

“The Provider”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 20, 2017

Rev. John Wahl

Genesis 45:1-28

Joseph, “the dreamer,” sure has come a long way. After they sold him into slavery, his brothers return and tell their father Jacob that Joseph is dead, while he is actually taken to Egypt. Years later, Joseph impresses the Pharaoh with his ability to interpret dreams; becoming his second in command. When a famine grips the land of Canaan, Jacob tells his sons to go to Egypt to buy grain. They appear before Joseph who recognizes them, but they do not know it is him. Instead of revealing his identity, Joseph uses his power to exact revenge on his brothers. After locking them up for a few days, he demands that they go home and return with their youngest brother, Benjamin; and until they do, he will keep Simeon imprisoned.

Jacob does not want to lose yet another son, but when the food runs out, he sends the brothers back with Benjamin; but again, they do not recognize Joseph is their brother. In yet another expression of revenge, Joseph instructs his servant to slip a silver cup in Benjamin’s bag. Joseph then confronts the brothers about the alleged theft. The brothers beg Joseph to release Benjamin and Judah volunteers to stay in his place. It is at this point that Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers.

Joseph’s brothers had first appeared before him in Egypt in chapter 42, as part of a parade of supplicants who are victims of a famine than spanned throughout the region of the Near East. Egypt was for many centuries the place that poorer nations would go to buy grain, since the Nile would water Egypt’s land and provide crops enough to store up for leaner times.

Surely, Joseph was the last person on earth that his brothers might expect to be a mighty Egyptian governor, but that is exactly who he has become. “When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them,” saying “you are spies who have come to see the vulnerabilities of the land.” (Gen. 42:7-9) He intentionally stands apart from them, speaking always through an interpreter. Thus began his cat-and-mouse game that would last all the way until his revelation to them here in Genesis 45.¹

The initial dream that a seventeen year-old Joseph told to his older brothers, which so infuriated them, was that one day they would bow before him as their ruler. In Egypt,

¹ John Holbert, “Revenge is Sweet” from *Patheos.com*

Joseph's position of imperial power is unquestioned: anyone who wants to eat must come to Joseph. He controls all the grain, and he decides who may purchase it and at what price during a time when the entire ancient world was riddled with famine. Once powerless and abandoned at the bottom of a pit, outnumbered by his brothers who hated him, Joseph now is the one who gets to decide who will live and who will die. Joseph fills the role of provider, but – as we will see – everyone in this emotionally estranged family will come to know that the real ruler and provider is God; though hidden through most of this story, God has been working in and through these all-too human realities of famine, deceit and revenge to create something good.

Finally, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and asks about the welfare of his father. He then speaks to his brothers about the way they had treated him. Joseph does not outwardly forgive them – maybe he shouldn't be expected to after what they have done to him – but he does see that that their actions as not of their doing. Instead, he tells them, “it was not you who sent me here, but God.” (Gen. 45:5)²

And so, we find ourselves yet again face-to-face with the question that continues to tie us into knots – *does God cause bad things to happen?* If God works in mysterious ways: through the evil scheme of Joseph's brothers which make him a slave in Egypt, through the pharaoh who elevates Joseph to a position of great power, even through a widespread famine – then what does this mean for us; for human agency; for free will?

Some people see God directing every aspect of their lives – good or bad, large or small. In the midst of the world's many mysteries, doubts and fears, it can be tempting to believe that we can understand these events, to interpret the signs and know that God has caused them. Some would say that Joseph's words prove that all things – no matter how vile or evil – can be used and thus redeemed by God.

To some extent, this is true; as we see in this story, God is purposeful, involved, active and engaged. While the brothers plotted against Joseph, God was planning for something else. While Joseph imprisoned and tricked his brothers, God touched his heart and created a new way forward. God works in and through and – sometimes, it seems – in spite of human effort, and through events that might appear to us to have a whole different purpose.³

Unlike most of the other stories that are told in Genesis, though, in Joseph's world – both early in his life in Canaan and later on in Egypt – dramatic religious interventions are absent: there are no appearances of God, no conversations with God, no direct calls from God to action. Instead, Joseph seems to live in a world that appears similar to ours: while we may sometimes see and interpret God at work in our lives and in the world around us, it is often not so direct or obvious. Bad things happen and we are careful not

² Beth Tanner from *WorkingPreacher.com*

³ Celia Brewer Sinclair, *Genesis: Interpretation Bible Studies*

to glibly attribute them to God. Sometimes, good things come out of these bad circumstances, and we look for the ways that God may have been at work all along – not nullifying our human agency, but joining it, guiding it, redeeming it.

When we look back upon this story through the lens of faith, what takes place is made more clear. The guilt of the brothers, the grief of the father, and even the revenge tactics of Joseph are all used as means to disclose the hidden purposes of God. The people of God will not perish in the famine, but will be given a new home in Egypt. The family that seems to have been ripped apart has been drawn back together. Joseph is finally able to see his story for what it truly is: that God's purposes have been at work in and with and under all of these painful and difficult human actions.

This story confirms to us that God's purposes are often hidden and mysterious. Our faith calls us to affirm this reality – to pause and analyze and maybe even try to explain; to discern what acts of wonder God might be doing, but never to fully explain. Joseph – following all his personal pain and suffering, and after all the heartache his vengeful retribution then caused – tries his best to make sense of the situation. He has been reunited with his family – including the father that loved him so dearly – and for this he is thankful; both for the reunion and the chance to be their provider.

Maybe one lesson we take away from today is that while revenge may seem sweet, in the end it is empty. Jesus instructs us to love our neighbors – even those who may have wronged us or treated us poorly, even those who seem like enemies. Joseph tries revenge and finds there is no satisfaction there. Instead, he must reveal himself to his brothers and – despite his position of immense power – to admit that the one who has given him all the gifts of life is God. While the reconciliation with his family is incomplete – not all has been forgiven or forgotten – by turning control back to God, they can once again be neighbors; both in physical proximity, sharing the same land, and in the sense that their fates are once again tied to one another.

In our communities, in our nation, and in our world – we are estranged from many of our neighbors. There is much that divides us. But, as God's children, we believe that our lives are intricately interwoven, even if we cannot presently understand how. Reconciliation is possible, but we have to be willing to seek it; to admit that God is at work in and through and sometimes even in spite of us. God our creator, the giver of all good gifts, will provide. Thanks be to God. Amen.