

This morning we are dropping into the middle of the story of Joseph.

So let me give you a little context. The story of the family of Jacob begins in Genesis 37. Joseph is Jacob's second youngest son, and the first-born son of Jacob's favorite wife, making him Jacob's favorite son. Joseph is also a dreamer. And his dreams get him in trouble, because he dreams that his older brothers will bow down and honor him. So, what happens to the favorite, snotty younger brother when Jacob sends him to "see about the shalom your brothers?" (37:14)

First they want to kill him, naturally. They are brothers, after all. But then one of the brothers considers that a bit of an over reaction and they decide to leave him in a pit to die on his own. And remember—people look to scripture to support "family values". Eventually, they sell him to traders, dip his coat in goat's blood and take it home to dad and say, "we don't know what happened?"

Joseph ends up working for the pharaoh of Egypt—it's a great story. If you haven't read it, I invite you to spend some time with it this week. And in the intervening years, a famine comes upon the land. Because of Joseph's dreams and visions, Egypt is well prepared for the famine. The rest of the family of Jacob are not.

The brothers end up encountering Joseph when they come to Egypt seeking food, but they don't recognize him. He recognizes them, however. He puts one of them in prison, which is still better than leaving them in a pit or selling them to traders, but tells the others to take grain home to their father and to bring their youngest brother back if they want to save Simeon from prison.

Even though the brothers don't recognize Joseph, they correctly assume that this development is connected to their earlier actions against Joseph.

They go home and report to Jacob. He rather astutely comments, "I am the one you have bereaved of children. Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more and now you would take Benjamin."

They run out of grain again, and he tries to send them back. Judah says, "dad, we already told you. We can't go back unless we take Benjamin. But I promise I'll take care of him."

So Judah begins to live into his role as his brother's keeper.

And then Joseph sets up another plot. This time, he plants a silver cup in Benjamin's bag and then accuses them of stealing it. And here our text begins, as Judah addresses Joseph.

(scripture reading)

We could easily spend a month of Sundays talking about the Joseph story, but there's an entire year worth of Bible stories I'm looking forward to sharing with you, so we'll keep it to just today.

Jacob had sent Joseph to inquire about *the shalom*, the well being, of his brothers right before he was sold into slavery. And it is only now, after all these years, that Joseph is able to see to the shalom of his family by saving them from the famine.

But what he can't quite do is rise above his family system. The dysfunction that led brothers to sell their little brother is still in place. The brothers express their "dismay" when they realize Joseph is still alive. That's their reaction. If there was joy or celebration, the author doesn't tell us. Their dismay he noted. And Joseph imprisons Simeon, setting up elaborate plots in order to finally reveal himself to his brothers. And then, when he sends them off to get Jacob, he can't help but tell them to behave. "Don't quarrel along the way." He might just as well have said, (waving) "Have a nice trip! Try not to sell anyone else to slave traders!"

And so, even in a family as dysfunctional as the family of Jacob, God is at work. That is important to remember as you read Joseph. Some commentators want this to be a story about how great Joseph is. But this is a text about how *God* works through people, even people like Joseph.

Because if God can work through the imperfect people whose lives are chronicled in Scripture, then God can work through you and me.

And Joseph seems to get that too, finally.

“Do not be distressed”, he tells his brothers, “or angry with yourselves. Even if you sold me here, for God sent me here before you to preserve life. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God.”

Isn't that impressive? Joseph, who has good reason to be bitter, is not. He sees blessing in his having been sold into slavery by his own brothers. More than that, he sees Divine blessing.

How often are we able to really do that?

I was thinking about the Joseph story on Friday when I spent an unplanned and very long day at the Denver airport while trying to get home from Atlanta. Now I recognize that this illustration is imperfect. Being stuck in an airport is not the same as being sold into slavery or cancer or job loss or war or whatever it is that really affects people's lives. I only had an inconvenient day, but I didn't feel very blessed. I was downright grouchy.

And then I started thinking about Joseph. If he could see God's hand working for good in the mean and horrible actions of his brothers, surely I could see God working for good in my nasty day at the airport. So I started thinking about my day. Had there been any blessings in it?

