

## **“Reconciliation”**

Today we have the story of Joseph. He has risen to be ruler of Egypt. He has power to do what he wants to his brothers. He can exact revenge upon them or give them what they need. They did not realize who he was. In today’s scripture he reveals himself to them. Will he forgive them? His brothers have come for help in a time of famine. What will happen in this time of famine?

Joseph was the favorite son of Jacob. His father loved him more than his other eleven brothers. Jacob had given Joseph a coat of many colors. Joseph’s brothers became very jealous of him and even came to hate him. They conspired to kill him but the oldest brother Reuben convinced them not to kill him but throw him into a water cistern, an underground empty containment hole. When Joseph was held there, the brothers decided to sell him to a travelling band for twenty pieces of silver. Joseph was taken into Egypt.

Some find meaning or even divine purpose and guidance in almost any event. The gift of that perspective is that God is perceived to be near and active in the way a life unfolds. Good things happen. God is to be praised. Bad things happen. God is to be trusted to use it for some kind of purpose. The challenge to this perspective is that God becomes the author of some pretty terrible things that

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do not seem to be working for any good purpose. It can also be an excuse and keep us from taking responsibility for our own actions. All becomes God's will.

Others believe that God is somewhat absent from the minutia of human life and maybe even from the larger events in human history. The gift here is that humans must take responsibility for their agency for their triumphs and failures. The challenge here is that God becomes distant and cold, watching flailing humans do what they will in isolation from divine mercy, guidance or meaning.

Our story today from Genesis 45:1-15 again looks at the relationship between divine and human agency. We have looked before at the stories of Abraham, Rebecca, and Jacob and seen how human agency and human choice works within God's overall plan. Joseph had been sold into slavery by his brothers. The brothers then told their father Jacob that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. This was a cruel act. One could say it was sin.

The brothers acted. They were not mere puppets. But the other side of the story is that God sends Joseph to Egypt. Joseph states this when he talks to his brothers. God sent me; God made me. Joseph has many talents by which he rises to a high level in the Egyptian government. Pharaoh's actions in elevating Joseph to this position are the actions of God. God is the actor.

Joseph's great administrative abilities are used to help people. The famine is the background. A life and death issue---not doubt it has cost many lives and could

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cost many more. Joseph being sent to Egypt is God's way of preserving life, practically the life of Joseph's family. But God's concern for life embraces not just Joseph's family but also Egypt and the whole Middle East. The divine objective encompasses every sphere of life within both family and nation.

Does God really send disaster and famine in order to then save only some? Does God allow people to experience pain or shame in order to make them better people? As Rev. Michael Fick, pastor of Ebenezer Lutheran Church in Chicago writes, "Caution is warranted in drawing such conclusions, given the harm they can do to people who are harmed or ashamed." I believe this theology is problematic, because it suggests that God intentionally harms people to teach them a lesson. Some have asked me is the COVID-19 pandemic is a sign from God that people need to turn from their evil ways and repent. I have rejected this conclusion because I do not believe the God who sent his son to die for us is also a God who intentionally inflicts pain, suffering or death on us.

I think a better way to look at this story is that bad acts or sins of some can be used by God for a greater purpose. Joseph is convinced that the events of his life had a purpose. Through his brother's betrayal, he has not only grown powerful in worldly authority but will now be able to save a remnant of his people from the famine in the land. Joseph believes his life is the means of grace by which God will save his people.

The story of Joseph is a story of salvation comparable to that of Jesus. He is innocent, talented. He draws the wrath of his brothers due to their jealousy. He is thrown into a pit to die but they eventually decide to sell him into slavery.

Although he does not die, he has to suffer greatly and be taken away from the life he loves. Jesus is talented and innocent. He is arrested by those authorities who are jealous of him and want him out of the way. They trump up false charges against him and have him flogged and crucified. He goes through great sufferings.

In both the stories of Jesus and Joseph God uses bad actions of humans to achieve a greater purpose. God also uses his divine powers. Jesus is resurrected and brings life and forgiveness to all humankind. Joseph is essentially resurrected in Egypt by rising to the top of the political authority. His wise judgment to get the government to save resources in a time of plenty eventually gives life to those suffering in famine.

Joseph provides us with a model of forgiveness. He does not scold his brothers or try to make them feel guilty or shameful. He does not make them bow down and make a confession of sins. He is not dismissive of what they did to him, saying "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into slavery." He weeps and reconciles with them. He then provides for them and their families. We know that God is acting in humanity when there is reconciliation.

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Jesus has provided forgiveness for us without conditions. He weeps for us and provides us with eternal life. He just asks that we acknowledge him as the Lord of our lives.

What is the lesson for us in the story of Joseph? The activities of the brothers were used as a vehicle for the sustaining of the life of the family. There were bad actors in this story. There were bad actors in the crucifixion. The point to the story is that even bad acts can be put to good use by God. The brothers' sinful activities were drawn into a larger orbit of God's purposes and used by God as a way to bring life rather than death.

I have studied Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young theologian who spoke up against Adolph Hitler in Nazi Germany and was eventually killed because of his involvement in a plot to kill Hitler. The significance of Bonhoeffer's involvement in this plot was that he was a peace activist who did not believe in killing anyone. His reading of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount made him believe that he was not to kill anyone. But after being granted access to documents that showed the death campaign of the Nazi regime, he came to the conclusion that Hitler must be eliminated. In writing from prison, he talks about the free responsible action that must be taken by Christians. "It is founded upon God who calls for the free venture of faith to responsible action and promises forgiveness

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and consolation to the one who on account of such action becomes a sinner.”<sup>1</sup>

Bonhoeffer essentially promotes a variation of the idea that God can make something good out of bad acts as long as they serve a greater purpose of giving life. In his case, even though killing Hitler was technically a sin, it was done anyway to save the German people and he then asked for forgiveness.

We have a situation today in which we need to act to bring about justice and mercy in our country. We do not face the level of evil that was present in Nazi Germany. But we do need to do something. People are wrongly dying because of the color of their skin. People are being imprisoned because of the color of their skin. Life is being made harder for people just because of the color of their skin.

Our situation is not as dire as that of Bonhoeffer because we will not be killed for what we do. We are not sinning when we seek to make changes to a system which is unfair to those of color. But our challenge to this system may be viewed by others as bad acts. What has been engrained into us since we were born may also make us feel that we are committing bad acts. To do God’s purposes may require us to go against what we have been taught; it may require us to go against our family and friends. We will need to change institutions which we have considered sacred. We may have to question our government and our country. The intent is not to overthrow our government; it is not to hate our country but instead

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<sup>1</sup> Michael P. DeJonge and Clifford J. Green, *The Bonhoeffer Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 765.

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to make it better. The intent is to bring about justice for all. The question we ask is there a life-giving purpose in what we do? Can our actions be such to bring about life rather than suffering or death? Will our actions bring about reconciliation of all, regardless of race or the color of one's skin?

Let us go back to Joseph. He believed his own declaration that God had given his life meaning and purpose. His self-revelation to his brothers, as their brother and as a person who believes God has guided and cared for him, is real. And it's real in the lives of countless people of faith, too, who wonder at the mystery of God's presence in events yet nonetheless experience real redemption, forgiveness, and meaning through faith. God seeks us when we are both lost and found, doubtful and faithful, bound and free, wronged and forgiving. Let us continually seek God's guidance to bring reconciliation and life-giving purpose in what we do. We may never completely understand how much it is us working and how it is God working, but we know God is with us. God's presence with us is a mystery and it makes meaning.