

“Hope for Anxious People”
Genesis 41: 1-16, 25-36, 53-57

First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

July 19, 2015
Derek McCollum

My daughter has a new kitten. His name is Elliot. And technically, he is a flame-point Siamese cat. I don't know if this is a common trait for all flame-point Siamese cats, or even for cats in general, but this cat teleports. He has the ability to manipulate the space-time continuum so that he moves freely from place to place instantaneously. I might be in one room of the house and he is in another but when I sit down to eat, he teleports *onto* my plate and begins eating my food. Or I might sit down to start my day reading in a comfortable chair with my cup of coffee and he will teleport onto my arm, spilling my coffee on me and my clothing. But what he specializes in is teleporting into an open doorway just as I am about to leave. He's an indoor cat but he wants so badly to be an outdoor cat. I think that his teleporting ability in some ways is limited by exterior walls so he can't teleport directly outside, but he always shows up right when I open the door and bolts out into the free world. Then I spend the next 10 minutes chasing around the free world wishing that I could move as fast as he does.

And I have to tell you, this just makes me anxious. Every time I come in or out of my house now, I just get nervous. I am scared about what is coming next.

Anxiety about what is next can come in many different shapes and sizes. Sometimes it has to do with things more weighty than cats. When we get nervous about life—for whatever reason—we tend to search for something to hold on to. We want something that will comfort us and make us feel like things are going to be OK. For some of us, that's a search for more—more control, more safety, more freedom, more money. If we can get more of whatever that is, it will soothe our anxiety and calm our nerves. It's the endless quest for the next deal or the next experience or the next high.

Others of us, when we get anxious, turn to the cultural saviors around us—the “magicians and wise men” of our culture. We endlessly watch the stock ticker or

CNN. We listen to the talking heads tell us where our next hope will come from. We put our energy behind whomever the next political savior is. We proclaim that education will be our new hope, that our safety will rest in our children's schooling options. Homeschooling is the new savior. Or maybe it's Christian schools. Or is it public schooling?

And some, when the anxiety sets in, give up on all of the highly promoted saviors and turn in to themselves. They anesthetize with alcohol or substances. Or turn to cynicism. "It always goes this way for me, so why should I even try anymore." It's not worth putting forth the effort to hope in anything because nothing is going to change anyway. I'll never get married. I'll never get a better job. I'll never get rid of that habit.

God is calling us away from control, from cultural saviors and from cynicism. He's calling us to trust him. What the Bible proclaims and what we see in this passage is that our Lord is in full control of the events of this world. And it's in His sovereign care that we can place our trust and hope. If you are anxious this morning, *let me remind you that you can trust God. He is in sovereign control of all things.* He is making all things new. He is calling you to put your full faith in him—to rest all your cares on him. To hope in him alone.

Our story opens with Joseph in jail. If you remember, in chapter 37, Joseph was thrown into a pit then sold to traders on their way to Egypt where Joseph was sold as a slave. But God was with him, and Joseph rose to prominence in Potiphar's house. But Potiphar's wife, frustrated that her romantic advances on Joseph were not returned, falsely accuses him of rape and has him thrown in prison. He's in the pit again. But the Lord does not forget Joseph. His sovereign plan is not thwarted by the sinful actions of men and women. Joseph rises again to power within the prison system, being given authority over all the prisoners. One day, Pharaoh's chief cupbearer and chief baker are thrown into the same prison with Joseph. And one night in this prison they each have a powerful dream that, by the Lord's power, Joseph is able to interpret. To the cupbearer, Joseph says that in three days Pharaoh will "lift up your head"—that he will be restored to his office. The baker's fate is less fortunate—Pharaoh, Joseph tells him, will lift his head... off! And Joseph is right. In three days, the cupbearer is restored and the baker is killed. The cupbearer

promises to remember Joseph and mention him to Pharaoh but he forgets. And two long years go by.

And then Pharaoh has a dream—or two dreams as the case may be. He dreams that up from the Nile come seven fat and healthy cows and then after that come up seven skinny, unhealthy cows—and the skinny cows eat the fat cows! Pharaoh wakes up afraid and settles himself back to sleep. But he dreams again. This time it is seven nice looking ears of grain, growing high and wide. Then seven withered and miserable ears of grain sprout up after them and swallow up the good ears. Pharaoh is understandably shaken. He's nervous. He's anxious.

The Nile River—central to Pharaoh's dream—is also central to Egyptian culture. Every year, the Nile would flow over its boundaries and flood the delta nearby, depositing beneficial minerals that were wonderful for growing crops. It's what their country depended on. The Nile was the promise of future provision. They had a very significant god for the Nile River alone, and they would offer sacrifices to him, thanking him for such regular fruitfulness. So you can see why Pharaoh might be worried. A dream that includes the Nile River and ends so poorly would cause quite the nervous response.

So Pharaoh does what he is accustomed to doing. He turns on the stock ticker to make sure everything is going to be OK. He turns to the regular solutions for easing anxiety. He gathers together all the magicians and wise men in the land. These are his counselors. They are the ones he turns to when he's anxious or nervous. They provide safe counsel for what is ahead—something to ease his insecurity. But they don't have an answer. In fact, we are told three times in this narrative that “there was none who could interpret Pharaoh's dream”. The cultural saviors have run dry.

