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Texts: Genesis 37:2b-8, 17b-22, 26-34; 50:15-21; Luke 6:35

The Hand of God

Scripture

This fall we are hitting highlights in the Hebrew Scriptures. Today we come to the Joseph saga. It's a carefully crafted story—really a novella-- that takes up most of the last fourteen chapters of Genesis. Joseph was the eleventh son of Jacob (who is also called Israel). He was born to Jacob's beloved wife Rachel after years of barrenness and was his daddy's favorite. We'll hear a bit from the beginning and the ending of the saga. So, listen for God's word as it comes from selections of the 37th chapter of Genesis: *Genesis 37:2b-8, 17b-22, 26-34*.

So, to summarize what happens next, the story continues after Joseph, the tattletale and braggart, was sold to slave traders headed to Egypt. In Egypt, Joseph quickly earned the respect of his owner, Potiphar, but was unjustly framed by Potiphar's wife and sent to prison. During his incarceration, his abilities enabled him to rise to a position of trust and leadership. His God-given gift for interpreting dreams ultimately secured his release and appointment as Pharaoh's vizier, or second in command. Since he had insightfully interpreted the Pharaoh's dreams to mean that there would be seven fertile years followed by seven lean years, he set up a nationwide program of stockpiling reserve grain so famine would be averted.

When the lean years struck the whole region, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt seeking to buy grain. At first, Joseph did not let on that he was their brother, and they did not recognize him. He gave them the grain (refusing payment) along with elaborate gifts. Eventually, though, he revealed his identity, reconciled with his brothers, and paved the way for his whole family to come and settle in Egypt. All was well. But in time, the family patriarch Jacob died. This is where we pick up the end of the saga. Listen again for God's word as it comes in the 50th chapter of Genesis: *Genesis 50:15-21*.

Sermon

There are things in life that send us reeling: a child is stricken with an incurable disease; a divorce rips a family apart; an innocent person is killed by a police bullet; looters destroy a business that has taken years to build; a pandemic upends everything. There is hardly a person alive whose life has not been touched in some way by tragedy of one sort or another, though some, we admit get hit harder than others. These events can leave us angry and resentful. They certainly prompt us to ask, "Where is God?"

The narrative we heard this morning from Genesis encompasses the tale of Joseph, who had more than his share of hard knocks, we might say. We meet him in chapter 37 as a cocky seventeen-year old. But his comeuppance certainly seems to be over the top. Nearly killed by his brothers, he was instead sold into slavery, what we nowadays call human trafficking. He spent thirteen years enslaved in a foreign country, and some of that time in prison for an offense he did not commit. We can imagine how betrayal by his own brothers wounded, how being unjustly punished stung, and how revenge just might have crossed his mind. We can also imagine him wondering, “Where the heck are you, God?”

Rather surprisingly, the narrator of Genesis never mentions any of this. Instead, we see Joseph making the best of every situation and using the gifts that God has given him. While Joseph never gets any divine revelations—you know, the voice of God speaking directly to you—like his father Jacob, and grandfather Isaac, and great-grandfather, Abraham got, the narrator makes it is clear that God is nevertheless at work in his life.

Joseph himself, sees God’s hand in all that has happened to him. He is able to tell his brothers, “God sent me here before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.”ⁱ In other words, Joseph understands that God has used him to keep his family alive, the family whom God called to bless all the families of the earth. This is a tale of the providence of God.

And in the face of tragedy, that is what we must fall back on: the providence of God. The providence of God is the doctrine that says that not only did God create the world, but that God continually governs and preserves it. God rules not just in a hands-off kind of way, setting up universal laws of nature—but also in a hands-on kind of way. John Calvin said, “he sustains, nourishes, and cares for everything he has made, even to the least sparrow.”ⁱⁱ

There are several things I want to say about the providence of God this morning.

1) The first is that God does not cause bad things to happen, at least not directly. It’s true that God made the universe in such a way that two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time, so people get injured in car crashes. It’s true that God made the universe in such a way that under certain conditions hurricanes form and can wreck terrible havoc. And it’s true that God made the universe in such a way that there are viruses, so people do get sick. But that is not to say that God wills someone to be hit by a drunk driver, or for a storm to be aimed at a particular place, or for COVID 19 to claim the lives of thousands. Painful and awful things sometimes happen because we live in a world governed by the natural processes that God set up. Painful and awful things also sometimes happen because we live in a world where human beings are free to make choices. People are careless and neglectful. Further, they steal, maim, and murder. Evil is a mystery we will never be able to solve. But we can say with assurance, from the God we know in the Bible, the God we know in Jesus Christ, God does not will evil or suffering.

