

Intended for Good? (23Sept18)
Genesis37&50

Bad stuff that turns out okay.

As we skip from the start to the conclusion of this story of Joseph and his brothers, we could be tempted to say that no matter what happens, it all works out in the end. In fact, I do frequently say something like that as a word of hope in a God of new life and resurrection. But with this narrative, let's go tentatively and not leap to the conclusions.

As the story begins, we meet Joseph who is the 11th son of Jacob or Israel. From last week's story of Abram waiting for God's promise of a child, eventually Isaac, that son of laughter, was born. He and his wife Rebekah had twin sons, and Rebekah's favorite was also favored by God. That was Jacob, a cheater and thief. He didn't only struggle to steal from his older brother, but also from God. That wrestling for blessing late one night got him renamed Israel.

Obviously we know Israel as the nation bearing his name, a nation sometimes claiming to be right with God even as they continue wrestling with their brothers and sisters and neighbors. They took the name Israel since that became the identifier for the family of God's people. We learned last week that God's intention to bless all nations and peoples was through one specific person and family, Abram and his descendants. In today's story, this Israel or Jacob has twelve sons and a daughter (from multiple mothers, and Joseph's mother died in childbirth). Those 12 sons by next week will have grown and expanded into 12 tribes of Israel, 12 big extended family groups.

But before we worry about the family dynamics among hundreds of thousands of relatives, in today's story we've got problem enough with just the close family, the brothers with each other and sons with their father.

Commentators like to point out that Joseph is a jerk. He's a tattling younger sibling. He's the favorite and he knows it and wants to rub it in. He dreams that his older brothers and even his father will bow down to him. And he tells them about it.

He may have poor social skills or be a stereotypical younger child who can get away with too much.

Some older siblings would react by offering a hurts doughnut or a dutch rub or a wedgie, or would ditch the twerp and pedal away faster on bikes, leaving the whiner crying in the dust. Maybe since Joseph had gotten more on their nerves, or things were rougher in this family, the brothers decide to get rid of Joseph by killing him. Murder. Fratricide, like the first death in the Bible.

Again in the stereotypical way, the oldest sibling is the most responsible and concerned about parental response. Reuben tries to plan so he doesn't have to answer to an angry father about why and how he let his littlest brother die.

A creative middle child has the entrepreneurial mindset to realize they can both be rid of him and make some cash on the side, so they sell him into slavery in Egypt, which I suppose we take as the less-worse of options, the lesser of two evils, maybe.

Joseph is sold to a high-ranking official, but that official's wife tries to sexually assault Joseph. In what is much too rarely the Bible's story (or any story), the vulnerable person escapes, and yet, as is more commonly the case, the victim is blamed nevertheless, and in Joseph's case, it lands him in jail.

Eventually around more dreams, he is able to tell Pharaoh there is going to be a time of great harvests followed by a time of famine. So Pharaoh puts him in charge of all the crops and essentially all the Egyptians to sell them food when the hard times come.

These Egyptians aren't isolationists. When disaster strikes and others also are starving, they are ready to help (again, at a cost). This includes Joseph's brothers who come to ask for assistance. They have no idea their brother is alive, much less that he's the second-in-command in Egypt, living with a new identity.

Joseph doesn't quite welcome them with open arms. He does help with some food, but also plays tricks on them and is conniving and demanding.

We can't quite tell if it's just in jest or if he's vindictive and resentful of how they treated him, whether or not that would be reasonable and fair.

Eventually he comes clean, reveals that he's Joseph. He's weeping. They rejoice. It's all such a happy family reunion at that point, overcoming decades of separation and worse.

Still, the brothers are fearful. Fearful enough that their worry comes up twice. Once in chapter 45, and then again in the part we heard today, later on after their father has died. They're still trying to fabricate lies for things to turn out better for them, not to address straight on what they've done wrong.

And we might wonder whether Joseph would hold them to account, if he would recount the litany of his sufferings, if he would use his newfound power, if the expectation would be retributive justice. But Joseph forgives them. Suddenly he releases them from responsibility or liability for what they did wrong.

It's easy to have this enshrined by Scripture and stand on its own, but I want to hear it differently and tentatively by making it more generic. Here's a retelling for our ears:

A younger sister was disregarded by older siblings, and they found a way for her to satisfy their appetites of bad habits requiring hard cash. Her fate of human trafficking was the same as so many hidden others, modern day slavery, abandoned in a foreign place where she didn't even know the language.

Because of her youthful good looks, multiple times her boss tried to harass, touch, grope, even rape her.

Rather than finding justice, she was the one who wound up in prison, where others forgot about her and she was left under a too-long sentence. Still, on her eventual release, unlike many, she managed to reintegrate and even move up in society, but with a role that made awful demands on people while claiming to help them—extorting their money, extorting their lands, eventually extorting their very lives into the confinements she had escaped.