And then I realized my blessing that day were the people. I had stood in a customer service line for over an hour, without getting to the front of said line. But in that hour, I talked with a woman who had missed her flight, even though she'd been at the airport on time, because she went to grab breakfast and lost track of time. She was asking us to help her come up with a story she could tell her mother, other than the truth. Another woman suggested she tell her mother she'd gotten sick from eating bad shrimp.

There was a couple who, because of weather, had missed their connecting flight home from a vacation in Mexico. They were trying to come up with some sort of peaceful protest we “customer service line standers” could wage as we waited.

We pass people by all the time, especially at airports. But we rarely find out their stories because we don't stop and interact with strangers. I had the whole day to spend in the airport and I interacted with all sorts of people. I chatted with the salesman at the airport bookstore. He recommended all sorts of books for me, and seemed to appreciate someone taking the time to listen to his recommendations. When a flight to Billings that was at the gate where I was hanging out was canceled, I had time to help get a Billings bound man who was in a wheelchair from the canceled gate to some gate agents who could help him so he wouldn't have to go to that infernal customer service line.

And then, when it was finally time to go to the Boise bound gate, I visited with a couple whose travel had been worse than mine. They were trying to get to their daughter's graduation and had missed all of the Friday activities while waiting in Denver. After we talked for a while, I realized that their daughter was graduating from the residency where my husband, Justin, works. So, in addition to enjoying our visit at the airport, their daughter gave me a ride home from the airport at 1:00 in the morning, and then I got to visit with them yesterday at the graduation.

All because we had time.

There is beauty in looking for blessings, in looking for God's hand, even in the worst situations.

And I think it is related to control. Because we can't control everything that happens to us. Joseph didn't pick his family and he didn't choose to be sold into slavery. We can drive safely and still get in car accidents. We can eat healthy and still get diseases. We can show up on time, but can't control thunderstorms that cripple the air traffic for a day. There are all sorts of things beyond our control. But one of the few things in our control is how we see things. When we're sold into slavery, we can grow bitter and plot revenge against our brothers. Or, like Joseph, we can look for God's hand in our lives. Not as the cause of the difficulty, but as the redemption of our lives in the midst of the difficulty. And we don't look for God's hand in our lives so we can just pretend that everything is fine. Joseph's brothers needed to

apologize to him. The fact that God was able to work in the situation didn't erase the fact that Joseph's family had some issues.

The story of God's working through the dysfunction of the family of Jacob is a good illustration of the concept of providence. Providence comes from the Latin, 'pro videre', to fore see, to fore ordain.

Now, providence is not fate. God is not a puppet master. We still have the agency to make decisions and take actions that affect our lives and the lives around us. But providence means that through the good and the bad experiences that happen to us, God is at work, creating new ways for us to see blessing.

Providence is related to the idea of God as creator. The God who created us is still at work, in the midst of everything, creating new *life*.

The word "life" flows through this Joseph story. "Do not be distressed", he tells his brothers, "or angry with yourselves. Even if you sold me here, for God sent me here before you to preserve life. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God."

And listen to these two questions from the Heidelberg Catechism, which was written in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Heidelberg Confession:

Q. 27. What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. The almighty and ever-present power of God whereby he still upholds, as it were by his own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures, and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.

Q. 28. What advantage comes from acknowledging God's creation and providence?

A. We learn that we are to be patient in adversity, grateful in the midst of blessing, and to trust our faithful God and Father for the future, assured that no creature shall separate us from his love, since all creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they cannot even move.

Was it providential that I spent that unplanned day in the airport? I can't quite say that yet. Because that's another thing about providence—it is best seen when you are looking backward at your life. And I'm still recovering from that long day with no rest. But I am able to see some blessings that were in that day.

My favorite scripture passage, the one that has brought me comfort through many difficult times, is Romans 8:28. "And we know that in all things, God is working for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

This passage doesn't mean that only good things happen to Christians. But it means that through it all, there is *nothing* that can separate us from the love of God.

So, when your life feels like your brothers just sold you to traders, remember that even then you are being held in the palm of God's hand.

And as you go back out into the world, remember that your kindnesses and good deeds may be the providential hand of God in someone else's life.