

Will You Make the Hard Choice?ⁱ

Genesis 41:1-16ⁱⁱ

Introduction

I don't know what it's like at your house...but among the members of my extended family there's always been an extreme fascination with trying to predict what Windham will want to do when she grows up. You probably know the kind of observations that I'm talking about:

- Oh look! She's twirling around. I'll bet she's gonna be a dancer.
- Isn't this a great picture?! I just know she'll be an artist.
- She just loves to tell bad jokes to a captive audience. I bet she's gonna be preacher.

These days, the odds-on favorite is that Windham is going to be a scientist; she has a telescope and a microscope...and she likes to mix things together and see what happens. Of course, that'll be just fine with me, because—if she becomes a scientist—she might one day be able to support me in the manner to which I'd like to become accustomed.

- But I guess you never know. How can you tell what path your kids will take?

I came across a story this week about a mom and dad who were hoping to get some clue about what their young son might become some day. So before he got home from school one afternoon they put out on the kitchen table: a bottle of whiskey...a Bible...a \$100 bill...and a pair of loaded dice.

- And they agreed that if the boy chose the whiskey, he'd probably grow up to be a drunk. If he picked up the Bible, he'd clearly be a preacher. If he went for the \$100 bill, they just knew he'd grow up to be a successful businessman. And if he went for the dice, he'd probably grow up to be a criminal.

Well that afternoon the boy came home...walked into the kitchen and saw the items lying on the table. But he didn't know that his parents were watching him from a nearby closet. So he picked up the whisky bottle...looked it over...and set it down. Then he did the same thing with the Bible...and the cash...and the dice—pick it up...and put it down. And all this time, the parents are hiding in the closet—watching and waiting.

- Finally, the boy looks around...picks up the bottle and the Bible and the money and the dice...and walks away.
- Well at this, the mother starts weeping uncontrollably, and the father can't understand why. So he asks her, "What does that mean? What's he going to be!?" And through her tears, the mother blurts out: "He's gonna be a politician."

Transition

Let's face it—there might have been a day when parents would have been thrilled to think that their kids might one day become politicians or elected leaders. But that day is probably long gone. More often than not, politicians are seen as dishonest, unprincipled swindlers...who are just as likely to be in office to line their own pockets as they are to serve the common good.

- A Gallup poll conducted in last July found—that of all the key institutions in American society—Congress was trusted the least. When asked, "How much confidence do you have in each of the following institutions?" only 12% said that they trusted Congress "a great deal" or "quite a lot." And the President didn't fare much better. Only 26% said they trusted him "a great deal" or "quite a lot."

And yet...to tell you the truth I feel kinda sorry for elected leaders. After all, how difficult must it be to try to lead us? It's not just that our world is complex and hard to figure out. It's not just that the American people are often bitterly divided along partisan lines. The challenge is...that in many ways...we are a spoiled people.

Think about it: so many of the challenges we face...are challenges that result from having had so much for so long that we're almost incapable of understanding how blessed and fortunate we are.

- We're facing a stagnant economy...and a lot of us are groaning about how much we lost from our stock portfolio or our 401K. But of course, that's only an issue because a lot of us had money to invest.
- We've got a mortgage crisis...and we're rightly upset about the way in which a lot of people have lost their homes. But let's not forget that that's only a problem because a lot of us had homes to begin with.
- We've recently come through a terrible spike in the cost of oil and gas...and there was 'weeping & wailing & gnashing of teeth' as people paid \$50...\$100...\$150 to fill the tank on their car or SUV. And of course, that's a real problem. But let's not forget: If you've got a car, you're blessed. And many of our families are 'blessed enough' to have—not one car—but two or three cars.

Yes, we face challenges. But so many of those challenges exist because our leaders have been telling us that WE COULD HAVE IT ALL...and we'd never have to worry about paying the tab.

- We could have big cars that we drive as much as we want, and we'd never have to worry about filling them with inexpensive gas.
- We could have returns on our investments that were simply unbelievable by historical standards...and we'd never have to worry about shady accounting practices or corporate fraud.
- We could have the best schools and roads and military and health care...and we could do it all while cutting taxes...UNTIL—until the bill came due. And then we'd need a leader who wouldn't try to PLEASE us. We'd need a leader who was gonna try to LEAD us.

The Question

For the first few weeks of this New Year, we're writing some "Letters to the Next President." As we move toward inauguration day on the 20th of this month, we're considering some of the challenges that we face as a nation and a world...and we're trying to capture some of the 'biblical lessons' that we'd better pray our next President keeps in mind. And this week, I think that one of those lessons can be captured in this question: Mr. President, will you make the hard choice? Will you make the hard choice?

The Biblical Example

Fortunately for us, there's a wonderful story in scripture that gives us a worthwhile example to consider. The story is found toward the end of Genesis...and it's the story of Joseph—one of the sons of Israel. Now I'm hoping that you remember a little of Joseph's story...because we don't have time this morning to go into detail on the whole thing. But just to hit the highlights...

