

## GOD INTENDED IT FOR GOOD

### Genesis 50:15-21

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on September 13, 2020, the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church was closed for the Coronavirus pandemic and the sermon was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.*

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*Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?' So they approached Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this instruction before he died, "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you." Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.' Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.*

I want to begin by saying that this is the first Sunday in several weeks that we are broadcasting live.

- It is also the first of several Sundays in which members of the Return and Renewal Committee are present in the Sanctuary, doing a dry run to get all our safety measures in place in hopes of allowing a safe number of people to start attending worship in person in a few weeks.
- Thus the chancel has been returned to the arrangement we have had for years, and the camera angles you see today are close to what you will see when our livestream equipment is installed over the next few months as livestreaming becomes a permanent part of our ministry.

The Return and Renewal Committee has met nearly every week since late June, for the benefit of all of us, and I want to thank you. I also want to congratulate you on being part of the largest crowd we have had in the sanctuary since March 8, including Easter Sunday. Believe me, it is good to see even a few people in the pews of this warm and holy place once again.

Let us pray: *Lord, as we return – to school, to Fall, to sports – however different that return is – renew us, keep us safe, and most of all, help us return to our ultimate hope in you. Amen.*

#### I.

In this strangest of summers, you have heard nearly a dozen sermons drawn from the Book of Genesis.

As is also the case with a class I taught in June and July, each sermon has focused on a character presented in the Bible. In the sermons we have spent time with:

- God at Creation and Babel<sup>1</sup>
- Abraham and Sarah at their call to receive the promise of land, descendants, and blessing<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1-11.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12.

- Isaac as he faced a near sacrifice at the hands of his father and as found healing in the tent of his late mother in the presence of his beloved and energetic wife Rebekah.<sup>3</sup>

We have spent time with:

- Rebekah as she joyfully threw herself as light into the family of Isaac yet began to bear some of its deeper and darker burdens<sup>4</sup>
- With Jacob as he wrestled with an angel and emerged blessed but limping<sup>5</sup>
- Leah as she moved from seeking the approval of her husband Jacob to giving praise to God, independent of what Jacob or others thought of her.<sup>6</sup>

And we have spent time with:

- The brothers of Joseph who conspire to sell their younger brother into slavery out of revenge at his favored status with their father<sup>7</sup>
- Joseph himself who rises, though enslaved, to be the second most important official in Egypt<sup>8</sup>
- And last week with Judah, one of the brothers, whose willingness to break through to honesty and emotional vulnerability helps heal the years of estrangement between Joseph and his brothers.<sup>9</sup>

Through all these stories, we have seen people in division and dysfunction fight, flee, love, laugh and live – in the same halting and harrowing way we live, knowing bane and blessing, weal and woe, often at one and the same time.

For the final sermon in the series I want to focus less on a character than on a *theme* to which Joseph gives voice as he looks back over his own life and several generations of his family’s history.

After twenty-plus years of estrangement, Joseph has brought his brothers and father to Egypt, where Joseph now rules like a Prime Minister, giving them food in a time of famine, settling them and their families as welcome immigrants in the land he rules, fostering an atmosphere in which reconciliation can occur and trust rebuilt within and across generations.

After their father Jacob dies, the brothers fear that Joseph’s forgiveness has been simply an act to appease their father, a charade to allow the ancient Patriarch to “sleep with his ancestors” in peace. The brothers huddle, discuss their fear, decide to approach Joseph and speak to him face to face.

Joseph answers:

*Even though you intended to do evil to me, God intended it for good...  
So have no fear...  
I myself will provide for you and your little ones.*

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 22 and 24:62-67.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 24:1-62 and 25:19-34; 26:34-35; 27:1-46.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 28:10-22.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 29:31-35.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 37.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 41.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 44:18-34.

This one sentence forms a *theme* of the Joseph story and touches nearly all the characters in Genesis:

...you intended to do evil...God intended it for good...

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What do we think of this statement? Is it true to life? Does it always hold?

At times, our answer has to be “No, it doesn’t always hold, at least from our limited human perspective.”

There are some deaths,  
some acts of cruelty  
some world events  
some natural disasters  
some heinous human slaughters  
about which we cannot say  
in any humane way:  
“God intended it for good.”  
9/11. COVID. Wildfires.  
1,000,000 Uighurs in Chinese concentration camps.

When we think of people near to us, particularly those who die young or tragically, *we* are likely go to *our* graves wondering why *others* went to *theirs* in the *way* or *day* they did.

Yet still Joseph makes the claim – concerning the violence he suffered and the exile he endures – that God intended it for God.

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This theme carries into Christianity when he realize – in our hearts rather than just in the formulations of our faith – that it is *God’s own self* who carries the beams of a cross into the eye of evil’s storm, and through the shameful death on that hand-carved wood, erected on a hill, brings good, conquers evil: strength through weakness, triumph through defeat, victory through shameful, painful death.<sup>10</sup>

It leads us – holding fast to our faith – to seek to see that there are events in our lives in which others intend harm to us, but God intends for good.

