

“Plan for the Worst, Hope for the Best”

Select Verses Genesis 41

In 1909, Captain Edward J. Smith said of his ship, the *Adriatic*, “I cannot imagine any condition which would cause a [large] ship to founder. I cannot conceive of any vital disaster happening to this vessel. Modern shipbuilding has gone beyond that.”ⁱ It’s impossible, unimaginable, in other words, unsinkable. This same Captain Edward Smith went on to be the captain the Titanic. The tragedy and the irony of the sinking of that great ship has remained with us for over a century. And it’s not that the company that ran the ship was constantly advertising “unsinkable, unsinkable, unsinkable.” But they were proud of their technological advances, confident in human progress, and smugly unafraid. After all, loss of life at sea had grown so rare. In the decade before the sinking of the Titanic, 3.5 million passengers had made the crossing - just on British ships. Of those 3.5 million, only ten had perished.ⁱⁱ

The company called their ship “practically unsinkable,” but people didn’t hear the “practically” part of that.ⁱⁱⁱ One passenger of the Titanic, Thomson Beattie wrote in a letter, “we are changing ships and coming home in a new unsinkable boat.” There’s even a claim that a crew member told a passenger, “God himself could not sink this ship!”^{iv} This hope, this optimism is shocking and saddening in retrospect. Looking back, we can see that some of the steel in the hull was overly brittle for icy waters.^v Looking back, we can wonder at how a captain could hear not one, but six warnings of ice ahead, and still continue forward near full speed.^{vi} Looking back, we can ask – how could they not know that they should have enough space in the lifeboats for every single passenger and that the crew should be trained in evacuation and disaster procedures?^{vii} A lot changed after the Titanic sunk – first came the mourning, finding and burying the dead, supporting the survivors. Next came new laws, better safety procedures, requirements for

lifeboat drills and the establishment of an International Ice Patrol by the US Coast Guard. This Ice Patrol, which continues to this day, has meant, “there has not been a single reported loss of life or property due to collision with an iceberg in [that very same] patrol area.”^{viii}

Hope is at the center of our faith, but it can be really hard to pin down just what it is. Certainly, the builders and crew and passengers of the Titanic had very high hopes for this maiden voyage and many voyages to come. But, instead, tragedy struck. Hope looks very different when things are hunky dory than it does when the worst has happened. In our hardest moments, we might expect the death of hope, a life of loss, the ascendance of meaninglessness. What happens to hope then?

Though our scripture passage today begins with Pharaoh and his dream, we should remember where Joseph is. Growing up in his father’s house, he was so cocky, so presumptuous – it never occurred to him that anyone or anything could take him down: from his undeserved status, from his father’s protection, from his cushy work assignments. He lied, he boasted, he crowed and his brothers attacked him, left him in a pit, and sold him into slavery. In most life stories, this would easily be the low point. The Lord was with Joseph and he ended up overseeing the household of Pharaoh’s captain of the guard. Maybe he was starting to feel like things were looking up. Until his master’s wife lied about Joseph and he landed in prison. Psalm 105 tells us what it was like for him: “his feet were hurt with fetters, his neck was put in a collar of iron.”^{ix} Genesis assures us that the Lord was with Joseph in prison, showing him steadfast love – but he was still in prison.

And even when he helps – even when he serves the other prisoners and interprets their dreams for them with stunning accuracy. Even then, he is forgotten. We know that he was 17 when he was sold into slavery and that he was 30 when he entered Pharaoh’s service. So that

makes 13 years of slavery and imprisonment – working and waiting, hopes raised and dashed. That’s a long time to live in limbo.

But Pharaoh had some dreams – really strange dreams that his wise men and magicians couldn’t make sense of. Or maybe they tried to make sense of them, but their interpretations rang false to Pharaoh. Imagine that you live in a kingdom where your king has charge over the cosmic order – where your culture tells you that your ruler is one of the gods whose power is unquestioned, unchecked. Imagine you are an advisor in this scenario – how likely is it that you would say something negative to Pharaoh? How long would you get to keep your freedom or your life if you said the wrong thing at the wrong time? I imagine that the way you got to be a wise man or magician had a lot more to do with smiling and nodding than it did with dealing in sometimes challenging truths.