And it's now that the cupbearer remembers Joseph. That guy in the prison who interpreted my dream, maybe he can help Pharaoh with his dream! But when Joseph shows up, we hear an interesting proclamation. “Pharaoh,” Joseph says, “all of your wise men and magicians can't interpret this dream. And guess what... neither can I. It is not in me. But God can. In fact, my God—the one true God of the universe—can do what none of your wise men and what all of your regular saviors cannot provide. And he is now going to reveal himself to you.” Not even

Joseph can do what Pharaoh is asking, but Joseph knows that the Lord is sovereign over all things, even the dreams of the great Pharaoh.

It strikes me that this story would have read much differently had it been an American invention. We would have had our typical rags-to-riches adventure. Joseph, cast away by his brothers, stripped of his kingly robe, finds himself a slave and rises from the ashes by his hard work, cunning and determination. Even against all odds he prevails and when faced with the king shows that even the lowest of peasants can rise to greatness with the right amount of determination and good luck. He would be proof that you can be anything you want to be if you just work hard enough. But that's not the story we get here. It's not a story of Joseph pulling himself up from his bootstraps. It's a story of God pulling Joseph out of the pit of despair and using him to proclaim the glory of the Only True King and Lord.

If you flip through the pages of Scripture, you'll only find two Israelites who interpret dreams. It's not common in the Bible. Those two people are Joseph and Daniel. Both set in captivity under pagan rulers. Both given favor in the king's court. And both interpret dreams for their pagan kings. Interestingly, it's these two cultures that also put a great deal of emphasis on the interpretation of dreams. These two kings would have surrounded themselves with wise men and magicians for just such dreams as these. But God works through both Joseph and Daniel to proclaim *His* supremacy and sovereignty over the weak gods and cultural practices of each place. He is showing his sovereign reign over all things. He is proclaiming to us that He is in sovereign control of all things, and he is calling us to trust him.

The hero in this story is not Joseph. It's the Lord. And if we are to find ourselves in this story, we need to place yourself not in Joseph's shoes but in those of the everyday Egyptian, or better yet, the starving Israelite having to travel to Egypt to buy grain. We are people who have a deep spiritual need. I was talking to a friend the other night who was telling me of a time in college when he finally understood the depth of his need. He had always considered himself a pretty good guy and the major things in his life that he always held up as examples of his righteousness clicked along fairly well. Until they each began to fall, one by one. And he realized that he was no better than all the people he used to look down on. He was needy and hungry and broken.

We read at the beginning of Chapter 42 that Jacob, the patriarch of God's people, realizes that he and his family are also needy, broken, and hungry. The famine has affected them just like everyone else. They will have to go to Egypt to buy grain. What we see in Joseph is that God has raised up from the pit to a savior for not only Egypt but the world.

Joseph is a type here of the great savior to come. Jesus, whom Isaiah calls the suffering servant, is exalted by the Lord to become King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is raised up from the pit of death and hell and he is crowned with glory. And he does so in order to save the world. The most well-known verse in the Bible, John 3:16, says that God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him might have eternal life. This is the glorious truth of the Gospel. That Jesus has come to rescue hungry, broken people. He is calling us to transfer our trust to him. To transfer it from the trust we put in control or the trust we put in our cultural saviors. Or the trust we place in our own ability to live up to God's standard. That's the definition of sin—us substituting something else for God.

Salvation, however, is God substituting himself for us. Putting himself where we deserve to be—suffering death on a cross as a punishment for sin. To become a Christian is to realize that you have been substituting yourself for God. We do it all the time. In our actions, in our thoughts, in our motivations. Repentance is recognizing that you have been substituting yourself for God. And then to accept the solution by asking God to accept you for Jesus' sake and know that you are loved and accepted because of His record, not yours.

If you have come to that point in your life, let me remind you that you can trust the Lord. He has died to forgive your sin. And he has risen from the pit to overcome the power of death and hell. God had his son die so that we might be saved.

And if you're anxious this morning, let me remind you that you can trust the Lord. He is in sovereign control of all things and he loves and cares for you. If you're one who is seeking more—more money, more safety, more experience, more power—let me remind you that getting more of whatever it is you are seeking will not ultimately soothe your anxiety. It will simply increase your appetite. Turn your trust upon the Lord. Cast your cares on him, knowing that he cares for you. The

cultural saviors of our day cannot help. If your hope is in political heroes or financial markets or anything other than the sovereign Lord, you will, at some point, come up disappointed.

If you have decided to turn to cynicism or self-medication, let me remind you that the Gospel provides real and lasting hope for you and me. To deny that hope is to deny the goodness and kindness of God.

We can trust the Lord. He is in sovereign control of all things. Let's finish up by talking briefly about *how* we can do that. Here are a few general principles:

First, engage yourself in the truth. Get into the habit of speaking the truth to yourself. No one talks to you as much as you do. So make sure you are saying the right things to yourself! Speak the truth of God's good and perfect care, his vast love and mercy, and his infinite wisdom. That's the way you replace the cultural saviors we often turn to. We must meditate on God's trustworthiness so that we might increase our trust in him.

Secondly, engage others in the truth. One of the wonderful things about living in community is that we can speak truth into each other's lives even when we are having trouble speaking it to ourselves. We don't allow each other to slip into cynicism because we are supporting one another in the hope of the Gospel.

Thirdly, get out and serve. This is one way we can fight against control in our lives—against the desire for more. We do so by pouring ourselves out to others rather than seeking to pour more into ourselves. Focusing on others forces us to trust in the Lord and His work rather than on our own security.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 6 not to be anxious about anything. To seek him and his kingdom and not to worry about the other stuff. Why? Why can we not be anxious? Because our father loves us. He is in sovereign control of all things and he loves and takes care of us. So we can trust him. We can put all our fears and all our anxiety and all our insecurity on him. He is the God who can bear it.