

“A Matter of Perspective”

*A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
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Genesis 45:1-15

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, “Send everyone away from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ²And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

⁴Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.’ ¹²And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” ¹⁴Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Do you like going to a stage play, seeing Act I, missing Act II, and then coming back for Act III? How about starting a book, reading the first chapter, then putting it down, only to pick it up again but resume reading from the second-to-last chapter? I know I don’t. Sure, I may be able to suss out what happened during the parts I missed, but that’s distracting. I realize that I’m missing something important, something that will help me understand the whole of what is actually going on. This lectionary passage is a prime example of not getting the whole story. When we last saw Joseph he was a youngster in a pit on his way to a life of slavery. Now he’s running a foreign country. What on earth is going on? How did we get here? And does any of that really matter?

In the gap between chapters 37 and 45 of Genesis, a lot has happened to Joseph: he's sold to Potiphar, Potiphar's wife hits on him, he refuses, he's tossed in jail, he has his dreams about the seven fat cows and their seven thin compatriots, he's brought to the attention of Pharaoh, he becomes the king's vizier, and he winds up running Egypt. Meanwhile, Jacob thinks his beloved son is dead, Joseph's brothers feel guilty, and the famine that struck the kingdom on the Nile is doing its worst in Canaan, too.

That's a lot of plot development! How on earth could the people who assembled the lectionary leave this material out? The answer is simple: the missing chapters, while interesting, are ultimately irrelevant.

Look carefully at today's lesson. What sticks out? Is it the revelation? The confession? The weeping? No, it's none of that. For me, it's Joseph's assertion that everything had happened for a reason, that God was why he had been delivered into bondage.

When I reread this story, I was struck by Joseph's attitude, which was remarkable, especially for someone with his ego. He still thinks he's a hot shot, and he takes pride in how much power and influence he wields. But despite his position as Pharaoh's right-hand man, he doesn't assume that he has authored his own good fortune, nor does he blame his brothers for the bad that has happened to him. Instead, Joseph assumes that a Divine Providence is at work, that what is good is the result of God's magnanimity and what is ill happened for a good reason.

Now, on one level, this shouldn't be a surprising notion. We, as church people, should be nodding our heads in agreement. But there is a difference between a nice sentiment and a guiding conviction.

I remember sharing a thought during an adult-ed class I was teaching at another church many years ago. We were discussing stewardship and I offered the anodyne observation that all we have is because of God. I was surprised when one of those in our gathering flat-out rejected the idea. He didn't seem to have a problem with the idea that God might be working in our lives, but he had no time for the notion that his success in life might be anything other than the result of his hard work and effort. Frankly, I liked him and was too stunned by his vehemence to directly challenge him, but this is one of those moments in my ministry that I've remembered with clarity for years and years.

I can only offer surmises about what made this usually genial, well-educated doctor reject the idea that God might be due some gratitude for what he had achieved in his life. But I do know that the man was in no way responsible for the genes he had inherited, for the parents who had raised him, for establishing and staffing the schools he attended, and so on and so forth. All these things were beyond him, as they would be beyond us.

We rightly take pride in our attainments and our accomplishments—we've worked hard to do certain things in life, and we don't want our efforts to be dismissed. But to say we

are not 100% responsible for everything good in our lives is not the same as saying we're not responsible for any of it. It's all a matter of perspective, of seeing ourselves as part of something bigger and grander than our own stories. It's a matter of seeing that maybe we have had some help along the way, just as we may have helped others on their way, too.

Jesus came to teach his community about the need to repent and prepare for the coming of the Lord. In doing this, he preached the story of Israel's fulfillment, and he told of God's hopes for his people.

Not for a person, but for a people.

"No man is an island," John Donne famously wrote; none of us is ever truly alone, not even when we spend an afternoon by ourselves or are dealing with a crushing solitude. No, we are meant to acknowledge and exist in community, to look to God, the Trinity, as the model for our lives. The Almighty saw us living with one another, for one another, and that requires us to have a certain perspective, one that sets aside the self for the common good. And in those times when there are no people in our lives with whom to celebrate, or curse, or mourn, or just be, God is always there with us, comforting us, holding us, and sustaining us.

Joseph's story is profound precisely because of the exalted position he held. Wouldn't it have been understandable if Joseph concluded he had made his own way in life, that he put his gifts to the best use, that he'd taken a bad hand and played it brilliantly, winning everything by himself? Sure. He could have seen himself as the hero of his own epic, a Horatio Alger figure of the ancient world.

But he didn't do that. He attributed to God not only his wealth and power but also the scary twists and dark turns of his life. Does that mean we would be justified in laying all the calamities and ill fortune that might befall us at the feet of God? Of course not.

Joseph never claimed to be a helpless pawn in some divine chess game. Instead, he saw God at work in his life and envisioned the possibility of something good arising from a bleak situation.