The cupbearer remembers this Hebrew slave – if he could interpret my dream, perhaps he could do it again here? He wasn’t afraid to tell the baker he would die, maybe he would show the same courage with Pharaoh in case the dream was a bad sign. Joseph is sent for and he changes garments, he washes up. Notice how every time something significant in Joseph’s life happens a change of clothes is involved? The dream-coat, the garment that Potiphar’s wife grabbed, now this new clothing that is fancy enough to be worn in the presence of the pharaoh. The winds are changing.

Pharaoh tells Joseph, “I’ve heard...when someone tells you a dream, you are able to interpret it.” Joseph, very politely – very politely, corrects Pharaoh. It is not I, but God. I do not answer Pharaoh, I do not have special knowledge – God gives the interpretation. [This is quite a different Joseph from the one who reveled in the idea of his whole family bowing down to him, eh?] The he says, “God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.” And you might think that Joseph

is being a yes-man, trying to butter up Pharaoh. Or you may think that God has given him foreknowledge of the dream interpretation so Joseph is giving Pharaoh a sneak peek – even before hearing the dream. I don't think either is the case. The word “favorable” here is actually shalom – peace, wholeness, welfare, security. I think that what Joseph is saying is that God is still working. Even with all the misery and downturns and strain of his life, he still trusts that God is with him. And, if God is with him, God will be with Pharaoh and with Egypt and all the people. Joseph has been worn down in many ways, but he has been building up his trust in God. In that sense, it doesn't matter what the dream says – Joseph trusts God.

And you can tell that Joseph trusts God because he has to give Pharaoh bad news – news that could seriously anger Pharaoh. If Pharaoh is the one who maintains the cosmic order between humanity and the gods, as the Egyptians believed, then a 7-year famine that Pharaoh did not want would be a huge challenge to his power and authority. But Joseph knows what happens when you ignore the signs that things are going wrong all around. He trusts God to keep him safe and he trusts God to convince Pharaoh of what is coming. Joseph tells Pharaoh – unflinchingly – this is what will happen and this is what you must do. In the time of impossible plenty, store up grain – store it up so much that it is uncountable, unmeasurable. But know that the good times don't last forever. Gird yourself for the hard times – share what you have with your people and the surrounding peoples and you shall live even in this most horrible famine.

Joseph never once advocated for himself – for his innocence, to be freed from prison, for a cushy new job. He just wanted the truth to be known no matter the consequences. And he was blessed – in that moment even Pharaoh can see that the spirit of God is within Joseph. Even Pharaoh recognizes that this foreign slave prisoner has something that his own magicians and wise men lack. And for this, he becomes overseer – once more risen to an elite status, even

fancier clothes, even more attention. But Joseph is not the same old Joseph any more. He didn't seek this power. The power that he has is for serving others, saving others, and not himself. You can see how he is changed because as soon as he gets his fancy new title and ring and clothing, he immediately travels throughout the land. He spends seven years spreading the word, beefing up storehouses, and probably getting laughed out of town trying to convince people that, yes, despite the abundance all around you, a horrible famine is coming.

It's very hard to know the difference between real hope and false hope. Certainly, the crewman for the Titanic who said "God himself couldn't sink this ship" was acting under false hope (and bad theology). Honestly, when we think about hope, we're so often focused on getting what we want or we're banking on a specific outcome. We block out the notion that a bad thing can happen because we rest on the idea that "my life isn't that kind of story." But once the unthinkable happens, when we're down in the dungeon, lost on the ash heap, grieved, enraged, and conflicted – if from that point, we can look up and say "yet there is hope"... That's where it is. Hope doesn't only exist when things go right, but also when they go wrong. Hope is when we don't pretend something bad could never happen, but when we say "whether it's good or bad, whether it's my preference or not, God is with me and God will see me through. The story isn't over and I will take one more step." As Joseph grew in faith, so may we. May we do everything we can to trust God, to be disciplined and earnest as we walk onward into life. May we rely less on our own power and cleverness and more on the unsearchable wisdom of our Holy God. Let us be humble and eager in God's service. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/sinking-the-unsinkable/>

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RMS_Titanic

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.historyonthenet.com/the-titanic-why-did-people-believe-titanic-was-unsinkable>

^{iv} Ibid.

^v https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RMS_Titanic

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

viii **Ibid.**

ix **Psalm 105:18**