

Written: Genesis 50:17-20 “What You Meant for Evil, God Meant for Good”

Ash Wednesday Divine Service

Wednesday, February 14th, 2024

Text: Genesis 50:17-20

¹⁷ ‘Say to Joseph, “Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.” And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.” ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

Exegetical Statement

After their father’s death Joseph’s brothers, still feeling the guilt over selling Joseph into slavery, believe he will now punish them in vindictiveness, just as they know they would do if the situation was reversed. Joseph responds by weeping, because they still don’t understand they have been forgiven by him, because they have been forgiven by the LORD as well. The LORD had a purpose in allowing all the evil that befell Joseph and that was to bless these brothers and their families as well as all those peoples and nations who were fed by the LORD working through Joseph’s actions to store grain during the prophesied time of abundance. The LORD sent Joseph to Egypt to provide for His chosen people Israel whom He still love and mercifully forgave for their sinfulness.

Focus Statement:

Everything that was allowed to happen in Joseph’s life was planned and purposed by God for to save Joseph, his family, and many others from certain death. The unjust suffering and death of the One sinless and innocent man, Jesus Christ, was all part of God’s plan and purpose to save all those chosen by Him through their faith in His atoning sacrifice. The LORD continues to work in our day, even as we suffer, sometimes without cause, to save us eternally by bringing us to faith and keep us in faith unto life everlasting.

Function Statement:

Why it’s important to know:

We can see the evil that happens in the world and happens in our lives as being out of God’s control, or at the very least unexpected or unwanted things that He has to correct or make right. We judge only by what we can see now from our personal temporal perspective.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Know that even the worst things allowed to happen in our lives are not out of God’s control, but have a purpose according to His plan of keeping us in faith and being tools of witness of the Gospel as we share our faith and His love through the hard times.

Subject Sentence: Evil that happens is really God working ultimate good.

Introduction

Whether people realize it or not, there is a significant biblical story of how God's hand is at work in the world that has been popularized and made known outside of the confines of the worship/Bible Study setting. That would be by the popular stage play "Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat." The Broadway stage performance saw a variety of men play the part of Joseph, including David Cassidy from the 70's TV show The Partridge Family. But perhaps the most well-known portrayer of Joseph was Donny Osmond in the 1999 film version of this show.

Now for that reason, because of Donny Osmond's involvement (among other things), I have never seen the stage production of this film. I have nothing serious against him, other than he was too cute at a time when I was into the real rock n' roll kind of singers. But I've heard from others who have seen the original performance that it stayed pretty faithful to the Biblical account. However, I was told that later adaptations of this play have Joseph actually engaged in an adulterous affair with Potiphar's wife. And why would anyone do that? Because sex sells. And the true story, in our culture today, with Joseph resisting temptation, is too unbelievable.

Therefore, I think it's a good idea to revisit the story of Joseph in a manner faithful to the Scriptures, and with an eye to understanding how God works through all things so that *"What was meant for evil, He uses for the ultimate good."*

Story of Joseph: Sold into Slavery

Joseph was the second youngest of twelve sons born to Jacob (whom the LORD renamed Israel). He was the son of Jacob's favorite wife: Rachel. As such he was favored by Jacob over his other sons not born to Rachel. And the clearest example of this favoritism is Jacob's gifting of an especially colorful coat to Joseph, with no such gift to the other 11 sons. This was a bad move on Jacob's part that was bound to cause problems.

Along with this was a dream Joseph had which he shared with his brothers about bundles of wheat each of them had collected in the field. Each of the brothers bundles of wheat bowed down to Joseph's. Then he told them of another dream where the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bowed down to him. If they didn't get it with the first dream, they got it with the second. Even his father Jacob didn't appreciate that dream as they all interpreted it to mean all of them will all bow down to Joseph one day. Jacob takes offense to this one. But nothing like how it offends the 11 brothers. It makes them mad enough to want to kill Joseph.

