

SERMON September 14, 2014
[Gen. 50:15-21; Psalm 103:1-13; Romans 14:1-12; Matt. 18:21-35]
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PRAYER: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength, our courage, and our freedom. Amen

Our Old Testament lesson this morning describes a dramatic encounter between the patriarch Joseph and his brothers. It comes near the end of **a long series of Joseph stories** that take up almost one-quarter of the book of Genesis. It also comes at the **end** of Genesis, where it functions as a **summary** of the stories of the patriarchs of Israel--Abraham, Isaac & Jacob—and also as a **preview** of God's involvement in Israel's experiences in the **wilderness**. All of this underscores the profound **importance** of the story of Joseph for God's people, **including us!**

Now, the Joseph Cycle is one **continuous, connected** narrative whose primary purpose is **didactic**, i.e., the Joseph stories teach the reader—they teach **us!**--**how God works** in the world, including working in **hidden** and **mysterious** ways. Unlike the pessimistic **Greek** belief in **Fate** that **determines** all of life, or the view that everything happens by **chance**, or the view that **humans** determine their **own destiny**, the story of Joseph affirms in the strongest terms that **God superintends all** of human experience for **good**. For the **first** time in the biblical narrative, Joseph enunciates the **truth** that **God** is able to bring **good** out of **all** the actions and experiences of human beings, even the **most evil** actions and the most tragic experiences. This truth about God's deep **involvement** in human experience is what the **BCP** call's "God's providence". Now, "providence" is **not** a biblical term; but the **reality** of God's overruling providence **pervades** all of Scripture. In the highly **troubled** times in which we live, as well as in the midst of **our own pain** and our **own personal tragedy**, we **need** to hear Joseph's story of God's faithfulness to bring **good** from what seems to be **only bad**.

Now, to understand the amazing **power** of Joseph's testimony to God's providential care, we need to **know more** about Joseph's story. Here are a few **highlights**. The great patriarch, Jacob, had **twelve sons** and you know that Joseph

was his **favorite son**. It was to Joseph that Jacob gave the **famous** “coat of many colors”. Jacob’s **favoritism** toward Joseph made his brothers **jealous**. And two **dreams** of Joseph, in which his brothers appear to be **servicing him**, aroused their **hatred**. One day, Jacob sends Joseph out to where his brothers are herding their father’s sheep. The brothers **seize** this opportunity; they **strip** Joseph of his precious coat; and they **sell** him to a traveling caravan to be sold as a **slave** in Egypt!

In Egypt, Joseph becomes the slave of **Potiphar**, a high-ranking officer in Pharaoh’s court. The narrator of Joseph’s story, in a **refrain** that runs through the Joseph stories, says, “**The Lord was with Joseph** and he became a **successful** man.” (39:2) So successful, in fact, that Potiphar put Joseph in charge of **all** that he had. Something **good** after the **evil** done to him! Before long, Potiphar’s wife tries to **seduce** Joseph. He **repeatedly refuses** her advances; but then she **turns** on him and tells **Potiphar** that **Joseph** has been trying to seduce **her**. Potiphar is **outraged**, of course, and throws Joseph into **prison**. More **evil** done to Joseph—now, **falsely accused** and thrown into **prison**.

But, the narrator affirms **again**, “**The Lord was with Joseph** and showed him **steadfast love**, and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.” (39:21) **Indeed!** The keeper of the prison put **Joseph in charge** of all the prisoners! Then the story takes a **new twist** when two high-ranking officials of Pharaoh—his chief butler and his baker—are sent to the prison where Joseph is in charge. Each man has a **dream**, which Joseph is able to interpret with God’s help. Joseph interprets the **butler’s** dream to mean the butler will be **restored** to his role waiting on Pharaoh. When the butler is finally released from prison, Joseph asks him to **remember** Joseph to Pharaoh. “But,” the narrator tells us, “the chief butler did **not** remember Joseph, but **forgot** him.” (40:23) And so Joseph is **wronged** yet **again!**