2) Secondly, we can say that God always works for good. God is a force for love, and justice, and healing in our world. God is working God’s purposes out in, through, and in spite of bad situations. God did not want Joseph’s brothers to throw him in a pit to die or to sell him off to human traffickers and cover their tracks with lies. But they did. So, God worked through that tragedy to bring about good. God worked through Joseph and Joseph’s gifts to save the chosen people from starvation. In fact, it was in Egypt at Joseph’s invitation that the Hebrews settled and became as numerous as the stars in the sky, thus fulfilling God’s promise to

Abraham.

This is not to say that God is a puppeteer controlling every move that happens on earth. There is human free will in the mix. Joseph said to his brothers, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.”ⁱⁱⁱ God is like a weaver who takes the dark threads life throws in the tapestry and is able to weave a beautiful pattern. Or, God is like a sculptor who is able to use even the most stomped on, bent, discarded piece of metal to fashion a wonderful piece of art. That is to say, there is no bad decision, no meanness, no awful situation that cannot be redeemed by God.

Now I don’t mean to minimize anyone’s suffering or to suggest a Pollyanna approach to life. Pain and suffering are real, and they are hard. Just saying, “Don’t worry, it will all work out for the best” is not the sort of comfort anyone wants to hear. What may be more helpful to hear is that God is there in the midst of our pain. God suffers with us. Jesus is our Emmanuel, God with us. When we say in the creed, “He descended into hell,” we are saying that there is no situation so bad, no tragedy so bleak, no hell so remote that God has not been there and is not there in solidarity with us. The poet who penned Psalm 139 put it eloquently, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? ...If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.”^{iv} God is with us in our darkness, working for good with utter graciousness.

3) Thirdly, God’s purpose is often hidden and mysterious. None of the characters in the Joseph saga has the slightest clue about it until it dawns on Joseph when his brothers come seeking his aid. And that is true with much of our lives. God is at work in inscrutable ways, mostly unrecognized at the time. Only upon later reflection can we see God’s fingerprints. The amazing feats like the parting of the Red Sea and the feeding of the Five Thousand are pretty few and far between. What’s much more common are the stealthy dealings of God: the divine coincidences, the voice of God in the soft whisper, the conversation with the stranger who disappears that sets our heart on fire, the mustard seed growing quietly, the unexpected turn of events. God is not always obvious but works behind the scenes in hidden and mysterious ways.

4) And lastly, let me point out the pivotal role that forgiveness plays in this tale of God’s providence. Joseph had every chance to stick it to his brothers, especially after their father died, but in the end, he gave up any thoughts of revenge^v and instead forgave his brothers for their misdeeds. This utterly astounded his brothers who, when they learned of Joseph’s true identity, feared the worst. After all, they were accustomed to retaliation like when they tricked and slaughtered all the men of Shechem and plundered their possessions to avenge the rape of their sister.^{vi} Instead of retribution from Joseph, they got grace. Not only did they get the grain they came for, they were reconciled with their brother, and got an invitation to bring their extended family to settle in prime Egyptian land.

Joseph certainly matured a lot from the cocky teenager we met at the beginning of the story. He was able to let go of old hurts and to forgive. Forgiveness is a key way that God works God’s purpose out. *It is the only way forward out of tragic situations.* Can we forgive the person who hurt us badly? Can we forgive ourselves for a poor decision? Can we confess our biases and seek forgiveness from those we have wronged? Can we forgive God for making the world like it is?

Looking to Jesus as a model of forgiveness, we see him hanging on a cross, rejected by

the religious establishment, unjustly accused by the state, and abandoned by his closest friends. What were his dying words? “Father, forgive them.”^{vii}

I was surprised to learn that our sanctuary originally had a steeple. And on top of the steeple was a giant hand, with the index finger pointing up. Whether it was intended to be the hand of God, or a human hand pointing heavenward, toward God, I do not know. Regardless, it was our forebearers’ testimony to the providence of God at work in all our lives, nurturing and sustaining us, bringing good out of bad situations, often in unseen ways, and especially through forgiveness. Knowing all this, we can have hope and courage to face whatever comes our way. Amen.

ⁱ Genesis 45:7

ⁱⁱ Christopher Elwood, *Calvin for Armchair Theologians*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 59.

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 50:20

^{iv} Psalm 139:7, 11-12.

^v Joseph toyed with revenge. While he did give his brothers grain for their famished family, he initiated a series of tests and ordeals that reads like an account of psychological torture. It included intense questioning, three days in jail, taking one brother as hostage, and framing another for stealing a silver cup.

^{vi} Genesis 34:25-34

^{vii} Luke 23:34