- Sometimes such events are personal losses:
  - Friendships
  - Relationships
  - Marriages
  - Family differences and divisions.

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<sup>10</sup> Near the end of his recent book *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), historian and journalist Tom Holland wrote: “To be a Christian is to believe that God became man and suffered a death a terrible as any mortal ever suffered. This is why the cross, that ancient implement of torture, remains what it has always been: the fitting symbol of the Christian revolution. It is the audacity of it – the audacity of find in a twisted and defeated corpse the glory of the creator of the universe – that serves to explain, more surely than anything else, the sheer strangeness of Christianity, and the civilization to which it gave birth.” (540=541).

- Sometimes the loss of a job, the elimination of a position, the closing of a business, the concluding of a career, can be the occasion, the catalyst, the cause that forces us to make decisions that lead to something new and turn us toward blessing.
- Sometimes even the crises a nation goes through God uses for good. Would slavery have ended without the Civil War? Nazism without World War II?
- Will this pandemic, even with nearly a million deaths worldwide, be something that God uses for good?
- Will the current divisiveness in our nation, in person or online, in violent action or violent thought, be something God ultimately uses for good?
- Will the heightened awareness of racial injustice – brought through painful deaths seen by millions – be something God ultimately uses for good?

Only time, faith, wise discernment of events will tell us whether the things which so pain us one day we will another day interpret as God using for good. Often that that determination must can only be made by those who walk the face of the earth after our own walk has ended.

## II.

A close reading of the brief passage before us reveals nine – count them: nine – ways in which the attitudes and actions of Joseph or his brothers contribute to God’s using their flawed family for good.

I will *name* these nine but not *explicate* them, lest our trial run at returning to worship be deemed a failure. Please don’t feel you have to remember all nine, but perhaps one of two will speak to you.

Here is what I notice about Joseph and his brothers:

1. They engage in *honest* conversations:
  - a. They brothers are honest among themselves about their fear that Joseph’s forgiveness has only been for the sake of their father
  - b. And then they are honest with Joseph when they ask him to confirm that their restoration to the family is still in place after their father’s death.

It is the honesty of their conversations that *leads to* the reaffirmation they receive and the reconciliation that lasts.

2. Their conversations are *deep*. They are intense. They are personal. They are not shallow, cursory, or evasive conversations. The words they speak go too, rather than gloss over, the heart of the matter.
3. In their conversations, they are willing to reveal and share *emotion*. The narrator says: “Joseph *wept* when they spoke to him...then his brothers also *wept*...” Neither Joseph nor his brothers are ashamed of the vulnerability of tears.
4. These conversations involve confession. For the second time, the brothers *confess*; this time going so far as to be willing to use the label their father has used to describe their throwing Joseph into a Pit and selling him into slavery, namely, a “crime.” Not a miscommunication. Not a mistake. Not a misunderstanding. But a crime, pure and simple. Their conversation involves confession.
5. In their conversation, the foundations are laid for trust to be rebuilt. The brothers *trust* themselves to speak the truth; they trust Joseph to hear the truth; and when Joseph reiterates his forgiveness, they are

able to trust its sincerity. Trust, when broken, has to be re-built. Both Joseph and his brothers work at this.

6. They focus on *what is good for the whole*, not just for their own psychological condition or even their own lives. “God intended it for good,” Joseph says. “In order to preserve for *himself* a numerous *people*.” Their focus is not just on their health as individuals: it is on the health of the people of God as a community, as a nation, as that community created and chosen to bear God’s promise to all the nations of the world. It is about the common good, not just the individual good.
7. Joseph *reassures* his brothers.
8. Joseph speaks *kindly* to his brothers.

Reassurance and kindness. Kindness and reassurance. Gifts of God to be rediscovered and used in the world from which they seem to have taken leave. Reassurance and kindness. Simple kindness.

9. Joseph is focused on *God*. “Am I in the place of God?” he asks. “...*God* used it for good...in order to preserve a numerous people, as [*God*] is doing today.” It is not about Joseph. It is not about the brothers. It is about God.

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For those taking notes or appreciative of lists, the contribution Joseph and his brothers make toward being able to see God using their long and conflicted history for good involves:

- Honesty
- Depth
- Emotion
- Confession
- Trust
- The good of the whole
- Reassurance
- Kindness
- And a focus on God.

### III.

I entitled this series “Beginnings.” That is, of course, the meaning of the word “genesis,” the beginning of something, the story of origins. These are stories of old, stories from another time. They even have touches of fantasy about them. But they tell us about who *we* are, who *God* is, and who *we can be* before God. Even four thousand years after the time in which these stories are set, 2500 years or more after they were put to parchment, there is nothing more important to know:

Who we are  
Who God is  
Who we can be before God.

The Book of Genesis. The stories of our origins. Before God. I commend them to you. Amen.