Two more years pass while Joseph is **forgotten** in prison. Then Pharaoh has two very **troubling** dreams, which none of his Egyptian wise men is able to interpret. The chief butler suddenly **remembers** Joseph and his ability to interpret dreams. So,

Pharaoh sends for Joseph, tells Joseph the dreams, and asks for his interpretation. Pharaoh's two dreams, you may recall, are **predictions** of **seven** years of **abundant** harvest, followed by **seven** years of **famine**. Because of Joseph's interpretation Pharaoh puts **Joseph** in charge of the preparations for the famine. In fact, Joseph is made **second** in command to Pharaoh himself! Pharaoh also gives Joseph an Egyptian wife, the daughter of the **High Priest**, with whom he has two sons. Now, it is significant that Joseph names the first son **Manasseh**, which means, "God has made me forget all my **hardships**". (41:51) You see, the Lord is **still with** Joseph! How things have **changed for good** since Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers! And in ways he could **never have foreseen**!

Well, the famine comes as predicted and Joseph administers the food program by which the Egyptians are kept **alive**. And not just **Egyptians**! **Joseph's own brothers**—the ones who had sold him into slavery--come from the land of Canaan to Egypt to buy grain. **Ironically**, the brothers must deal with **Joseph**, whom they do **not** recognize and could never guess would have this high position! Joseph, on the other hand, **does** recognize his brothers and, in a highly **emotional** scene, Joseph **suddenly reveals** who he is, "I am Joseph your **brother**, whom you **sold** into Egypt!" (45:3) What a **shocking** disclosure! The brothers are absolutely **terrified**! They are **afraid** that Joseph will now take **revenge** for the evil they had done to him.

So, what **does** Joseph do? **Remind** them of their evil behavior toward him? **No!** Mete out the **punishment** they deserve? **No!** Instead, Joseph utters these **absolutely amazing** words of grace: "Do not be **distressed**, or **angry** with yourselves, because you sold me here; for **God** sent me **before** you to **preserve life**. ...and to **keep alive** for you **many** survivors. So it is not **you** who sent me here, but **God**." (45:5-8) **Three times** in this scene Joseph declares the **unseen**, but **effective** providence of God, who **counters** their evil intentions: **they** did not send Joseph to Egypt; it was **God** who sent him to Egypt, so that Joseph could save their lives!

Now, fast forward to the scene described in our Old Testament lesson this morning. Their father **Jacob** has **died** and the brothers are afraid Joseph will **now** take his **revenge** on them. So, **what** does Joseph **do**? He speaks **yet again** of the **overruling providence of God**, who has taken even the evil intentions of his brothers and brought good from those intentions: “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.” (50:19-20)

This is what the **grace-ful providence of God** is all about, my friends. It is the **gracious** action of God, who takes **all** the intentions and actions humans devise, including the **evil** ones, and somehow **brings good** out of them. **How is** God able to “make all things work together for good”, as the Apostle Paul puts it? I confess I cannot explain **how** God does this; I can only **testify** to the glorious **truth** Joseph’s story illustrates.

I **know** this truth from **personal** experience. In what I am about to tell you, **all** the **glory** belongs to **God**. I did not have my doctoral dissertation written when I began teaching in Azusa Pacific College in Southern California, where I first met Teresa more than 35 years ago. With a heavy teaching load and two small children, I was **not** getting it done **either**. So, I decided to take a **leave of absence** for a year. I left with the **blessing** of the college and with their **financial support** and returned to Princeton to finish my work. After I had been there about **six months**, I received a phone call in which I was told bluntly that there would be **no teaching position** for me when I **returned**. The **college** was **reorganizing** itself as a **university** and the person who was to become my **superior** did not want me there. The reasons **why** were purely **political**, as Teresa can attest.