And they almost do, except oldest brother Reuben stops them. Instead, at his insistence, they strip off the multicolored coat and throw him into a dried up well. Reuben's plan is to come back later and rescue his brother from it. But while he is gone from the rest some traders come along. And the brothers decide they can get rid of Joseph and make a little profit while doing so. So, they sell their very own brother Joseph to these traders as a slave.

When Reuben returns, he impresses upon them the gravity of what they've done. Joseph is gone, presumably forever. What are they going to tell their father? They decide they can't tell the truth. So, they rip up the multicolored robe and smear animal blood on it. They take it to their father saying they found this robe looking like this. Jacob assumes his favorite son was killed by a wild animal. His grief is inconsolable. But this doesn't move any of the 10 brothers to confess the truth of what they had done. They let their father think Joseph is dead to save their own skin. But this unspoken truth will haunt them for a long time to come.

Joseph was not perfect; no one is. When Joseph relays the dreams he had he was probably prideful. His wearing of this coat around his brothers who he should have known were jealous was also prideful. But he didn't deserve to be sold into slavery and separated from his family, never getting a chance to say goodbye to his father. As he traveled to Egypt with these traders, who considered him to be nothing more than a slave, and probably treated him as such, imagine how lost, forlorn, miserable, and scared Joseph must have been.

Joseph certainly didn't deserve this treatment. God certainly could've stopped it from happening. But He didn't. Why? How can we see His hand in this? Well, for starters, it was He who kept the brothers from killing Joseph by working through Reuben's thoughts words and actions to prevent it, even though Reuben was unaware of it. The LORD didn't force the brothers to sell Joseph as a slave, and he didn't stop it, although He certainly could have. He allowed it to happen because He wanted Joseph to be brought down to Egypt. The brothers plan, which they certainly meant for evil, was actually according to God's plan and purpose that would be for the good of more people than the brothers, including Joseph, could've realized

Joseph in Egypt: From House Manager to Prisoner

The brothers had abandoned Joseph, but the LORD had not. He was with Joseph throughout his time in Egypt. By the LORD's hand at work Joseph prospered as a servant in the house of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. Because of the talents and gifts of management, organization, and wisdom that the LORD gave him, Joseph quickly became manager over all the other servants of Potiphar's household. He entrusted Joseph with all of the day-to-day affairs of his household.

Unfortunately, Joseph caught the eye of Potiphar's wife. She repeatedly tried to lure him into her bed. But he refused, citing this as a sin against his master and against his LORD whom he still worshipped and served despite all that had happened. And what does he get for his faithfulness? She lies and accuses Joseph of trying to attack her. Because of her lie Joseph is thrown into prison.

Joseph did not deserve this. The LORD could have prevented it from happening. It was an evil thing that Potiphar's wife had done. Yet as evil as it was, it was all part of God's plan at work which would end up being a blessing in a greater way than anyone could have known, including Joseph.

Joseph in Egypt: From Prisoner to Savior of Egypt

But even in prison Joseph doesn't give up on His faith in the LORD because the LORD is clearly still with him and is blessing him. Because of the gifts and talents the LORD had given him Joseph is put in charge of all the other prisoners by the jailer who is impressed with him.

Joseph still has the ability to interpret dreams. He does so for two of Pharaoh's staff, his baker and cupbearer, who were imprisoned for offending Pharaoh. Each had a dream and told Joseph. He correctly interpreted each. He told the cupbearer his dream meant he would soon be restored to his position before Pharaoh. Joseph only asked that he might remember him before Pharaoh and his wrongful imprisonment. Joseph also correctly interpreted the baker's dream which meant he would soon be put to death.

But the cupbearer forgets about Joseph, and he stays languishing in prison. The LORD could've kept Joseph out of prison. The LORD could've caused his release right after the cupbearer was restored to his position. But the LORD left Joseph in prison. He remained there due to the sinful negligent actions of others. But it was all part of the LORD's grand purpose and design to bring about blessings greater than Joseph or anyone else could realize.

