, our future from God is one in which we know him and share what we know about him with other people, so that they too can have a future. That's our vision not just as individuals but as a church. We are here to let others know about the great love of the Father and the hope for a future that he offers each one of us.

Take a look at our vision on the back of your program:

To build a worshipping community of all kinds of people that will be a living testimony to the power of the gospel and the reality of God's kingdom.

That's a big vision. We're here to point to a different reality, and to get better and better at it as a community. As we move toward that vision, some of our key priorities going

into the fall will be to find new ways to help people stay connected in this group that keeps getting bigger and bigger. How do we cultivate meaningful relationships? We also need to create opportunities for people to be mentored and challenged in their faith to keep growing. And we need to expand what we have to offer for the youth in our church, starting with junior high this fall.

Starting up new ministries is a step of faith like Joseph had to take. We don't know how dreams will become reality, because with no paid staff yet, we can't really do new things without new people stepping up to take ownership. Here's an example. Quite a few people have expressed interest in being part of small groups. If that's been on your heart, maybe that is the seed of a vision and God would want you to consider what your role could be in making more small groups a reality.

Let me give you a "for instance." Karen Bocseri wanted to put together a study group for some of the newer young women of our church, so she talked to me about it, talked to them about it, sent invitations, chose the curriculum and is ready to go. It wasn't anything anybody asked her to do. God put it on her heart, and she responded.

When we put our faith in Christ, God puts his Spirit in our hearts who will speak to us and give us a dream for what he wants us to do or become. It might be like Joseph where we don't have all the details up front. It could be as simple as God bringing someone to mind that you feel burdened to pray for. It could be as big as going somewhere far away as a missionary to share Christ with a people group you care about. God asks us to step out in faith when he gives us a vision for the future, and he makes it one that is motivating enough to keep us going.

Some of us are here this morning and standing at a decision point. We're in situations at work or with our friends or in the general direction of our life where like Joseph we're needing to ask the question: Am I going to go along with _____? What stand am I needing to take right now?

And that's going to lead us to a second question about who we're aligned with. Are we serious about our commitment to God? Are we going to live like his priorities and his concerns are the most important, or are we just trying to live in his house, eat his food and take advantage of his hospitality without really acting like he's our Father?

As we make those decisions, we'll see right away that he is standing there with that coat, ready to wrap us in Christ's righteousness, ready to name us as his heirs, ready to free us from the burden of earning our own way with him. **He loves us because he made us and that love will never go away.** Do we feel secure in God's love?

And finally, think about what vision God is setting in front of you. **What is God calling you to do or become?** Do you have the courage to move ahead with that vision? Do you need more clarity? No matter what he's asking you to do, if it's from God, it will involve knowing him better and helping others to know him as well.

One day, we'll all be like those sheaves and those stars, bowing down around Jesus. We sang this morning, "One day every tongue will confess you are God. One day every knee will bow." Jesus is the love that God expressed, he's the center of our future. And he's calling us like Joseph to follow him no matter what.