This news hit me like a **blow** from behind! I was completely **overcome** by the gross **unfairness** of it all. For two months, I walked around in a **daze** and **lost** valuable time on the dissertation. I **confess** I could **not see** God at work in all this! How could things have worked out for me to complete my work, but then have my teaching position

suddenly **yanked** out from under me? Was it not God's will for me to finish my dissertation? "Where **are** you, God?!"

At that time and for some time after that, I could **not** say, what Joseph said, "**You** did something evil to me, but **God** meant it for **good**." It was only **over time**, and in **retrospect**, that I came to see what **Joseph** saw with regard to his ill treatment by his brothers. **Gradually**, I, too, **looking back** began to see how God was **bringing good** out of what had seemed only **bad** for me.

Now I see **many** good things that came from the devastating loss of my teaching position; but I will only mention **two**. When I returned home, I only had about **half** of my dissertation written **and** I had **no job**! So, I fell back on what I knew I could do to make a living: paint houses and hang wallpaper. Some time later, one of my **former students** called to say she and her husband wanted to talk with me. I had not had any contact with her since she finished several of my classes. When they came over one evening, they expressed **concern** that I would have to work **full time** to provide for my family and therefore would **not** be able to **finish** my dissertation. They said they both had **well-paying** jobs in the Silicon Valley and were making so much money that they were "**concerned**"—their term!—with what to do with their **tithe**! So, they offered to give me and my family **\$750 each month** until I finished the dissertation! And they **did so faithfully**! And that made it possible for me to finish it! If you read the "Acknowledgments" in my dissertation, you will eventually come across this **cryptic** line: "Laura and Jeffry Yeates freed my hands to finish the writing." That is literally true!

Now, since I had **lost** my teaching position, I was suddenly **free** for **something else**. Through a series of circumstances in which I now see **God's hidden hand** at work, I ended up teaching in the Episcopal Theological School at Claremont for more than **17 years**, something I could **never have imagined**. Teaching future priests and deacons (and one future **Bishop**!) in the Episcopal Church during those years was the **most rewarding** teaching I have ever done. So, I stand before you to testify, "**I know**

what Joseph meant when he said, “Even though you meant **harm** to me, **God** intended it for **good**.” This is the glorious **paradox of grace**!

Now, in recounting the experiences of Joseph and myself, I have focused narrowly on the harmful **actions of others** toward us; **but**, I believe God is able to take **all of our experiences** in life, whatever they may be, including the broken relationships, the debilitating accidents, profound health issues, lost opportunities—all of our experiences and use **every single one** for our good. I also have to be **honest** with you: God's providential care does **not** mean we will **escape** the suffering, the depression, the frustration, the loss from the bad things that happen to us any more than it did for Joseph. But, the providence of God **does** mean that **God is there with us** in the midst of that experience, even if for a time **God's action** for our good is **hidden**. The narrator of the Joseph stories reminds us repeatedly that God was continually **with** Joseph; and **still**, bad things happened to him. Despite Jesus' anguished prayer in the Garden, God did **not** step in to save him from suffering and death; **but**, God **did raise up Jesus** for our salvation! The providence of God does not mean God **pulling strings** to manipulate the circumstances of our lives, but rather God **weaving together** the various strands of our experience into the **perfect pattern** of God's desire for us. I firmly believe this!

This Eucharistic table is where this great **paradox of grace** is on magnificent display **Sunday** after **Sunday**. Jesus' death was the result of the **evil** intentions and actions that arise in **every** human heart. This bread and wine made holy **re-affirms** the **providence** of God—the gracious work of God—which takes up **all** human intentions and actions, even the evil ones, and somehow brings **life** from them. Just as **God** sent **Joseph** before his brothers to preserve their lives, so also God sent **Jesus** before us to give us life. May we receive God's **providential gift** of grace with **thankful** hearts this morning. May our **eyes of faith** be opened to **see** the **hidden, gracious** hand of God at work in all our lives for **good**. And may we learn to say with Julian of Norwich, “**All** shall be well, and all shall be **well**, and **all manner of things** shall be well”?

AMEN