- Joseph was Israel's (or Jacob's) favorite son. In fact, Jacob loved him so much more than his other boys that he gave Joseph a coat of many colors...an "Amazing Technicolor Dream-Coat," for those of you who are Broadway fans. And not surprisingly, Joseph's brothers got jealous. They just couldn't stand to have their little brother lording it over them all the time. So they faked his death and sold him into slavery.
- Now...while a slave, Joseph had an unfortunate encounter with the wife of an Egyptian named Potiphar. Even though he did nothing wrong, Potiphar's wife accused him of sexual assault...and so Joseph ended up in prison, where he developed a reputation as an interpreter of dreams.

That's where our scripture lesson from a few minutes ago comes in. As Helen read for us—Pharaoh has a dream: There he is—standing at the edge of the Nile River—when he sees 7 cows come up out of the water. And these aren't your average cows; these are prize-winning cows. They're fat and sleek and healthy...and they start to graze at the water's edge.

- But suddenly, 7 more cows come up out of the water...and these cows are hideous. They're emaciated and mangy. They're covered with sores and they're wobbling around like they've got mad cow disease. But much to Pharaoh's amazement, the 7 ugly cows eat the 7 fat cows...and it scares Pharaoh so bad that he wakes up.

After some warm milk...and a quick dose of “Lunesta” and an adjustment or two on his “Sleep Number” bed...Pharaoh gets back to sleep and has another dream: A beautiful, green stalk grows up out of the ground and bears 7 plump heads of grain. But just like before, a 2nd sprout shoots up...and on this one the heads of grain are small and withered. But miraculously, the withered grains eat the plump grains...and Pharaoh wakes up again.

- Pharaoh orders his wise men and magicians to interpret the dream, but none of them can figure it out. And it's right about then that one of the servants remembers Joseph's unique ability in the dream department. So they send to the prison...and get Joseph a shave and a clean change of clothes...and they bring him to stand before Pharaoh—the ruler of the known world.

Joseph Makes the Hard Choices

Now I want us to pay close attention to the things that happen next...because in his statements & his actions... Joseph reveals something vital—not only about his own character—but about the character of a true leader.

- Pharaoh says, “I hear you interpret dreams...” and Joseph says, “Nope...I can't do that.” Probably not a very good thing to say when you're talking to a guy who holds your life in his hands and who'd be just as likely to kill ya as to put up with ya. But Joseph refuses to sugar-coat anything, and so he continues: “But God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.”

So Pharaoh shares the dreams: the fat cows and the scrawny cows...the plump grains and the withered grains... the way that—each time—the wasted characters consume the healthy ones. And once again, Joseph plays it straight. He doesn't tell Pharaoh what he wants to hear. He doesn't tell Pharaoh, “Well yes, you've got a problem...but there's an easy way out.” Instead, picking up at verse 28 of Genesis 41 he says...

- God has shown Pharaoh what He is about to do. 7 years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt, but 7 years of famine will follow them. Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten... and the famine will ravage will the land. The abundance in the land will not be remembered, because the famine that follows it will be so severe.

Now let's be clear that this is bad news for Pharaoh...because the Egyptians, you see, were used to abundance. They were the most powerful nation on earth. They had everything they wanted and never dreamed that that would change. They just lived year-to-year off the richness of the land...and they exported their leftovers to other nations. If what Joseph was saying was true—well...that's the way that revolutions get started.

But God be praised! Before Pharaoh can worry too much about what he's going to do...Joseph offers a plan of action. But what a plan it is! Picking up at verse 33 of Genesis 41, Joseph says, “And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him charge of the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest during the 7 years abundance.”

- Now let me invite you to pause and think about that for just a minute. What Joseph is saying basically boils down to this: As soon as the good times start...as soon as you enter those 7 years abundance...raise taxes by 20%. Now according to some scholars, the Pharaohs already taxed the people 10% to support the royal lifestyle. So it's a little unclear whether Joseph is telling Pharaoh to double the taxes or triple them.
- But either way: just imagine the response of the people of Egypt. Right when everybody's starting to sing, “Happy Days Are Here Again,” dramatically boost taxes. And why!? Because Pharaoh had a dream!? You've got to be kidding.
- You can almost hear the people saying, “Why worry about that now? IF it ever happens, we can deal with it then. Why save for the future when we can enjoy the present? Why drive a smaller, more fuel efficient car when we've got plenty of gas now? Why cut back on greenhouse gases when we can burn cheap coal to produce electricity? Why worry about taking out an adjustable rate mortgage that I can barely afford when house prices keep going up and the economy is doing so great?”

Well, fortunately for Egypt...Pharaoh doesn't have to run for re-election...and he doesn't have to work his tax plan through Congress. And so—at Joseph's urging—he decides not to please his people. He decides to lead his people.

- He appoints Joseph to implement this new policy. And during the next 7 years of abundance, Joseph collects grain. In fact, if you read the rest of Genesis 41, you find that he stored up so much grain “that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure” (41:49).

And thank God he did...because a few verses later, the Bible tells us: “The 7 years of abundance came to an end...and the 7 years of famine began, just as Joseph had said” (41: 53-4). And what comes next is so telling. Verse 55: “When all Egypt began to feel the famine, the people cried to Pharaoh for food” (41:55).