In the church, we describe this as the Holy Spirit at work. We see God making the most of the direst situations. While the God of Joseph doesn't overtly involve himself in human affairs like an ancient Greek or Mesopotamian deity, he does not just leave us to our own devices. If he did, he would not have spoken with Abraham, or raised up Moses, or come to us in Jesus. Yes, each man spoke with and knew God, but each had to act on his own, to make his way forward in the world in which he lived. Seeing and acknowledging how God has worked not just in all of history but also in our lives requires a new perspective, one that can be life-giving if we are fully prepared to lay aside our need to be at the center of everything and instead award God pride of place.

Remember: God was with Joseph in the pit, and he was with him in his dreams, and he was with him at the seat of power in Egypt. And now, at this moment of reunion, Joseph realized that his story had a purpose: not just to benefit his family but to ensure that God would be able to keep the promises he had made to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. In saving his relatives, Joseph ensured the future of Israel. Seeing this, Joseph believed himself to be an instrument of divine action.

Looked at from one vantage, this actually sounds prideful. Joseph, once the lost boy, the foreign slave, the nobody, was now the chosen vehicle through which the Creator of heaven and earth worked his plans. God used Joseph to achieve his aims! Joseph must surely have been special.

But looked at from another vantage, Joseph saw his worth not through his office or his resume. Instead, he set aside his ego and recognized what God was able to do through and with him. Joseph recognized that the meaning of his life came through his service to others: to Pharaoh, but more importantly, to his family. The way he saw things shaped the way he did things, and that, in turn, allowed for healing and forgiveness to take root, where resentment, anger, and even hate might have flourished.

So, is the lesson of this story that we should just do as Joseph did, see as he saw, and all will be well with our worlds? Well, yes, but... We must admit, right now, that doing what Joseph did is easy in theory but much harder in practice.

Consider our present situation. Where is the good to be found in the coronavirus pandemic? In our fractured politics? In our discussions and arguments about race? We might have to work very hard to find any positives beyond a Pollyannaish assessment of these scenarios. But I believe that it is both possible and necessary.

As I was working on this sermon, I was fighting a low-grade migraine. The first of these headaches manifested itself earlier this summer and, if you've ever had one, you know it's not pleasant. I tell you this not because I look for sympathy, but to offer a reflection on a God-centered perspective and how it might look in our daily lives.

I do not believe that this is an affliction from on high, that the Lord punishes us with illness or tries to educate us through suffering. A migraine is just a migraine, end of story. I have learned from past experience and so was better prepared to deal with this one. As I rested my eyes, and turned away from prolonged viewing of screens, and was glad I did not have any Zoom meetings to attend, and did a variety of other things to ameliorate my discomfort, the thought came to me that God might be trying to tell me something. I was able to set aside my daily distractions, some of those things that keep me from focusing on what God would have me do and be.

Do I believe that God was speaking to me in this moment? No. I haven't started to have visions or hear the Lord speak to me, as he did to the prophets of old. But that's not the

way God communicates with us, is it? We have Scripture, the Church, each other to remind us that we are here to praise God and to serve his people. God has various ways to get our attention, to share things with us. Think about how God might be doing this in your life. You may be surprised.

So how does God communicate with me or you? Well, one way might be through events. This will not be news to you, but this is an exceedingly weird time in which to do ministry. While I'm sure that could also be said for many other jobs and professions, I'm in church work, so that's what I'll focus on.

It's been five months since we last gathered for in-person worship in our sanctuary, and I honestly do not know when we will do so again. But as has been said so many times over these past weeks, while the church building is closed, the work of the Christ's body goes on. This is because we—not just I, but all of us—have adopted a new perspective on things. Rather than turn away from the situation, we have asked questions: If we are unable to meet in person, how will we gather? If we can't have adult ed classes in the parlor, how can that be pulled off? If we can't sing together, how else might we make music? The list goes on, and rather than see what is happening as an inconvenience, in which life as we know it is coming to an end, I prefer to see the current moment as a heaven-sent opportunity, to focus on what we really value, to figure out how we can hold onto what we treasure but also, perhaps, try some new things, too. That doesn't mean that when the time comes, we won't return to our sanctuary. Far from it. But my fervent hope and prayer is that we will do so with renewed appreciation for what we have been given and enthusiasm for what we can do.

When we adopt a Jesus-focused perspective, we look at the world as it should be, not as it is, not as we would like it to be, but as the Lord intended it to be. A world where we live in community, serve the common weal, rejoice in what is good, enjoy that which is beautiful, not let old hurts exercise dominion over us but let ourselves be led into God's future by the Holy Spirit.

To do that, we need to focus on what is important, not on details that may distract us. Remember the book and the play I mentioned at the start of the sermon? Those missing middle chapters? Imagine your viewing or reading isn't for pleasure or self-edification, but because you need to learn what's really important, and that information is found at the start and the finish. In this case, it's that Joseph alienated his brothers, they responded in a beastly manner, and then we fast-forward to a point where reconciliation may take place. I believe that all those involved—Joseph, his brothers, the Egyptians, Jacob—were surprised by the emotion that arose on that long-ago day of reunion. And it was all possible because Joseph was able to set aside his ego, to still love his brothers, to recognize the power with which God had moved throughout his long, eventful life.

May it be so for us, too.