

SERMON TITLE: "God's Monumental Surprise"
SERMON TEXT: Genesis 45:4-14 and 50:18-21
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: June 11, 2023, VBS Sunday, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

We had some surprises this past week at Vacation Bible School. After many years of holding Vacation Bible School when the weather was very hot, we were surprised by this past week's clouds, wind, and rain. And just when we thought we would have to move the games indoors, then God surprised us again by clearing the skies. We had some brand new children who had never before attended one of our Vacation Bible Schools. It was great to see their surprise and their parents' surprise at how much those kids enjoyed our VBS. We also had some returning participants whom we hadn't seen since last summer's Vacation Bible School. We were surprised to see how much they had grown in a year! Three of the children who attend our church regularly had scheduling conflicts in the evening hours, so they thought they weren't going to be able to attend VBS. But Chris Hicks and I decided we could hold extra sessions of Bible Adventures and Kid Vid Cinema at 1:00 in the afternoon. So, it turned out that that family could come, learn, and get in on the fun. What a nice surprise!

In this week's Monumental VBS, we learned many important lessons. On Monday, with the help of Harley the Gila monster, we learned that *God loves you no matter what*. (Awesome God!) On Tuesday, with the help of Miley the road runner, we learned that *God is with you everywhere*. (Awesome God!) On Wednesday, with the help of Howell the coyote, we learned that *God is in charge*. (Awesome God!) And then on Thursday, with the help of Jet the jackrabbit, we learned that *God is surprising*. (Awesome God!) That last one is how I'm going to frame this sermon. As we review what we learned at Vacation Bible School, let's think about it from the perspective of God's Monumental Surprise.

1—GOD LOVES YOU NO MATTER WHAT

All week long, we focused our attention on the Joseph story in Genesis chapters 37 to 50. That story of Joseph began with young Joseph receiving special attention from his father Jacob, who gave him

a unique robe. Sometimes that's translated as a "coat of many colors." Bible scholars aren't actually certain of the meaning of the ancient Hebrew words in this verse. But the idea from the context is that father Jacob gave his 11th son Joseph some kind of special garment to wear, and his older 10 brothers were very jealous. It felt like their father loved Joseph more than them, and that didn't seem fair.

To make matters worse, Joseph then taunted his older brothers by telling them about his dreams. In the imagery of the grain harvest and the sun, moon, and stars, Joseph dreamed that his brothers would bow down to him. In one of his dreams, even their father and mother bowed down to young Joseph. How arrogant and rude Joseph was to brag like that! How insensitive and cruel!

Consequently, the 10 older brothers felt hatred toward their younger brother Joseph, and they thought about killing him. One day when they were all out pasturing their flock, the older brothers conspired to throw Joseph into a dry well. Maybe the braggart would learn a lesson down in that hole! But then along came some slave traders, and the older brothers decided to sell Joseph to them. After the traders took Joseph as a slave to Egypt, his brothers lied to their father. They told him that his favorite son had been attacked and eaten by wild animals.

At the end of the first day's lesson, things looked terrible for Joseph. He was a mess. His family was a mess. Everyone had expressed bad attitudes and made poor choices. Everyone had spoken cruel words and acted wrongly. But do you know what we learned in that first day of Bible School? We learned God's monumental surprise that, no matter what you do, and no matter what other people do to you, *God loves you no matter what!* (Awesome God!)

2—GOD IS WITH YOU EVERYWHERE

When we picked up the story on Tuesday, we found Joseph in Egypt, working as a slave in Potiphar's house. Potiphar was a high-level official in Egypt, and he had a big house and lots of property. Joseph worked hard as a slave and earned Potiphar's respect. Potiphar saw that he could depend on Joseph, so he began giving Joseph more and more responsibility. Soon, Joseph was put in charge of all of

Potiphar's household. All was going well until Potiphar's wife accused Joseph of mistreating her. Joseph was innocent, but Potiphar sent him to jail anyway.

It's a good thing that Joseph already knew that *God loved him no matter what*. (Awesome God!). But now the lesson Joseph and the children learned was that *God is with you everywhere*. (Awesome God!) Previously, God was with Joseph in Canaan. Now, far, far away from his family, Joseph really missed his father's special attention. But he came to understand that God was with him in Egypt too—not only when he was in charge of a big and fancy house, but even in a stinky, dirty Egyptian jail. Joseph learned that *God is with you everywhere*. (Awesome God!)