- When the people began to feel the famine...when gas prices shot through the roof...when the market bubble burst...when infrastructure decayed...when health care became unaffordable...when the people began to feel the consequences of a lifestyle that failed to prepare for the future...they cried out.
- And you can bet they were thankful—that instead of trying to please the people—their leaders decided to lead the people...and that made all the difference.

Application: The President

Now let me point out...that I am not suggesting that Barak Obama needs to respond to the challenges facing this nation by raising taxes. To be honest, I don't have any idea what he should do. But I am saying is:

If I had the chance to write a letter to the next president...I think that I'd want to ask him:

“Mr. President, will you make the hard choice?”

- Will you refuse to be swayed by polls and pundits and pressures from your party and be guided instead by what's true and what's just?
- Will you stop focusing on short-term gains or getting re-elected and focus instead on the long-term health and stability of our nation and our world?
- Mr. President, will you dare to stop trying to please us and start trying to lead us...so that—maybe—with God's grace and strength...we can truly become that light shining on a hill...that we have always said we long to be?

Application: Us

Of course, I pray that our next President would answer “Yes” to that question. I pray that he will make the hard choice...even if I personally end up being not-very-happy about it...because I think it ought to be clear to all of us: There are hard choices to be made.

And like I suggested last week, if this is a fair question to ask our next President, then it's probably a question that we need to ask ourselves, too. Are we willing to make the hard choice?

- When it comes to our health...will we pass on the fast food and the nights spent watching TV...to make the hard choice of eating right and getting enough exercise?
- When it comes to our finances...will we stop making excuses for why we need one more gadget or that new outfit even though we've got more stuff already than we know what to do with...to start making the hard choice of saving for the future...or of tithing on our income rather than offering God only what's left over?
- When it comes to our families...will we refuse to over-indulge our children by catering to their every whim...and choose instead to make the hard choice of teaching discipline and self-reliance?
 - Will we stop holding on to the little lists we make of how we've been wronged so we can use them as ammunition in our next argument...and choose instead to make the hard choice of talking through our hurts and offering forgiveness?

- When it comes to our faith...will we come to church to worship God on Sunday and live for ourselves the rest of the week? Will we settle for a faith that's cold and lifeless and that doesn't change our lives? Or will we make the hard choice of making time for God...the hard choice of abiding in his word and seeking his face and offering our lives to Him so that He can make us instruments of his kingdom?
- When it comes to our church...will we be content to stick with what's comfortable and familiar, because that's the way we've always done it and we like it like that? Or will we make the hard choice to go and make disciples of all the nations...the choice that recognizes: it's not about us and our comfort—it's about God and His glory? Will we make the hard choice of understanding that we are blessed to be a blessing and that we exist—not for the benefit of us who are in here—but for them who are out there?

Closing Application: Our Lord

Let's face it: It's not easy to do the right thing. Anyone can stay quiet...what takes courage is speaking out. Anyone can please others...what takes faith is leading others. Anyone can make the easy choice...but the world needs people (and maybe God is looking for people) who can make the hard choice.

- Will you make the hard choice?

I hope you're tempted to say, "I don't know...after all, it's hard!" But I also hope that you'll remember this:

- Two thousand years ago, God looked down at a world that was dying in sin...a world full of hatred and injustice and violence...a world that was running full speed away from its Creator and His love.
- And our Lord had a choice: to let the world go...and let us die in our sin and our loneliness...
 - Or to humble himself and die on a cross so that we could be forgiven... to defeat death so that we could have the hope of eternal life...to entrust His good news to a rag-tag group of followers so that—someday—peace and grace and love could become not just a dream but a reality.
 - And thanks be to God: He made the hard choice. Will we?

Invitation

I don't know what choices you need to make today. But I know that there are choices—sometimes hard choices—that we all need to make.

- Some of us need to choose to make Jesus Lord...and to be baptized in obedience to his command.
- Others need to choose to join this church...and to become a part of the things that God wants to do through us in this community.
- Still others need to choose to rededicate our lives in some way...to stop toying with sin...to stop being apathetic...to start loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.
 - And let me go just a little further with that...because even though we can always decide to respond to God in our hearts without walking down the aisle or shaking the preacher's hand...
 - Some of us need to choose to start being a little more public about our faith...because let me tell you, First Baptist Church, we are called to reach this community for Christ—and there is no way we will do that if we can't reach out to each other and be open about what's going on with our faith.

So having said all that, here's the promise:

- If you will make that choice...if you'll open your heart to the possibility of doing what's right instead of what's easy...God will honor that.
- He will enter your life and walk along beside you and give you strength you never thought you could have...all so that His dreams for your life can be realized...all so that the image of Christ can be formed in you.

Our hymn of response today is "Open My Eyes that I May See" (Hymn #381). Will you make the hard choice—the right choice—as we stand and sing together?

ⁱ Second of three in a series: *Letters to the Next President*. Preached at the First Baptist Church of Marshville. Sunday, January 11, 2009.

ⁱⁱ The selection of the text and the basic concept for this message was borrowed from Andy Stanley of Northpoint Church and his message series: *Letters to the Next President*.