Then one night Pharaoh had two dreams. And the cupbearer told Pharaoh of the Hebrew in prison who can interpret them. The dreams Pharaoh had were from the LORD, given to him, even though he was not a believer. And Joseph was brought before Pharaoh, and the LORD gave him the interpretation of the dreams. There would be 7 years of unprecedented abundance in crops, followed by 7 years of the most devastating famine. The LORD not only gave Joseph the interpretation but gave him the plan on how to save Egypt from it. He told Pharaoh to build storehouse cities to store the abundance of grain throughout the 7 plentiful years so there is enough to last through the 7 years of famine. Pharaoh tells Joseph to go do just that, and gives him the authority to make it happen, making him 2nd in command of all of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself.

The LORD could have prevented all the evil that had happened in Joseph's life up to this point. But He didn't. Instead, through these evils things, the LORD caused Joseph to be in Egypt at this particular time and place so that through him all of Egypt might be saved. And not just Egypt, but many other peoples from the surrounding countries who were able to come and buy grain. Even so, the LORD had more going on than just when He brought Joseph to Egypt.

Joseph as God's Agent of Repentance for His Brothers

Among those who have to come to Egypt for grain are Joseph's 11 brothers. They arrive at that particular city where Joseph is at, all according to the will and plan of the LORD worked out in an amazing way.

And from his position Joseph is able to be the LORD's hand saving his brothers. He is the LORD's hand to save them not just from the famine, but to save them from eternal separation from the LORD. Joseph tests them to see if they have confessed their sins and are repentant. He finds that while they admit what they did to him was sinful and evil, they still carry the guilt from their actions all this time. Joseph is the hand and presence of God to preach to them forgiveness of their sins. And He demonstrates the wonderful grace and forgiveness that only comes from the God by his complete and unconditional forgiveness of them.

He enlightens them to this truth, that is as eye opening for them as it is for us today: **Genesis 50:20 As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.** What they did was wrong and sinful. But the LORD forgives them. Moreover, the LORD used their evil actions for an ultimate good, the salvation of many people including them and their families. Despite their evil, the LORD still loved them and cared for them. Joseph could forgive them because the LORD had forgiven them first.

The Story of Jesus

We often like to say, "God works in mysterious ways." But have you ever stopped to consider how deep and far reaching that statement is? The Apostle Paul's restates Joseph's words of Godly wisdom in **Romans 8:28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.** Now let's apply this to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

All of the evil things evil men did against this One innocent and sinless Son of God, the physical and emotional suffering He endured, it was all part of the Father's greater plan and purpose; not for the Son's good, but for your good and mine. Jesus suffered and died to be our atoning sacrifice for our sin. The LORD laid on Him all our evil plans and deeds and His suffering and dying forgives them all. And He rose again from the grave so we could know with confidence that our sins are completely forgiven. The Father planned all that happened to His Son from the beginning. It is His gift of love to you. And through your baptism and the Gospel message preached, read, and sung, and through the Sacrament of the Altar, He gives you that gift of grace and mercy and forgiveness over and over and over again.

Conclusion: Our Story

As we walk through Lent this year, in our Midweek Lenten Services, we are going to take a look at this Biblical truth revealed by God Himself. We are going to look it and meditate upon it as we study Jesus' Road to the cross as presented in the Gospel of Luke. We will do so with an eye to this truth: What the devil and the sinful world meant for evil, God had already planned and purposed to use for His ultimate good. In understanding how this is true the lives of the disciples and for us His Church, I pray we will be encouraged to bring our sins before God in repentant faith, knowing that even though what we think, say, and do is evil and stands against God's will and purpose for us, even the consequences of our sins serves His purposes for our ultimate good as well as for those around us. It all serves His stated will that all be saved and brought to the knowledge of Jesus Christ as Savior. It all is to be used by His Spirit to create and sustain repentant faith in us and those we come in contact with. It serves His will and plan that all whom He has chosen as His precious and beloved children would walk with Him now in faith and be kept in that faith unto life everlasting. Amen.