Some of the kids in Vacation Bible School know this personally, because they've moved from one house to another and even across the country. They've had to go to new schools and make new friends and even go to new churches. Sometimes those changes go well, and we feel happy. Other times changes are hard, and we have to go through some tough times. Our VBS lesson taught us that, if you find yourself in a rough spot like Joseph, it really helps to remember God's monumental surprise that *God is with you everywhere*. (Awesome God!)

3—GOD IS IN CHARGE

On Wednesday, we found that Joseph was still in jail for another two long years. But, finally, the cupbearer remembered how Joseph had helped him. While they had been in jail together, Joseph had capably and successfully interpreted dreams for the baker and the cupbearer. Now, the Pharaoh was having some disturbing dreams, and he needed someone to interpret the dreams for him. So, when the cupbearer suggested Joseph, they got him out of jail and brought him before the Pharaoh.

Then the Pharaoh told Joseph about his dreams of seven healthy cows getting eaten by seven skinny cows, and seven plump ears of grain being swallowed up by seven scrawny ears of grain. Joseph told the Pharaoh that the dreams meant that there would be seven years of good food production, followed by seven years of famine, when the people would become hungry. Joseph explained to the Pharaoh that he needed to put a wise person in charge who would organize a collection of food. This

food storage would then allow the people to survive the difficult years ahead. Pharaoh thought this was good advice, so he appointed Joseph to be in charge of the food for all of Egypt.

We could think that Pharaoh was in charge and that he appointed Joseph to be in charge. But Vacation Bible School on Wednesday taught the lesson that *God is in charge*. (Awesome God!) When we make ourselves available, cooperate with one another, and trust in God, God uses our smart brains and capable skills to work out God's much bigger plan of protection and care.

When Joseph was still in jail, he probably felt horrible and powerless. In all our lives, there are dark, difficult, and scary times when it seems like nothing is going right. It feels overwhelming and chaotic. But, behind the scenes, God is at work, preparing for what comes next. So, we need to hold on to hope and believe that, even when we can't see what's ahead, God has a monumental surprise for us. We need to remember that *God is in charge!* (Awesome God!)

4—GOD IS SURPRISING

If the story of Joseph had concluded with Joseph getting out of jail and successfully helping the Pharaoh, it would have seemed like a happy ending, right? Even though we know that hard times are coming, we know that *God is in charge* (Awesome God!) and that Joseph is on the job to store up the food. But our Vacation Bible School wasn't over yet. On the final day, we emphasized the fact that *God is surprising!* (Awesome God!)

You see, the famine had spread beyond Egypt to other countries of the region, so even Joseph's own family back in Canaan didn't have enough food to eat. Consequently, 10 of Joseph's brothers traveled to Egypt in hopes of buying some food. When they came before Joseph, they didn't recognize him because they had sold him as a slave and assumed that he was probably dead by now. They never would have expected him to rise to a position of great power in that foreign land.

Joseph did recognize his brothers, but he didn't tell them at first. He let them buy some food to take back to Canaan, but he was still angry at them. So, he stuck their brother Simeon in jail and

required the rest to bring their youngest brother Benjamin to him the next time they came. Joseph also played some mean tricks on them, accusing them of stealing money and his silver cup.

But, in the end, Joseph worked through his anger, and he forgave his brothers for how they had treated him. This was no easy task for Joseph. He had to go through a period of weeping and wailing and some counseling with Egyptian friends before he was mentally and spiritually ready. But God has an amazing ability to change our hearts from arrogance and revenge to kindness and compassion. God is able to replace hatred with love.

So, finally, in a big surprise, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers and declared to them, “Even though you intended to harm to me, God intended it for good” (50:20). Joseph invited his brothers to bring their father, their wives, and all their children to Egypt where he would make sure they had enough food to survive. Through all the good and bad things that had happened, God was working to preserve a numerous people. This was God’s monumental surprise.

CONCLUSION

In the ups and downs of life, it’s easy for us to lose sight of God. It’s easy to think that our successes and problems are all about us or those who would do us harm. The story of Joseph reminds us that God’s always got something much bigger going on. So, let’s remember: *God loves you no matter what!* (Awesome God!) *God is with you everywhere!* (Awesome God!) *God is in charge!* (Awesome God!) And *God is surprising!* (Awesome God!) This is God’s monumental surprise.