Even her own family, when they came looking for help, she extorted their kindness, their regard for each other, making a mockery of their identity and making them bow and grovel.

But! it all turned out in the end.

See, we have to wonder at the sudden end and shouldn't rush to God's resolution. After all, whether the version from Genesis, or the updated retelling bringing it into a reality we know more about, these may feel more like real life, at least theologically, than last week where the voice and promise of God was loud and clear. We shouldn't skip to the ending, as we're left wondering: how do we attribute an invisible silent God's place?

In this whole saga we heard, God isn't mentioned until things turn good. But Joseph even there only raises the backward question that the role of God is to punish but that he can't. So through this whole thing, do we expect that God is absent or negligent in the harder times? Or why do we give God credit especially for the good? Maybe we hold this as Don Tubesing shared in preaching a couple weeks ago, that we can't see it as it's happening but can later look back and see the "thin silver thread" running through it all, even when everything seemed lost and gone. That's also a task and a vision we can only accomplish ourselves. We can't tell others what the meaning was, or how to relate their difficulties to God.

But still, if God doesn't get mentioned at all until the end, we wonder through it all, from back at the start, did God give Joseph the dreams, even while offending his family? Or was it just his subconscious at work?

Did God design for all the horrendous details, just to put Joseph through it to lead eventually to something else? Was the rotten stuff warranted because it turned out better? Wouldn't we flee promptly from a God who used any means to justify an ends?

Or did God just manage to take what was available and turn it nevertheless to good purposes? Using imperfect materials and dull tools and the lack of clear blueprint that so often exemplifies our lives, if we're God's instruments,

God's stuck with not the sharpest knives in the drawer. That feels the most obvious to me, that a good God continually strives ahead in spite of our sin and stubbornness and suffering.

Was the alleged happy ending that Joseph helped save people from starving? Or more narrowly that he forgave and was reunited with his family? Both could be God's work, of feeding the hungry, and of reconciling relationships.

And what about that not really being the end, with the ongoing hard edges, that everything isn't fixed and made right, that by the time we turn the page into Exodus, this pleasant family get together will have resulted in the enslavement of the Israelite descendants and killing of their children. That will further result in the harm of many Egyptians and their livestock, including deaths of all the firstborn. And we might have to say it eventually results in the injustices perpetrated by Israelis against Palestinians.

In many and various ways, Scripture does assert that God is working for the good, that indeed "goodness is stronger than evil" (ELW 721), that our fallible wills will not inevitably lead to destruction, that God leads to new creation through God's promising ever-resilient and tenacious will, always finding a way forward.

Sometimes we glimpse or taste that ourselves, as we share in a moment of healing or a change of heart or happy surprise or experience the power of forgiveness for new beginnings, as grace leads us home.

Sometimes we have to say it's more than we individually know, that the arc of the universe is long but it does bend toward justice, that we can see the Promised Land, even though we may not each get there. There is that kind of larger hope, hope for our children, hope for our nation, hope for humankind, hope for the planet.

And then there's even something beyond that, that death can never prevail against the God of life, even though sometimes that means God's good work is not accomplished in this life but must wait for resurrection.

When we're faced with hardships like human trafficking and sexual assault and exploitation and

extortion just to be able to afford not to starve, when we're faced with fractured families that may be downright dangerous or may just be the usual kind of frustrating and doing all sorts of wrong to each other and mourning loss of family members, when the story may be a long, long way from finished, we're left to ponder how God is involved, whether God works with us to make things right, or we work without God, or God works in spite of us. Given the bleakness of the story, I can't but hope in the biggest possible God with the most potential, even if it is yet to come.

I also know that I can't muster that hope on my own. That, as the twisty pondering questions of this sermon have indicated, if I'm left to myself, then I don't know where to locate God. I don't know what's right. I don't know whether to hope or fear, press ahead or retreat, ask forgiveness, praise, or lament. That is why I'm here in worship, with you. That is why I need gatherings like this, for reassurance.

In one small way of that, I'll tell you that except for the next song, the rest were chosen by Sybil Klatt as hymn selector. You can tell mine is more dour. She had upbeat and trusting choices, confident in a God who is with us and seeks our good in spite of too much evil and sorrow around us. Today, because I'd spent a week struggling with where God was in this reading and where God is in my life, in your lives when you need God, in our desperately needy world, this week I needed Sybil and her hymns to help reinforce my faith and hope. Thanks Sybil. Thanks all for hanging in there as this community sustaining promise and hope and pointing to God together.

Hymn: *God, When Human Bonds are Broken* (ELW 603)