

God Always Has a Plan

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“So it was not you who sent me here, but God. . . .” – Genesis 45:8a

“So it was not you who sent me here, but God.” Those were Joseph’s words to his brothers when he revealed his identity to them near the end of his story, and it took a lot of faith to say them.

It takes a lot of faith – and I mean a LOT – to see God’s hand at work in the circumstances of our lives, especially the miserable ones. And Joseph, you’ll recall, had plenty of those. Despised by his brothers, sold into slavery, falsely accused of attempted rape, thrown into prison – what a dossier! If this was the story of anyone we knew, we’d say they were making it up – we’d call him Calamity Joe.

But whatever history lies behind the story of Joseph, the point of the story, as the narrator says more than once, is that “the Lord was with Joseph” (Gen. 39:2, 21). God’s unfailing presence is the real point of the marvelous story of Jacob’s favorite son. God’s unfailing presence – a presence that cannot be defeated and thus will, in the end, win – is what we mean by the theological term Providence. Divine Providence is what the Joseph story, in all its drama and pathos, its colorfulness and humor, is all about. And God’s presence comes with a plan – a plan for Joseph, for us, and for all of creation – and that plan is to preserve life. God is, after all, the living God.

We don’t know why God chose to be with Joseph – he was a spoiled little brat, after all – but we also don’t know why God chose the weasel Jacob or the stiff-necked people of Israel. God’s election is both gracious and unfathomable, and the bond of God’s love is unbreakable.

What shall separate us from the love of God, Paul rhetorically asked the churches at Rome. “Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” No, Paul declared, he was convinced that “that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:35, 38-39).

That’s a lot to go through – hardship, distress, persecution and so forth – and yet God is faithful, as faithful to Paul as God had been to Joseph. Maybe Joseph’s story was in Paul’s mind as he wrote those reassuring words to the Romans. Paul had certainly learned the story of

Joseph, seeing as Paul was a good Pharisee steeped in Scripture. Paul certainly had plenty of his own ups and downs, as he wrote to the Corinthians – stoned, lashed, beaten with rods, shipwrecked at sea, thrown into prison – but he never wavered in his belief that God was with him and supporting him in his ministry of reconciliation.

God has a plan – God always has a plan – and we are part of that plan even when it doesn't feel like it. God had a plan for Paul, in the midst of those stonings, lashings, and imprisonments, just as God had a plan for Joseph, and just as God has a plan for all of us. If we will open our hearts and minds and eyes to see God at work in the world and in our lives, we will realize that we are part of God's mysterious plan for the world, a plan that ends not in extinction and emptiness, as our secular scientists predict, but in a new heaven and a new earth, where sorrow and sighing have passed away and death itself has been swallowed up in victory.

This heaven and this earth that we inhabit now have more than their share of suffering, but as believers in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, we believe that suffering is not the last word. The world's craziness may prevail for a time, but truth and beauty and goodness will eventually emerge victorious. As James Russell Lowell wrote in a poem that became one of the church's treasured hymns,

Tho' [truth's] portion be the scaffold,
 And upon the throne be wrong;
 Yet that scaffold sways the future,
 And, behind the dim unknown,
 Standeth God within the shadow,
 Keeping watch above His own.

You and I don't want to live in a shadowed world – our plan is for the world to be all sunshine, lollipops, and rainbows, as Lesley Gore sang, and we wish God would emerge from the shadow. But that's not God's plan. God's plan is bigger than our biggest plans, and that plan is bigger even than those storm clouds that we fearful saints so much dread. And God is working out that plan, even when it's difficult for us to sense it. God always has a plan.

And in the realization that God always has a plan, of which we are a part, lies happiness. "That is happiness," Willa Cather wrote in My Ántonia, "to be dissolved into something complete and great." That something complete and great is God's plan, and it's always there. There is always completeness and greatness in the world if we have the eyes to see it. There is always life in the world, and beauty, and truth, and goodness – if we have the eyes to see them and the courage to believe in their power.

There's also suffering and sin and brokenness and pain, of course, and those are brought to our attention in a 24/7 media flood that we deliberately have to learn to turn off from time to time if we want to keep our sanity. Focusing our attention on what is right, rather than what is wrong, helps us keep our bearings and stay on course. We don't ignore the wrong, of course

– Israel’s prophets would be horrified at such a thought – but we don’t spend our lives simply responding to wrong. To do so is to always be caught wrong-footed.

Instead, we keep ourselves listening for the voice of God’s Spirit calling us to the good irrespective of whatever may be wrong. These little microcosms of the world that we call churches are outposts of God’s realm, planted by the Spirit in a divine offensive of mercy, justice, peace, faith, hope, and love. Those churches mix it up with the world, as yeast is mixed with flour to make bread, which is what will allow us to say, with Paul, “we know that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called to God’s purpose” (Rom. 8:28). Those words echo Joseph’s words to his brothers, “So it was not you who sent me here, but God.” That’s faith speaking, and a lot of it.

I want to close now by saying that our church is in one of those phases of its life when clouds have gathered. It’s no secret that a significant source of income for our church is being challenged by our neighbors to the east and north of us. This is a dispute whose outcome none of us can see right now, and about which you’ll receive an update in a few minutes in the congregational meeting. But what I want you to remember as we hear from our leaders and as we move through the near future is that God has a plan for this church, even though we don’t know exactly what it is. We know only in part right now – to be an outpost of God’s realm in a fallen world – and only later – much later – will we know fully as God knows fully now. Our job isn’t to engineer or even attempt to divine God’s plan for us. Our job is to listen attentively to the Spirit and to be as faithful to our calling as the people of God and followers of Jesus as we can figure out how to be, no matter what comes our way. We may have difficult days ahead of us and difficult decisions to make, but we will face them and make them confident not in our own abilities, but in that love – and that plan – that will never let us go. Thanks be to God.